Bereaved employees, professional activity and pain of loss

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Abstract
When a close relative dies, what kind of relations do individuals professionally active have with their colleagues at the workplace? How do they live their return at work? Based on a research carried out with various actors (directors, heads of human resources, employees, trade unionists, work inspectors, psychologists and social workers) in about twenty medium-sized and big companies of the French-speaking part of the canton of Valais, Switzerland, this paper tries to answer these questions following an anthropological approach. It presents how the bereaved employees perceive the way their firms rationalize - or do not rationalize - the announcement of death; organize their participation to the funerary rituals; welcome them after their bereavement leave; manage the temporality of bereavement in their structure. It focuses on the experiences of the bereaved employees in order to better understand the influence of the social and professional context on the grieving process at the workplace.

Key Words: Bereavement, workplace, professional activity, sense of loss, intimacy, anthropology.

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1.   Bereavement at the workplace

Literature on bereavement at the workplace is scarce. There is yet a basic premise appearing regularly in the few texts that deal with this issue: employees have neither place nor time to express grief while they are on duty. Marcia Lattanzi-Licht assumes, for example, that "in the workplace, the traditional standard of leaving personal concerns at home is one that can create a sense of disconnection or isolation for employees experiencing a major loss."[1] This educator, counsellor and consultant, refers here specifically to the American work ethic, namely a set of values that would impose a quite frank separation between the personal and the professional sphere on the employees.

A similar view is defended by Regina Bento, distinguished professor of Management at the Merrick School of Business, University of Baltimore. In an article dedicated to grief in organizations, she sustains that a common norm within business companies is that "sadness and grief […] should be checked at the door; they are too heavy for the rarefied emotional atmosphere

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of the workplace."[2] She draws her argument from narrations given by bereaved individuals to show how grieving at work may be deemed inappropriate; how grief may be refused to these employees. This happens because firms and businesses, epitomized by hierarchical superiors and colleagues, expect generally that the bereaved workers will get over their grief in a relatively short - though unspecified - period of time. As Bento reminds us, the social system simply does not always permit individuals who want and need to grieve to do it: grief is *disenfranchised*, a much celebrated notion coined by Kenneth Doka in the late eighties.[3]

At the first glance, we can easily admit the existence of such a pervasive constraint upon intimate suffering and pain in the professional realm. Numerous persons who have coped with the loss of a close relative while they were employed would indeed share this point of view. At peculiar moments of their grieving process, bereaved workers have usually felt the weight of a limit that delineates the workplace as a non emotional arena; moreover, this place is thought to be exempted from personal affairs. This seems particularly true for those who resume their job after an unexpected and sometimes brutal loss. The following short quote illustrates this feeling; it comes from a thirty year old woman who suddenly lost her husband. Six months after an accidental death, the young widow, working for an insurance company, recalled during our research interview she had had that altercation a few weeks ago with one of her colleagues who had complained to her about delay in delivering statistical data for his administrative sector:

> This person does not understand that my 'very little problem' - even though we are very professional - cannot be left at the door when we arrive at the workplace. We cannot just say: "when I am at the office, I am at the office; and when I am at home, I am at home". Grief is not a thing we can put under the doormat.[4]

Through this comment, the grieving person laments the insensibility she perceives in her colleague's reaction to her personal and dramatic situation. Reducing ironically her bereavement to a 'very little problem', she stresses out the apparent lack of usual consideration generally due and expected in these circumstances. From this brief example, one could be prompt to say that grief is *disenfranchised* and to conclude that death is *taboo*, as it is too often highlighted in the literature and relayed by a large public.[5]

However, we have to be cautious with this kind of conclusion. To my view, the above cited person is calling attention first and foremost to the fact that the divide between the professional and the personal registers is purely utopian: it is just an artifice we cannot believe in.[6] This appears clearly

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in her discourse as she caricatures such an opposition to better say that grief is precisely *at work*, fully present and intertwined with her colleagues' professional activities. As a given, her bereavement is at the heart of a new set of behaviours which goes from avoidance to complicity; from ignorance to overprotection. It serves to explain awkward attitudes, lacks of concentration, extended deadlines and potential mistakes made in the fulfilment of professional duties. There is no urge here to express more freely or to talk about grief more openly, but a serious need to embed it in a wide range of situations that may entangle the most unpredictable and the sheer conventional act or word.

In writing this, I do not aim to minimize the pressure a bereaved worker may feel at work. The point I want to address is the following: displaying and welcoming grief and emotions are not and, more important, should not be publicized anywhere, anyhow or with anybody[7]. This is true for the family circles or the public space as well as for any professional context. In other words, the recognition of grief and the facilitation of its 'normal' process will constantly depend on multiple factors largely exceeding the idea following which the social system hinders the psychological work of grief on the motive that personal affairs are kept in the cloakroom. From the precedent example, we could thus say that the separation between the personal and the professional, and in a similar manner between the public and the intimate, is discursively used - by all actors within the same firm, not only the bereaved - to recast many sets of interactions; these are subtly modelled by the appreciation the colleagues make about their co-worker's grieving process and by the way information circulates within a structure.

Following this perspective, we tried to understand how grief is concretely configured at the workplace. We carried out a research with more than twenty medium-sized and big companies in the French-speaking part of the canton of Valais, Switzerland. A series of formal and informal interviews were made with directors, head of human resources, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, trade unionists, company doctors and bereaved employees. The objective was to compare and cross conceptions, practices and experiences of bereavement in various professional sectors.[8] In this article though, I limit my presentation to a few ideas based on employees' perceptions of their own bereavement within their professional environments. My purpose is more specifically centred on the ways the professional and the personal references are combined to think about *disenfranchisement* of grief at the workplace.

2.   Acute grief and intimacy within the companies

There is no complete rupture with the professional world since an employee learns about the death of a close relative until he returns to work. Some individuals are even called by a parent to be told of a dramatic event as

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they are precisely at their workplace. In that case, they are led to share this harsh information directly with the colleagues present at this specific moment. Catherine, who tragically lost three close relatives during the last decade, remembers how she heard of a new drama that occurred within her family just a few months before our encounter:

> I learned about it as I went up to the cafeteria, situated in the last storey of the office building. My mother called: "Catherine, you need to sit down." This is our peculiar formulation to announce bad news. And I said to myself: "no, not that" […] I went up and said to my colleague: "my aunt has committed suicide". I wasn't able to take my lunch break; I went back downstairs. I couldn't even say: "I must leave! I must go away!" I stayed behind a cupboard and cried all my tears down. And I finished my workday.

Before Catherine could share her first emotions with her family members, she had to express them with a couple of colleagues in her daily professional environment. Her situation was thus instantly known and publicized by the few secretaries - but not necessarily the whole staff - she was working with. So the psychological shock and the intense intimate feelings - she sought a bit of privacy behind a cupboard - this employee was suddenly going through took place in her office. At this very early period of grief however, nobody, as Catherine remembers, knew what to do and how to behave. In this specific case, the death of an aunt might have appeared as not close enough in terms of kinship to anybody to officialise the death and ask a superior permission to leave: Catherine stayed the rest of the afternoon at her desk.

Within the firms contacted, no procedures and no policies exist to anticipate this kind of situations when grief starts at the workplace. Its regulation is left to the sole appreciation of the people who are living *hic et nunc* this acute moment during which the 'professional' and the 'personal' patently show their indivisibility. Exceptions are to be found nevertheless when an employee's close relative is terminally ill: the superior and the immediate colleagues may have been alerted to the fact that in case of emergency or death, the employee will have to give up his task at once. In general, this is orally agreed.

In many other situations, one learns that a death has occurred while he is at home, on leave or on vacation. Rapidly, he tries to make sure his company will be notified; but the way the information circulates is quite sinuous. Andrea for example, who gave birth to a stillborn, sent out an SMS from the hospital on a Saturday; among the six to ten receivers, mainly friends, there were co-workers close to the bereaved couple. Afterwards, the

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sad news quickly spread in her office - a public service - since one of them was on duty that same day. On her side, Julia asked one of her preferred colleagues to tell her boss about the death of her husband. The communication followed then a snowball effect: "The head of human resources called me as soon as possible, and I received a lot of messages of sympathy from the direction board."

Moreover, various social practices are linked to the professional realm during the bereavement leave. Without going into details, I can simply mention here mortuary visits; attendance to the funeral; sending of a letter of condolence signed by the staff and/or the directors; announcement in the local press. These practices are quite always codified in a more or less formal document besides the internal policy or the collective agreement that clearly indicates how many days an employee can take off according to his degree of kinship with the defunct.[9] Such attentions are recognized and appreciated, even more if they appear 'spontaneous' and 'natural'. Julia puts it this way:

> During the funeral, I was impressed by the attendance. Many had driven from far to come in this small village. And I couldn't even count the people, it was so impressive. And I saw the number two of the direction; the number one couldn't come as he was on vacation; the whole direction was there, and that touched me because we are more than 1'500 employees […] I think it was everybody's will to come to show their sympathy. That was not really 'let's organize us and go by coach' to show that 'we are there!' I really felt that everybody followed his own approach to sustain me.

If these aspects show that a link – even tight – is often kept between the personal and the professional, another feature has to be noted that goes in the same direction: the return at work is almost never totally frank. This is especially true for those employees who have suffered a sudden and tragic loss, that is to say the main cases I am referring to in this article. Concretely, bereaved persons try to negotiate a 'smooth' return to the workplace. For example, one may want to see his superior outside the company building, in a restaurant, sometimes at home, to talk about the work environment before his comeback; another will go to the office for a short period of time, in order to see some colleagues and prepare the 'official' return.

From these various insights and short descriptions pointing to the fact that professional concerns are continuously running across intimate pain as soon as an employee learns about the death of a close relative, I would like to make three main observations. First, if informed, companies try to respond to the flexibility the bereaved may explicitly need or ask for. They seek for arrangements - and sometimes they are forced to make them because a

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certificate of incapacity has just been delivered by a doctor or a psychiatrist - in scheduling the presence of the grieving employees. They tolerate short absences and sudden changes in their work planning; or more precisely, superiors will not blame them. If such a tolerance is currently asserted by the directors and head of human resources we interviewed, it is perceived the same way by most of the employees who had to diminish temporarily their activity rate because of their bereavement. The latter perceive that a reel effort is made in terms of management towards them, at least during the first weeks of grief.

Second, the circulation of information - about the death, the bereaved, the bereavement leave, the social practices related to the funeral, the exact date of return, the potential change in work conditions - is rather laconic and unpredictable within a firm. It is above all regulated by interpersonal affinities: a bereaved employee may indeed choose to contact his preferred colleague to diffuse the news; one may call a superior that he 'personally' knows or likes. Everything goes as if those colleagues function as a rampart against unwanted, uncontrollable, and too emotional relationships the grieving employees might have to engage with individuals they don't know well or appreciate. At the same time, 'official' measures are almost never taken; nothing is organized for the return at work by the superiors, who globally confirm that point.[10]

Consequently, many employees assume that the others are supposed to know about the grief situation. But nothing is really clear, all the more so since agreements with the direction or the human resources are mostly made on an informal and oral basis, if not on a tacit one. Such partial view is not without blurring the co-workers' appreciation of the grieving process. Furthermore, the initiative of talking about grief is often left to the bereaved. Andrea reports here what her boss told her:

> She said to me: "listen, I apologize in front of you. That's true, I couldn't think about going out of my office and shout: 'Hey, everybody, stop for a while, I have sad news to communicate'." And as I haven't told her to spread the news, she didn't know if she had to tell or not.

That leads to my third observation: in these contexts of fragmented communication, everybody is on the qui-vive, not knowing exactly what to do or what to say. And this is not only true for interpersonal relationships, but also for the legal frame and the rights a bereaved employee is entitled to. Grieving persons feel this embarrassment that finds expression, at times, in a deafening silence; nonetheless, they say they understand this ill-at-ease because they would not know themselves how to behave if they were in the same situation. In this perspective, the intimate pain of grief is - *en creux* -

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present at the workplace for an indefinite period of time. And even if some collaborators forget rapidly about their colleague's bereavement, grief may stand out at specific moments, at specific places, with specific persons, for the best as for the worst professional interactions.

3.   To approach the pain of loss needs 'tact'

Directors, head of human resources, colleagues and bereaved employees at the same time usually hope that behaviours regarding grief at work will be as 'natural' and 'spontaneous' as possible. If everybody agrees on this principle, such a 'normal' attitude is rarely adopted. A brief comment made by a postal officer about the situation of one of her colleagues who just lost her mother-in-law summarizes this point: "behind the scene, there is a fair amount of chatter, but in front of the bereaved, the behaviour is not very natural." This remark simply shows that expression of grief - and not necessarily its recognition - is socially controlled. Obviously, this control is not always done by individuals who may stay mute when confronted to their colleague's grief: bereaved employees themselves are indeed reluctant to talk about their own feelings and pain.

The reason for unexpressed grief at work is then twofold. First, the bereaved may fear too much exposure in their professional relationships; they may be put under the pressure of production and feel a potential risk of dismissal if they cannot get through the same amount of work as before. This argument - sometimes set forth by interviewed employees - is important for sure. But a more crucial aspect is the inappropriateness of work conditions to express pain: time to talk properly about grief and the defunct with a client or a colleague is generally too short; interlocutors are not always the 'good' ones; work locations - behind a window, in an open space office or a noisy environment - do not stimulate an outpouring. On this particular point, Bento remarks rightly that "the expression of grief in the workplace is more easily tolerated if it does not take place in public. If one is crying in one's closed office, or in the bathroom, that is acceptable […]".[11]

Moreover, grief generates trouble of concentration, a sense of vacuity and uselessness, fatigue, as it is well described in the literature.[12] All this elements contribute assuredly to the confinement of the employee. Paul, a thirty-one year old man who lost his father and eight months later his mother, comments his return to work in a school office in those terms:

> I was very withdrawn. I guess I didn't have much contact; this period was so dark […] Anyway I didn't want to expose all I have lived to certain individuals if we were not very close. At the same time, I have tried to talk about my grief with some other colleagues, but after a while I felt that it was too straight; they were switching conversation […] I

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discovered that if we are not prepared for this kind of experience, people are mostly ill-at-ease.

So the second reason comes from the co-workers' expectations; they wait on the bereaved making the first step. Such attitude is not without provoking a sense of isolation; of stigmatization even as Paul - and many others - stresses: "I had the impression I was not really a freak, but a curiosity; an extraordinary thing happened to me that happens usually to others". If this generates the feeling of being left by the wayside, it is mainly linked to the need of privacy and to the conceptions of intimacy that determine the expression of pain; it is not particularly specific to grief at work, but to this fundamental inability to be 'normal', 'natural' and completely at ease when two persons exchange on grief. As the French sociologist Patrick Baudry accurately noted: "Shall we want the people to talk about their dead as they talk about the cars they had; the vacation sites they visited or the good bottles they drunk? This is precisely that - this succession of commentaries, this pose, this affectation of learning - the denial of death".[13]

At the workplace, this mutual social control is framed by business temporal norms, practical conditions in which the professional activity takes place, and organizational opportunities to be flexible with the employees; at least with those who suffer grief complication, knowing that such a notion defies any easy definition.[14] During an indeterminate period of time, grief is thus potentially structuring the work interactions in the background. At certain moments, often considered as tensed and problematic, the merging of the intimate and of the professional is explicitly displayed, even months after a death. In this sense, neither the colleagues nor the bereaved dare being too familiar, too humoristic, or too ironic; this is particularly true during the first weeks of the bereavement process. For example, Julia remembers she tried a line of humour related to a professional imbroglio four months after her husband died; as she says, some were pleased to see that she 'had come back' while others considered her comments as a personal attack and as a mark of her lasting incapacity to be fully at work. Furthermore, the interpretation one can make about such an anecdote may lead the colleagues to ask more from a bereaved employee, professionally speaking.

In reverse, some grieving persons affirmed they couldn't support seeing other people being too expressive, too joyous, or too expansive. Paul and Catherine notably, if they do not deem such behaviours as inappropriate, simply reckon that they were not ready to be confronted daily to such emotional easiness. So, once again, we see here that being 'ordinary', 'natural', or 'spontaneous' is ambiguous when it is related to grief: everyone must guess what is the 'good' moment, the 'good' place, or the 'good' word to communicate: this is always challenging and demanding.[15]

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At the workplace, people need to find a constant balance between the essential proximity a co-worker must show to the bereaved person, and the companies' rules and procedures that are the same - on the paper - for all. A useful parallel may be finally drawn here with the ideas the sociologist Marc Breviglieri developed regarding the new requirements of a social work system based on a contractualist management. Breviglieri sustains indeed that one of the main difficulties a social worker is confronted to today rests on the necessity to show his skilfulness at being within the personal and particular story of his interlocutor without discrediting the general rule. And that requires a sense of tact:

> Tact supposes indeed the implementation of a know-how that enables to connect a close attention to the person with its treatment as a general case. In other words, it enables the preservation of the accurate distance towards the beneficiary and its support seized between two antagonistic registers of investment and move: the one gets closer to it, the other goes away from him by a generalization of his case.[16]

Concerning bereavement at work, similar modes of interactions and commitments seem to be in progress. The co-workers and the hierarchical superiors for instance try to be as flexible as possible. They may well go beyond the rules and policies - in granting a longer bereavement leave; in asking some of the colleagues to care temporarily for the grieving employee; in arranging his schedule - but they never ought to go below them: misinformation or negligence regarding rules, rights and procedures will thus appear as a frustrating discredit within the professional realm.

At the same time, there is a need to acknowledge the personal and intimate pain of grief an employee is going through. But, as I said before, it is always difficult to perform the helpful proximity with the grieving person, due maybe to a principle of decency. We could then think that - in the image of the social worker and his beneficiary - the appropriate way to talk about grief and act with it at work will be found when rules and rights are clearly known and communicated to the bereaved employees; when the firm rationalizes the frame within which the pain of a loss is going to be lived. This could stimulate a series of informal conversations between chosen colleagues and superiors that is generally thought to be governed by a sense of 'spontaneity' or 'normality'. This kind of generalization associated to a very personal pain may thus help to be tactful; it may prevent *disenfranchisement* of grief without necessarily asking for its public expression or its collective treatment at the workplace.

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Notes

[1] M Lattanzi-Licht, 'Grief and the Workplace : Positive Approaches' in K Doka (ed.), *Disenfranchised Grief. New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*, Champaign, Research Press, 2002, p. 167.

[2] R F Bento, 'When the Show Must Go on. Disenfranchised Grief in Organizations'. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, vol. 9(6), 1994, p. 35.

[3] K Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief. New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*, Champaign, Research Press, 2002.

[4] All the bereaved' names have been changed. I translated their quotes from French.

[5] See in particular D Charles-Edwards, *Handling Death and Bereavement at Work*, London, Routledge, 2005. R F Bento, op. cit., postulates also the same idea.

[6] Some years ago, Agnès Pitrou has shown that the classical separation between sociology of work and sociology of the family is not accurate. It is more than necessary to study mutual influences between these two spheres; see A Pitrou, 'L'interaction entre la sphere du travail et la sphere de la vie familiale' in *Sociologie et Sociétés*, vol. XIX(2), 1987, pp. 103-113.

[7] This insight was very well exposed in the pioneering work of the French anthropologist Robert Hertz in his classical 'Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort', published in *L'Année sociologique* at the beginning of the twentieth century.

[8] The research, a two year-long study, was realized with António Magalhães de Almeida, research assistant, and with the collaboration of Corinne Bonvin, psychologist at the Center François Xavier Bagnoud that offers grief counselling. It was financially supported by the 'Résar' - Réseau d'études appliquées des pratiques de santé, de réadaption/(ré)insertion - from the University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland; see M A Berthod and A Magalhães de Almeida, *Le deuil au travail. Les modalités de soutien au deuil en entreprise et leur impact sur le vécu des employés endeuillés*, Sion, research report, 2009.

[9] For further details on these administrative aspects and policies, see M A Berthod and A Magalhães de Almeida, 'Les entreprises face au deuil de leurs collaborateurs', communication présentée lors de la 2ième conférence internationale sur le temps *Rupture, finitude, mort et management*, Université de Bretagne occidentale, Brest, 25 et 26 juin 2008, to be published. See also Pratt L, 'Business Temporal Norms and Bereavement Behaviour', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 46(3), 1981, pp. 317-333.

[10] On rare occasions, it happens that a superior sends an email to all the colleagues or announces the death - mostly when it concerns a parent, a

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spouse or a child - during a team reunion. To my knowledge, this is never formalized in firms; it rather comes from sporadic initiatives.

[11] R F Bento, op. cit., 42.

[12] M Stroebe and al. (eds.), *Handbook of Bereavement Research. Consequences, Coping and Care*, Washington, American Psychological Association, 2001. For anthropological reflexions on bereavement at work, see M A Berthod, 'Entre psychologie des rites et anthropologie de la perte : notes pour l'étude du deuil', *Journal des anthropologues*, vol. 116-117, 2009.

[13] P Baudry, *La place des morts. Enjeux et rites*, Paris, Armand Colin, p. 187. [My translation].

[14] M-L Bourgeois - in *Deuil normal, deuil pathologique. Clinique et psychopathologie*, Doin, Rueil-Malmaison, 2003.

[15] On the difficulty and the complexity of doing 'being ordinary', see H Sacks, 'Faire « être comme tout le monde »' in J-P Thibaud (éd.), *Regards en action, Ethnométhodologie des espaces publics*, Bernin, A la croisée, 2002, pp. 201-209. I would like to thank António Magalhães de Almeida for calling my attention to this text based on lectures given by Sacks in 1970 and 1971.

[16] M Breviglieri, 'Bienfaits et méfaits de la proximité dans le travail social' in J Ion (dir.), *Le travail social en débat(s)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005, p. 227. [My translation].

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