MAT Medicine Anthropology Theory

PHOTO ESSAYS

‘Something is Not Okay’

Bodily Expressions of Grief for Street-Involved Youth

Marion Selfridge

Received: 6 August 2021; Accepted: 27 January 2022; Published: 28 April 2022

Abstract

The experiences of grieving among street-involved youth are both highly visible and invisible. Their actions of living outside, engaging in money-making by approaching passersby, trading in and using drugs and alcohol, or simply hanging around in public spaces make them exposed and visible to the public. Yet, the stories that brought youth to the street and the scope of the losses they have sustained are hidden. Henry Giroux (2006, 175) describes the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as the new ‘biopolitics of disposability’ in that poor and racialised groups ‘not only have to fend for themselves in the face of life’s tragedies but are also supposed to do it without being seen by the dominant society’. This Photo Essay makes visible the bodily expressions of grief from participants in my doctoral research, *Grieving Online*, to create understanding into the profound losses and ways in which they cope.

Keywords

Street-involved youth, grief, trauma, substance use, arts-based methodology.

Medicine Anthropology Theory 9 (2): 1–18; ISSN 2405-691X; https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.9.2.5773.

As an outreach worker in a youth clinic, I have witnessed the outpouring of online messages involving songs, video, poetry, photos, and artwork that youth send to their deceased peers and to each other when a peer dies. My goal here is to experiment with the metaphors found in a grief model in order to bring a more tangible understanding of the experiences of death, grief, and loss in the street-involved youth I interviewed for my doctoral research work (Selfridge 2017; Selfridge and Mitchell 2020). In 2015–16 I met with 20 young people aged 16–24 to explore how they use online social networks following the death of people important to their lives. The grief model used by Delaney (2014) and others was a helpful tool as I attempted to make sense of the highly traumatic and unrelenting grief experiences of the youth with whom I spoke.

Using a collaborative Photo Essay, I aim to unpack some of the assumptions embedded in the metaphors that are used in Delaney’s model. In particular, I critique what seem like progressive, positive metaphors provided by hospice professionals, seeing them as continuing class- and privilege-based notions of grief. The bodily experiences of grieving among street-involved youth are both highly visible and invisible at the same time. Their actions of living outside, engaging in money-making by ‘panhandling’ (approaching passersby), drug trade or busking; their use of drugs and alcohol; or simply hanging around with their friends and family in public spaces, make them exposed and visible to the public. However, the stories that brought them to the street and the scope of the losses they have sustained are hidden. Similarly, Henry Giroux (2006) describes the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as the ‘new biopolitics of disposability’ in that poor and racialised groups ‘not only have to fend for themselves in the face of life’s tragedies but are also supposed to do it without being seen by the dominant society’ (175).

In this model, the grief after a death is imagined as a ball. After fruitless searching for uniform balls in different sizes to use in this Photo Essay I decided to create balls out of old elastic bands.

Rubber bands
Wrapped one on another
Layers of memories
Of phone calls
And meeting after school at the park
Beers by the water
And the dark bird flew by so low
The wings brushed the mirrored reflection

Meals shared
And dishes washed
Or left to pile until an argument
Erupts
Shopping trips
And colds you passed around
Late nights at shitty jobs

And early mornings when
everyone else is sleeping

The bands are blue, beige, and red
That thick one from the broccoli
Old and hardened
Like those grudges
You never quite got over
Thin and springy
Tenuous minutes when you can’t
Remember their middle name
Or what kind of mustard they wanted
On their hot dog

The bands are wrapped
Layer upon layer
Thick
Heavy
Sometimes so heavy
Your arm goes numb
Just trying to imagine
Picking it up again

And if you throw it
Hard against the wall
It bounces
Ricochets from surface to surface
And slowly loses speed
Dribbling to the ground
And comes to rest

Grief, ‘the pain and suffering experienced after loss’ (Small 2001, 20) has been imagined using a variety of metaphors to understand this nearly universal human experience. Judith Butler has described its enormity:

> I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but does not know why. Something is larger than one’s own deliberate plan, one’s own project, one’s own knowing and choosing (2006 21).

In this model, a jar represents a person, and the grief they experience after a loss is represented by the ball.

The enormity described by Butler is understood as the ball completely filling the jar. Delaney (2014), who uses this model in grief seminars describes it as follows: ‘Do you know what that feels like when you are so full of something there is no space for anything else and you couldn’t even stand for someone to touch you. It’s just loss and pain. There is no space, no space for anything else.’ The rest of life can seem out of focus and unreal in the midst of the enormity of the experience of loss.

However, for many people this profound and overwhelming experience of grief is expected to diminish over time, where the ball gets smaller and there is space for other things.

Delaney (2014) describes this expectation of diminishing: ‘And we say things to people like: “Are you over that yet?” or “Are you back to your old self?” or “I thought that happened last year?”’. She asserts: ‘If you have had a significant loss in your life, the last thing you want is to forget. If the person that you love most in the world has died, you don’t want to forget that person.’

Instead, Delaney argues for a new version, where rather than the balls shrinking over time, the balls, or grief, stay the same and the jars, or your roles in life and experiences, get larger.

I sat thinking about this model and how it related to the experiences held within the bodies of 20 street-involved youth I had interviewed, and those of my youth advisory group, who were grieving many of the same young people I had lost to toxic drug poisoning (Selfridge, Robinson, and Mitchell 2021). Delaney’s (2014) words went over and over in my mind: ‘We can grow … The grief doesn’t get lighter, but the shoulders can get stronger. And then what happens? You can carry it more lightly, you can fit other things in your container … There is space for other things, but it still privileges the loss.’

How did this model fit with the stories youth told me of their experiences of loss? For instance, when sixteen-year-old Crystal says: ‘I went on like a five-day meth and heroin binge, after [she] died, and I ended up getting raped again by the guy that had been supplying me for those five days. And then after that I was just kinda, just like really lost and confused.’

For these youth, experiences of loss started long before they entered the street. Twenty-two-year-old Xavier told me: ‘I have been put through a lot, I was in shelters with my mom all my life too, ‘cause my dad was abusive … I pretty much lived one of those scary kids’ life’.

Susan Delaney (2014) in collaboration with the St Christopher’s Hospice educator, Barbara Munroe, have adapted this model from Tonkin’s (1996) work some years ago. I argue that this model comes from a place of privilege, where there was just one death to manage at a time and various resources available, such as extended family support, employee benefit plans, and a robust community, with meals and private spaces to grieve.

Instead, here youth like twenty-five-year-old Nan had experienced multiple and overlapping deaths and had few resources to manage them all: ‘I was thinking about when I was ten my aunt hung herself. And having everybody at my house, and taking care of everybody, yeah. That was fucked up.’

As their lives moved forward, more and more grief experiences were jammed into their container.

These grief experiences were complicated, entangled deaths where blame and regret featured as main characters. As Crystal put it: ‘bad stuff is going to happen, it is always going to happen like nothing is going to be good’.

Multiple losses—one more and one more, piled on top of each other, messy, entangled, coming undone, not one discrete ball in a jar. This is the image I see when youth describe the experiences of loss in their life.

I quickly realised as I asked youth about their experiences with death and loss that drugs and alcohol kept coming up in how youth framed different times in their life: how they coped, how they spent time and hung out with friends and family. It figured prominently in how they experienced death; in their mourning practices, the way they survived after the death, and was a main character in the stories of blame and regret they told me. I chose a colourful and murky liquid to fill the jar in order to represent coping with drug and alcohol use.

I started to ask youth about their drug use, what it did for them and if there was a specific drug that was helping them to endure, to distract, to escape and recalibrate. Crystal recounted:

> Meth has definitely been the best, the most helpful to me … Well, to me it is like you know the shitty terrible stuff is still there like, all the pain and emotion, that you feel are still there, but it makes you not care as much you kinda, just makes you numb in a way … It makes the emotional attachment kinda go away.

Using this metaphor works in two ways. First, it demonstrates how fixated we are on drug and alcohol use and the behaviours that accompany them. We are so focused on the bright colours swirling around, we are either unaware or forget what are the life circumstances that people are coping with, not paying attention to the grief that is submerged. The highly visible bodily expressions of drug and alcohol use, of people nodding off or jerkily moving through spaces, or actively searching for drugs and alcohol, completely overshadows the losses they have experienced.

These visible signs of drug and alcohol use are rejecting Giroux’s (2006) ‘biopolitics of disposability’, and may be a visible marker of structural violence, the failures of the child welfare system, colonisation, access to housing and other forms of social exclusion. As Crystal says:

> Addiction is definitely a big part of like grieving and like loss and stuff because addiction begins with hope, like a hope that something can take away the pain instantly … And uh, an addict never really like stands still, they are either getting better or getting worse and they are brave enough to show society like, use their body to show society that something is not okay.

Second, this metaphor of a cloudy liquid highlights a value held by some of the participants in my research that the clouding hinders the activity; that, as twenty-year-old Gary put it, ‘you can only grieve when you are sober and actually feel stuff

right … otherwise when you are high it just shadows it over and you can’t deal with it’.

When recovery from trauma and the ‘work’ of grief is prescribed, sobriety is often a prerequisite for therapy, as substance use is seen to re-enact trauma. I am not here to argue that alcohol and drugs are either beneficial or detrimental to grief or trauma but simply to question in what circumstances sobriety is required and when substances may be desired or expected. What purpose does alcohol hold for a grieving widow sipping sherry; for a whisky-filled wake; to smoke a joint with friends at the grave site of your friend; to inject some heroin in the same cubby outside which you used to use with your deceased partner-in-crime? When are these substances sanctioned and even encouraged and when are they vilified and criminalised? How often are these based on class or privilege?

Grieving while on the street is ‘a stress-filled, dehumanizing, dangerous circumstance in which individuals are at high risk of being witness to or victims of a wide range of violent events’ (Fitzpatrick, LaGory, and Ritchey 1999, 439). Many of the deaths that youth talked about, they were involved in—as witnesses, victims, or even perpetrators of violent events.

At some point the container that we have imagined a life to be may not be able to withstand the violence that has been witnessed and experienced. Twenty-year-old Ida describes trauma in this way:

> I know people who have had so much stress in their life. Stress will kill you if a cigarette won’t. They’ve got so much stress just from like, being abused, beaten, sexually, physically … To the point where their brain was breaking down. Their synapses weren’t firing. Their neuron pathways were corroded.

Youth have taken up this understanding of trauma: of overwhelming sensations in the body, where the jar can no longer contain the multitude of experiences, and shatters.

This image of being completely broken easily leads to thinking of people as damaged, as dangerous with sharp edges that can hurt.

Youth talked about the toxic nature of friends they once were close to; how the deaths have radically damaged friends so that it is hard to be with them.

Like duct tape holding the pieces together in a coherent shape, they had a variety of ways to cope, to ‘keep it together’.

Although some youth talked about feeling shattered they were, however, finding a variety of ways of carrying on. Working, hanging out with friends, going to school, skateboarding in car parks. Spending time with other people who were living close to or on the streets was one way youth talked about coping, until they were ‘emotionally ready’ to handle their circumstances. Xavier talked about his strategy of tattooing his body, covering up the scars of burns and cuts, reclaiming his skin.

No matter how much the burden of loss they carry, they continue.

I refuse to consider the people I have worked with and the youth that have contributed to my research as broken shards.

Perhaps we need to re-evaluate the metaphor of the glass jar. If we understand ourselves as being made up of relationships, as in an Indigenous model of relationality (Smith 2012), the connections to others, human and non-human, and to places may also deeply influence our experiences of grief. How else might we describe ourselves as instead of as a container, instead of as a glass?

What metaphors can we come up with that generate other possibilities, to maintain our lives while living with the multiple experiences of loss and entangled and difficult traumatic events? My youth advisory group proposed several, including gold-painted cracks in pottery and mosaics. Twenty-nine-year-old Naomi said:

> I was learning how to do somatic therapy … I’m sitting and I was like weeping and I was like, ‘I’m so broken, I’m so broken, I’m so broken’ … This woman came up to me and she goes, ‘Yeah, but if you were never broken, then we wouldn’t be able to make such a beautiful mosaic’ … I think breaking is important … we can become so much greater than we were in the first place if it wasn’t for that breaking.

Butler imagines grief to expand our compassion: ‘from where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?’ (2009, 30). Connecting to our own suffering, to those moments when we are ‘done and undone’ may be the way to push change, to nurture compassion and embrace transformation, and to make visible the bodily experiences of grief of those whose losses are so enormous as to be almost unimaginable.

Acknowledgements

Much gratitude to the youth who shared their stories of grief and loss, to Lacie who first introduced me to the model, to Nicole who threw herself into playing with and capturing through the lens this idea of balls and jars, and to Lisa, who always had my back. Photographs by Nicole Paquette, Victoria, BC, Canada. Reproduced with permission.

About the author

Marion Selfridge is a postdoctoral fellow at the Canadian Institute of Substance Use as well as a research manager, focusing on HIV and Hepatitis C treatment

and access to safe supply of drugs, at the Cool Aid Community Health Centre. She completed her PhD in the Social Dimensions of Health programme at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Her dissertation research focused on street-involved youths’ use of social media to deal with grief and loss. She teaches dance to stay sane.

References

Butler, Judith. 2006. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* New York City, NY: Verso.

Butler, Judith. 2009. *Giving an Account of Oneself.* New York City, NY: Fordham University Press.

Delaney, Susan. ‘Good Grief; Coping with Loss’. June 20, 2014. YouTube video, 53:52. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxSd8f2Utpk.

Fitzpatrick, Kevin M., Mark E. LaGory, and Ferris J. Ritchey. 1999. ‘Dangerous Places: Exposure to Violence and Its Mental Health Consequences for the Homeless’. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 69 (4): 438–47. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080392.

Giroux, Henry A. 2006. ‘Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability’. *College Literature* 33 (3): 171–96. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25115372.

Selfridge, Marion. 2017. ‘Grieving Online: Street-Involved Youths’ Use of Social Media After a Death’. PhD diss., University of Victoria, 2017. https://dspace.library.uvic.ca//handle/1828/8932.

Selfridge, Marion, and Lisa M. Mitchell. 2020. ‘Social Media as Moral Laboratory: Street-Involved Youth, Death and Grief’. *Journal of Youth Studies* 24 (4): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1746758.

Selfridge, Marion, Jennifer Robinson, and Lisa M. Mitchell. 2021. ‘heART space: Curating Community Grief from Overdose’. *Global Studies of Childhood* 11 (1): 69–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610621995838.

Small, Neil. 2001. ‘Theories of Grief: A Critical Review’. In *Grief, Mourning and Death Ritual*, edited by Jeanne Katz, Jenny Hockey, and Neil Small, 19–48. Buckingham, UK: University Press.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London, UK: Zed Books.

Tonkin, Lois. 1996. ‘Growing Around Grief—Another Way of Looking at Grief and Recovery’. *Bereavement Care* 15 (1): 10. https://doi.org/10.1080/02682629608657376.