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ABSTRACT

This paper examines non-human loss and its psychological effect upon rural people. It discusses the absence of any ritual response to loss, including farm loss, that would otherwise benefit the loss victims or the surrounding society. The dilemma is comparable to that of the "transitional person," the immigrant experience following World War II. The transitional person became stuck between cultures, exhibiting typically adolescent behaviors. The therapeutic response involves loosening the all-or-nothing thinking, opening up the client to new possibilities and role transition. Personal resources to mitigate loss, such as personality, sense of social role, or value structure, are examined. A study of farm adolescents' grief reactions to the sale and slaughter of animals is described. The paper concludes that, in a large number of cases of emotional reaction to loss, "recovery" is not a possibility or goal. When the loss is significant to us, we return to it as a theme throughout our lives, gleaning significance and meaning from our attachments as we mature. The positive aspect of loss is this continuous process of integrating pieces into our role definition. (TES)

Non-Human Loss in Rural Areas

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Introduction

Loss is a part of everyday life. We lose and find keys and glasses, and may think nothing of it. We lose the note reminding us where to meet our friends for dinner, and are bothered by our forgetfulness. We lose hair as we get older and are regretful at the slow deterioration of the human body.

When losses mount, or a single loss significantly affects the way we conduct our lives, we experience stronger psychological reaction called grief. The work of loss integration, sometimes called "griefwork", is more commonly referred to as the mourning period. It is the time we spend to regain equilibrium and the work we accomplish to align psychological reactions to social definitions, and takes place largely within a social context.

The distinction between significant human and non-human loss is largely artificial at the psychological level. Grief over non-human loss is quite similar to grief over human loss when significant roles and attachments are wrapped up in the object. The major difference between the two is social, not personal: our ethos claims that human life is irreplaceable, while material objects or possessions come and go.

This generalization is important, because society helps inform us about how survivors and friends are to survive the loss. Every major religion has rituals which guide us during the mourning period following human loss; we are thankful for these rituals because mourning a significant human loss can be a terrible, confusing process.

What is less obvious from a societal point of view is that non-human loss can engender the same feelings in the mourner. Yet there are no well-defined rituals which assign behavior to those mourning the loss of a farm, for example. This has a psychological effect of trivializing the loss; we feel as though we are behaving inappropriately when the environment fails to validate our loss. This is not to suggest that these reactions do not occur as a result of human loss; rather, the social milieu, by failing to acknowledge the non-human loss experience, exacerbates an already difficult situation.

The result is known to all who counsel unhappy people. When conflict between psychological response and social expectation occurs, there is an attempt by the client to reconcile the two, often at the expense of the inner experience. People feel "crazy", or out of sync with the rest of society. The natural psychological response may be denied, and often sublimated into other dysfunctional behaviors: depression, anxiety, unfounded fears, anger.

Blundall (1985) discusses the ways in which farm families personalize their loss. She writes:

> Farm families view their loss, or their anticipated loss, very personally. They are breaking a generational trust, losing a valued possession which has been an integral part of the family. This sense of loss is complex for it is a loss of one's history, one's present, and one's future. During the grieving process, the meaning and value of life is called into question primarily because of the discrepancy between one's hopes/expectations and between the course of actual events. There is a loss of confidence in the predictability and stability of the environment. The grief tends to be cyclical rather than linear, since before the grief process is completed, a new grief must be dealt with. Loss of machinery, land, operation, small business, church, school, neighbors are griefs that continue for some families, there has been grieving for four or five years. In these instances of prolonged grief there is little energy to focus on recovery....
>
> The Nebraska Farm Crisis Hotline, ... received over 600 calls in its first five months of operation. People calling on the Hotline are characterized by being in acute crisis situations; they express anxiety, depression, fear, anger, frustration and confusion, along with a general lack of pertinent skills to cope with the stressful situations. Also, they claim medical complications and physical ailments in disproportionate numbers. (pp. 4-5)

This report is typical of observations made all over the country as a consequence of recent losses engendered by the farm crisis. Similarities exist between the farm crisis and the drought.

The Social Context of Loss

Others in the individual's social environment are also confused as to appropriate response to farm loss.

Wright and Rosenblatt (1986) delineate a number of reasons why neighbors abandoned farm loss families during the recent farm economic crisis. These have to do with rural ethos emphasizing independence, fear of contagion of loss, and absence of social rituals surrounding the loss. It appears now that there will be different reactions in rural areas based on the mode of loss. Neighbors are appearing more likely to extend sympathy when farm loss is due to an act of God such as the drought as opposed to rising interest rates.

In areas where social control is great, the conflict will be denied more intensely, depending upon the individual's investment in the prevailing social order.

There are a number of obstacles the rural survivor of non-human loss must overcome: the personal, or ubiquitous confusion engendered as a result of any significant loss; and the lack of clear-cut social rituals surrounding the loss, including the ambiguity of the environmental response; and the transition to a new role as a result of the loss.

The Transitional Person

This dilemma is not without precedent. It is the fate of the "transitional person", first reported in depth by Kurt Lewin (1946; 1948) in his examination of the immigrant experience to America just after World War II. For these people loss was enormous: virtually every material object and most social customs were left behind. They faced a new society to which they must adjust. The reaction Lewin observed is now well recognized: transitional persons became "stuck" between cultures. Psychologically they exhibited typically adolescent behaviors -- which makes sense, considering adolescence is a common transitional experience we face when traveling from childhood to adulthood. Lewin's clients were often lazy, they slept a great deal, were oppositional, and fluctuated between childlike and mature responses, or cranky and lovable behavior.

For Lewin, the therapeutic response was psycho-social: first, clients must re-evaluate their thinking. For the transitional person, the common dysfunctional reaction is to rigidly assume an all-or-nothing stance with regard to the transition. Therapy can loosen the all-or-nothing thinking, opening the client up to new possibilities. The client can then begin to reassemble the "baggage" from the old, mourning the loss of that which must be left behind, and cherishing those things which can be brought forward into the new. This therapeutic reconstruction has of course occurred intuitively for centuries in the response by immigrants to new surroundings. Once the past has been evaluated, and objects or ideas of value sifted and brought forward, the process of integration can proceed with greater security. For Lewin that meant intervention must occur in the social world of the immigrant. Clubs were formed, where the native language could be spoken freely. Dances, festivals, and other social institutions were constructed, celebrating the old culture and serving as a secure base from which the immigrant could then move at his or her own pace toward integration.

The major difference between displaced farmers and displaced immigrants is of course geographic. Farm loss families must still live in the old culture, even though they have new roles. In that way, their experience is more like recent role shifts which have occurred among urban populations such as feminist women or gays and lesbians, or chemically dependent persons seeking a chemically free life.

The initial step in role transition is examination of significant attachments which can be "salvaged" from the old and brought forward to the new. Once the process of extraction occurs, integration into the new role can be made easier, as secure attachments from the past accompany the transitional person into the new role.

In order to accomplish this task, the therapist must be able to help the client distinguish the meaning of attachment to lost objects. The study will report on a model useful in helping the therapist understand the meaning of non-human loss for clients.

Human Loss Investigation

An examination of human attachment and loss models, though ultimately unsatisfactory for our purposes, provides a good starting point for investigation.

The source most commonly referred to in this area is Bowlby's monumental three volume study of attachment and loss. His concern though, reflecting the concern of other more recent human attachment researchers is between parent and child, and does not address attachment and role directly.

Virtually all modern researchers in the area of human loss are concerned with the study of grief and mourning behavior. Grief reaction is an area of study receiving the most attention. This is undoubtedly because the most distinguishing characteristic of loss is the emotional reaction to it. The twenty or so recognized models of loss reaction can be condensed for our purposes into an initial short period of shock, intense reaction, called grief, and a long process of recovery, called mourning (Gorer, 1965).

The most commonly cited mitigator of grief is affective investment. Fulton (1978) classifies loss reaction into "high-grief" and "low-grief". The difference for him is the amount of emotional investment in the lost object.

Jackson (1957) includes a psycho-social context to loss. For him, loss is mitigated by 1) personality, or the emotional resources available to the survivor generally; 2) social role, or the framework within which the loss occurs; 3) relative importance of the loss to the survivor; and 4) value structure, or the relative worth assigned to different experiences and possible outcomes.

Here we see the elements of value in non-human loss examination. The social context is all-important, because it sets the stage for recovery. Included in this is the social support system the survivor maintains, which serves to reinforce the dominant social milieu, or to temporarily protect the survivor from it. The loss survivor's personality and value structure are important. These are the personal resources used to withstand the shock of

the loss. Finally, Jackson identifies a factor which I call "utility" when he speaks of relative importance of the loss to the survivor. Importance is both emotional and material. Although we are unused to speaking of the material importance of another human being, we can readily see the factor as influential in non-human loss. As we examine role change as a result of non-human loss we need to identify the material or utilitarian elements as well as the emotional components.

A Recent Study of Attachment and Role Loss

In 1987 the author was asked by Minnesota 4-H to conduct a study of animal production participants. 4-H was concerned because some of the participants were expressing a great deal of grief as a result of the sale and slaughter of their project animals, and wanted to formulate a reaction to that event.

I interpreted the grief reaction as a response to the quality of attachment to the animals. I went further to suggest that the social roles tested by the adolescents participating in the project were in conflict and cause disequilibrium among members.

Attachment, like role, is both psychological and social. Both are reciprocal. In this case attachment of a certain type placed the participant in conflict with the social role being tried on by the adolescent. That is, the social role of farmer conflicted with attachment behavior eliciting love and nurturing.

The components of attachment I chose to examine were what intuitively appeared to be the dominant psychological elements of the conflict: the utility of the animal and its emotional importance.

I administered an animal attachment survey to a small group of production animal participants, and then interviewed them about their role as farmer in the future.

Responses to the animal attachment survey were used to place the subjects' responses on a two-dimensional matrix, with utilitarian responses on the vertical axis, and affective responses on the horizontal. Interview data was used to reinforce generalizations about attitudes within each quadrant of the matrix.

Those in quadrant one, high utilitarian and low affective involvement with their animals, tended to be older males and females who had all either experienced ambiguity about the death of their production animals, or had thoughtfully considered the experience of others. They expressed responses I labeled as adaptive to farming life, often remembering their fathers' words when expressing resolution of the dilemma. For these

people, the social norms around animal slaughter were acceptable. They carefully distinguished between animals as pets and as production units. Most expressed regret that an animal had to die, but held that regret at arm's length, intellectualizing it.

For this group, the high utilitarian value of the animal mitigated any emotional reaction they might encounter. The loss served a higher good. For one boy, the animal's death meant money for a college education he would otherwise not have been able to obtain.

Those in quadrant two, high utilitarian and high affective involvement with animals, tended to be middle adolescent, predominantly female. This group expressed greater ambiguity about the death of an animal. For most, the regret was still near and real to them. They were on the fence about the experience of the production animal project, reflecting their ambiguity about the implied social role in general. For these people, social norms were a dominant influence, although they were also highly influenced by personal response to the specific event of their animal's death.

Those in the third quadrant were exclusively early adolescent males, for whom the dilemma held no lasting conflict. Some were genuinely surprised at the notion that a conflict might occur. They were indifferent to the results of the production animal project, often indicating they were in the program as a result of peer or adult pressure. This group was too young to elucidate any significant role for their future.

Those in the fourth quadrant expressed the most genuine and lasting regret about the animal's death. They were predominantly older females who had engaged in the production animal project out of some external pressure. They often pointed to the animal death as a significant turning point in their life, influencing them away from further exploration in this area, and on two occasions away from 4-H entirely.

This group humanized their animals, or "anthropomorphized" the relationship to a great extent. They were unable to distinguish, as those in quadrant one had done, the difference between animals as production units and as pets. They would express philosophies to guide their thinking that were more universally humanitarian. They were the most concerned about issues of personal justice, and the rights of animals.

Therapeutic Implications

When role disequilibrium (to use the language of role theorists) occurs as a result of non-functional attachment to old or lost objects, new roles must be devised in order to bring the individual back into equilibrium.

The course of therapy in this case is description of old roles, interpretation of significant attachments and their conflict with the old role, therapeutic sanctioning of new role experimentation, and then assignment of tasks in the real world which would test out assumptions of new role.

The mode of therapy most useful appears to be the support group. In that setting new roles can be learned and tried, in a supportive atmosphere. It is no coincidence that support groups in Minnesota and other parts of the nation for farm loss individuals and couples are remarkably attractive. They provide all the elements needed for role transition.

Conclusion

In a large number of cases, perhaps all cases of significant emotional reaction to loss, "recovery" is not a possibility or goal; it is simply the wrong use of language with regard to the event. When the loss is significant to us, we return to it as a theme throughout our lives, gleaning significance, import, and meaning from our attachments as we mature. The positive aspect of loss is this continuous process of integration of pieces into our role definition. Like a great poem or other work of art, we return to discover new subtlety and more profound messages from our losses as we grow in our own capacity for understanding.

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