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In memory: Predicting preferences for memorializing lost loved ones

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ABSTRACT

People's preferences for memorializing loved ones vary and may depend on their personal attitudes and experiences with death. Participants ($N = 145$) completed the memorializing preferences checklist and measures of personal attitudes and life experiences with death. Factor analysis identified four memorializing preferences. In terms of predicting preferences, greater acknowledgment of death, and having experienced more losses, predicted preference for memorializing through societal tradition, community legacy, and continuing intimacy. Greater death resistance and less closeness to the deceased predicted preference for memorializing through confronting loss. Findings are discussed in terms of the range of preferences for and motivations behind memorializing.

Memorializing lost loved ones is a universally recognized sociocultural practice (Leming & Dickinson, 2007), whereby individuals preserve their relationship to a lost loved one through memory. Freud (1924) wrote that remembering allows one to assess the value of a lost relationship. Current theorists suggest that memorializing allows individuals to explore life's meaning (Moody & Sasser, 2015), identify themselves as in mourning (Cann, 2014), and preserve a relationship with the deceased (De Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Schwab, 2004). This study empirically delineates individuals' preferences for memorializing the dead and examines how their personal attitudes and life experience with death predict those preferences. Public, community-based memorializing preferences and private individual preferences are explored. This research contributes to the literature by specifying distinct memorializing preferences, thereby promoting awareness of the diversity in responses to loss. Identifying predictors of such preferences offers insight into what motivates individuals in their memorializing. This study also has, though tangentially, pragmatic implications for grief support. Future research can build on this work, using the obtained preferences and associated predictors to assess whether particular memorializing behaviors lead to more positive or negative grief outcomes.

Memorializing: Continuing connections through memory

While remembering is sometimes painful, recalling a lost loved one often brings comfort by connecting to a shared past. Remembering is the only way for a relationship to be maintained once a loved one dies (Hagman, 1995). Theory on autobiographical memory (e.g., Bluck, Alea, & Demiray, 2010) suggests that memorializing allows individuals to maintain social bonds (i.e., *social function* of autobiographical memory, Alea & Bluck, 2003). Past research in this tradition has often focused on maintaining social bonds between the living (e.g., Fivush, 2011). It also includes, however, reminiscing that "keeps alive the memory of a lost loved one" such that intimacy is maintained with those who have passed (Webster, 1993).

The theoretical idea of social bonding with lost loved ones through autobiographical memory is similar to what has been identified in counseling psychology as *continuing bonds* (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Societal values in the United States have shifted in recent decades to accept that it may be healthy to reflect on the importance of the relationship shared with the deceased over time instead of "letting go" (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). Such bonds include, for example, feeling a sense of calm via remembering the deceased and using physical possessions of the deceased to feel connected with them (e.g., Currier, Irish, Neimeyer, & Foster, 2015). Not all memorializing behaviors, however, will fulfill the same goals for the bereaved (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). As such, delineating different types of memorializing preferences is an important step toward understanding the various ways that individuals maintain connections with loved ones following their death.

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Memorializing preferences

Our review of modern American cultural responses to loss suggests three major preferences for memorializing: remembering the loved one's life, remembering that the loved one has died, and engaging in traditional societal rituals. Memorializing is a highly individualized process, and there are likely further preferences for memorializing based on needs following a loss. These three preferences, however, theoretically encompass a range of private and public memorializing seen commonly in bereaved individuals.

Remembering the loved one's life

Memorializing may include using objects and engaging in behaviors that cue memories of the lost loved one's life. Fostering recall of shared memories helps maintain a sense of the relationship even after the death (Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005). This type of memorializing is likely to provide rich memory cues to sustain recall over time, helping individuals satisfy the meaningful goal of remembering their loved one.

Remembering that the loved one has died

Memorializing that focuses on remembering that a loved one has died may help individuals process the irreversible nature of a loss (Shear & Shair, 2005). For example, keeping a loved one's cremated remains or getting a tattoo with their death date focuses on the individual's death, not the shared life. This type of memorializing may primarily serve the purpose of reminding the mourner that the loved one has died.

Engaging in traditional societal rituals

Likely the most common type of memorializing is engaging in societal rituals that usually occur relatively soon after the loss. Attending funerals or memorials and writing obituaries are examples of normative, community-based tributes to the deceased (Schwab, 2004). Such activities serve to publicly honor the death and socially acknowledge the significance of the loss.

Predicting memorializing preferences

Memorializing is a personal process: people have distinct preferences for how they want to remember someone they have lost. What guides individuals' preferences for memorializing? Two constructs expected to contribute to bereaved persons' behaviors following a loss (Neimeyer, Wittkowski, & Moser, 2004) are examined here: personal attitudes and life experiences with death. One's attitudes, particularly accepting or resisting death, are likely to influence the manner and type of engagement in memorializing. In addition, one's own past experience with loss may have deepened the emotional understanding of death, affecting what feels useful in terms of memorializing. Personal attitudes and experience with death are discussed here in relation to memorializing that focuses on remembering the shared life versus remembering that the individual has died. Since following traditional societal rituals is normative, it is expected that most individuals are likely to memorialize using such rituals (i.e., regardless of their attitudes and past experiences).

Personal attitudes

Individuals' attitudes influence the decisions they make after the loss of a loved one (Neimeyer et al., 2004), and this likely extends to their preferences for memorializing. Death attitudes are often related to one's religiously based beliefs about the afterlife (Dezutter, Luyckx, & Hutsebaut, 2009) and associated, conceptually and empirically, with how individuals respond to death-related events (Wong & Tomer, 2011). In particular, personal attitudes may reflect a willingness to acknowledge death or, alternatively, a resistance to the concept of death (Bluck, Dirk, Mackay, & Hux, 2008). Those with greater resistance to the concept of death may be inclined to memorialize in a way that helps "makes real" for them that a loved one has died. This might involve avoiding the maintenance of an ongoing relationship with a loved one as they focus on accepting the finality of the death (Field et al., 2005). In contrast, those who more fully acknowledge death (e.g., due to seeing death as part of a natural life cycle) may not need to focus on the fact of the death's occurrence. Instead, they may be more able to memorialize the life of the lost loved one, affirming their relationship through reminders of their loved one's life (Moss, 2004).

Life experience with death

Individuals' experiences with death may also affect their memorializing preferences. Witnessing the dying process and experiencing the loss of a loved one deepen one's understanding of death as a component of human life. One's experience with death may come in a variety of forms including the sheer number of people one has lost, how close one was to those deceased individuals, and the extent of one's involvement in providing informal end-of-life care for lost loved ones.

Those who have not had much life experience with death may find loss overwhelming. Such individuals may prefer memorializing in ways that help them to process that the loss has occurred, providing prompts for remembering that the loved one has died. In contrast, those who have greater life experience with death may have had more opportunity to examine their reactions to loss (Wortman & Boerner, 2011). For example, young adults who have provided informal (i.e., nonpaid) care for dying individuals report developing intense feelings of companionship with the dying and put high value on maintaining that close relationship (Dellman-Jenkins, Blankemyer, & Pinkard, 2000). This may extend to a desire to continue a sense of relationship with the loved one after death. As such, having experienced more losses, having experienced the loss of a very close other, or having informal end-of-life caregiving experience, may all lead to preferences for memorializing that focus on remembering the life of a lost loved one.

The current study

The study charts young adults' memorializing preferences. It also examines personal attitudes and life experience with death as predictors of preferences for memorializing.

Aim 1. Identify the factors that represent memorializing preferences.

Hypothesis 1. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is expected to produce factors representing: (a) remembering the life of the lost loved one, (b) remembering the loved one has died, and (c) engaging in traditional societal rituals.

Aim 2. Identify the personal attitudes and life experiences with death that act as predictors of memorializing preferences focusing on remembering the loved one's life, or remembering that the loved one has died. The relation of these variables to other categories of memorializing preferences (e.g., societal tradition) is also explored.

Hypothesis 2.1. Greater acknowledgment of death, having experienced more personal losses, having a higher level of closeness to lost loved ones, and a having more informal end-of-life caregiving experience are all expected to predict preference for memorializing that involves remembering a lost loved one's life.

Hypothesis 2.2. Greater resistance to the concept of death, having experienced fewer personal losses, being more distant from lost loved ones, and having had less experience with informal end-of-life caregiving are expected to predict preference for memorializing that reminds the mourner their loved one has died.

Methods

Participants

Study participants were 145 young adults (age: 18–23 years, $M_{age} = 18.97$, SD = 1.18); 66.9% were female. About two-thirds of participants were recruited through a psychology department participant pool and about one-third through volunteer flyers to capture diverse experiences with death in this young sample. The goal was to find students on campus who had experienced significant losses in the past. As such, flyers were posted on campus and at student volunteer organizations. All participants were full-time students. Fifty-four percent of participants were Caucasian, 12.33% were African American, 15.07% were Hispanic, 11.64% were Asian, 0.68% were American Indian, and 5.48% reported their race as "other." There were no gender differences in any of the specific memorializing preferences, so gender was not included in major analyses.

Measures

Memorializing preferences checklist

The memorializing preferences checklist, comprised of 43 items, provides an extensive list of possible ways of memorializing (Appendix 1). Items were developed based on literature concerning how people memorialize lost loved ones (e.g., Castle & Phillips, 2003; De Vries & Rutherford, 2004; Schwab, 2004) and input from a focus group. Participant instructions were, "When loved ones die, people sometimes do certain things 'in memory' of that person. Assume that you are the person who is most responsible for making decisions about how a lost loved one will be remembered. Please indicate how likely you would be to memorialize a loved one in each of the following ways." Responses were made on Likert-type scales ranging from extremely unlikely = 1 to extremely likely = 5. Note that preferences for memorializing refer to hypothetical selections individuals might make when experiencing a death in the future, and do not encompass practices that have been used in the past following a loss.

Personal attitudes

The two personal attitudes assessed were acknowledging and resisting the concept of death. Items were developed based on standard scales measuring acceptance and anxiety toward death (Allport & Ross, 1967) and extrinsic and intrinsic spiritual motivations (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). Death acknowledgment was operationalized with 19 items ($M = 3.32$, SD = 0.72) linking acceptance of loss (e.g., *Death is a natural part of life*) and intrinsic spiritual beliefs (e.g., *My religious*

beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$). Death resistance was assessed with 21 items ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.52$) reflecting a defensive anxiety when thinking about death (e.g., *The uncertainty of not knowing what happens after death worries me*) and predominately extrinsic spiritual motivations (e.g., *My place of worship is most important as a place to formulate good social relationships*; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$). Responses were made on Likert-type scales ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5.

Life experience with death

The death experience questionnaire (Bluck et al., 2008) assesses number of personal losses, closeness to lost loved ones, and involvement in informal end-of-life caregiving. Participants were provided with a list of close others (e.g., mother, spouse, sibling) they may have lost and spaces to add other significant losses not on the list. On average, participants had experienced about two deaths ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.55$, range = 7.00). A strength of the study was that the types of loss in the sample were diverse. In considering immediate family, 8.90% of participants had lost their mother, 23.97% had lost their father, 2.05% had lost their brother, 1.37% had lost their sister, and 0.68% had lost a spouse. In considering other loved ones, 63.70% had experienced the loss of a grandmother and 44.52% had experienced the loss of a grandfather, and 54.11% had experienced the loss of at least one close family member or friend. All participants included in analyses that explored life experience with death had experienced at least one loss (95.86% of the overall study sample).

Participants also reported how close they were to each of the deceased they had listed (i.e., very slightly = 1 to very much = 5) and their level of involvement in caregiving for each (i.e., almost never = 1 to very frequently = 5). Means for loss closeness ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.29$) and caregiving involvement ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.18$) were calculated across all losses for each participant. One overall score for each variable (i.e., loss closeness, caregiving involvement) was thus created per participant.

Demographics

Participants reported their age, gender, and ethnicity.

Procedure

Sessions were conducted individually in a comfortable interview room and took less than 1 hr. After informed consent was received, study materials were presented in a paper-and-pencil format by trained interviewers using a standard script. All study measures were administered in person as questionnaires by research assistants who followed a standard script.

Results

Aim 1 was addressed through EFA of the memorializing preferences checklist. Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to address Aim 2.

Identifying memorializing preferences: Obtaining factors

An EFA (Quartimax rotation) was conducted. Kaiser's rule (eigen values >1) initially resulted in seven factors (50% of variance). As is standard, a factor loading cutoff of 0.40 was used (Cliff & Hamburger, 1967), and only factors with more than three items were considered (Costello & Osborne, 2005). This resulted in four meaningful factors (35.72% of variance), three that were in line with what was hypothesized, and one additional factor (-Table 1). The factors include continuing intimacy (11 items, $M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.06$), confronting loss (seven items, $M = 2.21$, $SD = 0.06$), societal tradition (five items, $M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.06$), and community legacy (five items, $M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.06$). Factors were named in relation to their conceptual meaning based on the included items. Continuing intimacy refers to personal, intimate activities that allow the bereaved to weave memories into everyday life such that the loved one remains a continuing part of it (e.g., mentioning the lost loved one at family gatherings, listening to the lost loved one's favorite music). Confronting loss, in contrast, includes activities focused on facing the reality that the loss has occurred, reminding the bereaved that their loved one has indeed died (e.g., keeping the lost loved one's room the way it was before they died, wearing the ashes of the lost loved one in jewelry). Societal tradition refers to normative rituals immediately following loss (e.g., attending a memorial, writing an obituary). Finally, community legacy refers to the creation of an ongoing tribute that acts as a legacy in a public community setting (e.g., setting up a scholarship fund, creating a charitable foundation). Factors were intercorrelated (correlation between continuing intimacy societal tradition: $r = 0.34$, with community legacy $r = 0.22$, with confronting loss $r = 0.41$; between societal tradition and community legacy $r = 0.31$, with confronting loss $r = 0.46$; between community legacy and confronting loss $r = 0.20$).

Predicting memorializing preferences

To address Aim 2, regression models were run with personal attitudes (i.e., death acknowledgment and

Table 1. Factor pattern matrix for the memorializing preferences checklist (EFA: Quartimax rotation).

	Factor loadings			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Item	Continuing intimacy	Community legacy	Confronting loss	Traditional rituals
6. Create place for picture	0.45			
9. Birthday celebration	0.59			
10. Wear belongings	0.73			
11. Eat favorite food	0.65			
21. Write a poem	0.72			
24. Family reunion	0.65			
25. Listen to favorite music	0.76			
28. Passed down object	0.62			
31. Song creation	0.64			
36. Mention loved one	0.53			
38. Children take up hobbies	0.47			
14. Fund scholarship		0.87		
15. Start a foundation		0.95		
17. Donate to charity		0.67		
27. Name a street		0.49		
30. Video documentary		0.42		
3. Maintain website			0.68	
26. Wear ashes			0.49	
32. Create ornament			0.42	
37. Facebook/MySpace page			0.57	
40. Keep ashes			0.79	
41. Keep room the same			0.59	
42. Engrave car window			0.61	
4. Newspaper obituary				0.76
5. Place of death marker				0.41
12. Religious ceremony				0.43
13. Flowers for grave				0.41
22. Create plaque				0.52
Reliability (Cronbach's a)	0.80	0.74	0.72	0.67
Variance explained	13.39	8.34	8.92	5.07

death resistance) and life experience with death (i.e., number of personal losses, overall scores for loss closeness and caregiving involvement) as predictors of each memorializing preference. A correlation matrix with all major variables appears in Table 2. Major findings are illustrated conceptually in Figure 1.

The first model, $R^2 = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$ (Table 3) shows that greater death acknowledgment predicts a preference for memorializing using continuing intimacy ($p < 0.01$). The number of personal losses experienced shows a marginal trend ($p = 0.07$). The model for confronting loss, $R^2 = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$ (Table 4) shows that higher death resistance was related ($p < 0.05$) and loss closeness was negatively related ($p = 0.05$) to preference for confronting loss: those who resist the concept of death and who feel more distant from previous lost loved ones prefer memorializing that focuses on reminders that a

loved one has died. The model for societal tradition, $R^2 = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$, (Table 5) shows that higher levels of death acknowledgment ($p < 0.01$), and having experienced a greater number of personal losses ($p < 0.05$) both predict endorsing societal tradition. Similarly, the model for community legacy, $R^2 = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$, shows that higher levels of death acknowledgment ($p < 0.01$), and having experienced a greater number of personal losses ($p = 0.01$) predict preference for community legacy memorializing (Table 6). In a post-hoc analysis, death acknowledgment was explored as a mediator of personal losses in predicting community legacy (i.e., with the idea that more personal losses may result in a heightened acknowledgment, leading to preference for community legacy). No mediation effect was seen ($b = 0.01$, $se = 0.01$, $p = 0.21$, 95% CI [−0.01, 0.04]).

Table 2. Correlation of memorializing preferences with personal attitudes, personal losses, loss closeness, and caregiving involvement.

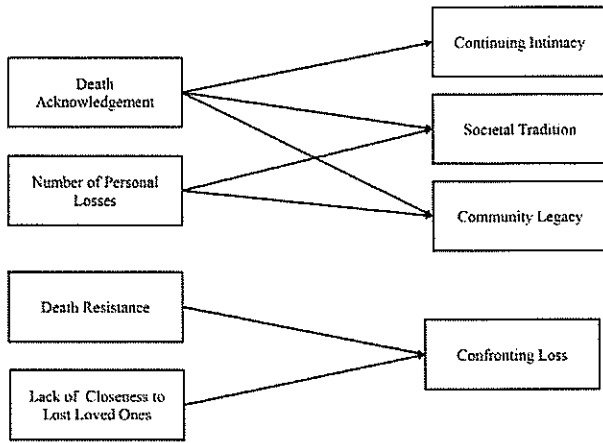|	Predictor variable	Continuing intimacy	Community legacy	Confronting loss	Societal tradition
1	Death acknowledgment	0.27**	0.27**	0.15	0.27**
2	Death resistance	0.11	0.15	0.21*	0.15
3	Personal losses	0.18*	0.28**	0.04	0.22**
4	Loss closeness	0.02	0.11	−0.12	0.06
5	Caregiving involvement	0.12	0.08	0.01	0.02

Note: *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$.

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of significant predictors of the four memorializing preferences. *Note*: Solid lines indicates $p < 0.05$.

Table 3. Summary of regression model predicting continuing intimacy.

Variable	B	95% CI
Death acknowledgment	0.21**	[0.07, 0.36]
Death resistance	0.07	[−0.13, 0.28]
Personal losses	0.06†	[−0.01, 0.13]
Loss closeness	−0.05	[−0.15, 0.05]
Caregiving involvement	0.08	[−0.04, 0.19]

Note: All variables are unstandardized. †$p < 0.08$. **$p < 0.01$.

Exploring the influence of personal losses

The number of personal losses that individuals had experienced was a predictor of multiple memorializing preferences. To rule out confounding of the number and type of loss, we decided to examine whether individuals who had experienced more losses were also more likely to have experienced the loss of a particular loved one (e.g., father, mother) in analyses where personal losses were significant. Bivariate correlations show that overall number of personal losses experienced is associated with having lost one's father ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), but not one's mother ($r = −0.07$), brother ($r = 0.09$), or sister ($r = 0.01$), all $p > 0.05$. As such, the regression models for societal tradition and community legacy were re-run, this time including whether one had lost their father (dichotomous) to

Table 4. Summary of regression model predicting confronting loss.

Variable	B	95% CI
Death acknowledgment	0.12	[−0.03, 0.27]
Death resistance	0.25*	[0.04, 0.46]
Personal losses	0.01	[−0.06, 0.08]
Loss closeness	−0.10*	[−0.21, 0.00]
Caregiving involvement	0.05	[−0.06, 0.17]

Note: All variables are unstandardized. *$p < 0.05$.

Table 5. Summary of regression model predicting societal tradition.

Variable	B	95% CI
Death acknowledgment	0.22**	[0.07, 0.37]
Death resistance	0.15	[−0.07, 0.36]
Personal losses	0.08*	[0.01, 0.15]
Loss closeness	0.03	[−0.08, 0.13]
Caregiving involvement	−0.04	[−0.15, 0.08]

Note: All variables are unstandardized. *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$.

Table 6. Summary of regression model predicting community legacy.

Variable	B	95% CI
Death acknowledgment	0.23**	[0.07, 0.39]
Death resistance	0.13	[−0.10, 0.35]
Personal losses	0.11**	[0.04, 0.19]
Loss closeness	0.04	[−0.08, 0.15]
Caregiving involvement	−0.00	[−0.13, 0.12]

Note: All variables are unstandardized. **$p < 0.01$.

investigate whether inclusion of this variable affects the coefficients for personal loss. Substantial changes were not detected for personal loss coefficients (changes in B weight < 0.02) and the loss of father variable did not predict either memorializing preference (p's > 0.10). Societal tradition and community legacy continued to be significant following the addition of loss of father.

Discussion

The study highlights heterogeneity in the ways that individuals find it important to memorialize the dead. We identify four preferences individuals have for memorializing lost loved ones. These private and public types of memorializing can sometimes occur simultaneously (e.g., remembering a lost loved one's life while also participating in tradition such as a funeral). At the same time, these distinct preferences suggest that connecting to the deceased through memory fulfills multiple purposes for the bereaved, including understanding fully that the death has occurred (Shear & Shair, 2005), but also integrating the lost loved one into one's ongoing life (Field et al., 2005). The study also shows how individuals' personal attitudes regarding death and their previous lived experience with death relate to the ways they choose to memorialize. This elucidates the motivations individuals may have for their behavior following loss. The study provides a basis for future work exploring how individuals' choices for memorializing relate to their grief trajectory.

The findings are discussed in greater detail. In interpreting them, however, note that participants were purposively sampled to include a range of death experiences including normative (e.g., grandparents) and non-normative losses (e.g., parents). Inclusion of

individuals with a range of losses was crucial to address the relations of life experience with death to memorializing preferences. That said, the sample does not represent the general population in this young adult age group, who have normatively experienced fewer losses.

Identifying memorializing preferences

Four preferences for memorializing, including the three that were hypothesized, were identified. Although there are certainly other ways of memorializing, this study provides support for these four as preferred behaviors following loss. We suggest that the delineated preferences may best be conceived as forms of public and personal memorializing. Each is discussed here in relation to their potential uses for the bereaved following a loss.

Public memorializing

Memorializing through societal rituals and tributes honoring the loved one are public activities. They serve to recognize the deceased as having been an important member of a given community (Cann, 2014). The societal tradition preferences identified in this study are normative rituals carried out immediately following a loss, while the community legacy preferences are unscripted activities that link specific characteristics of the lost love one to a method for socially honoring them in the community in perpetuity.

Societal tradition. As expected, this was the most highly endorsed form of memorializing. There is social press to participate in traditional rituals as a way of showing respect for the dead (Schwab, 2004). Traditional rituals such as attending a memorial or writing an obituary usually occur shortly after the loss and as such are unlikely to serve as prompts that help the mourner maintain a relationship with a lost loved one over time. They may serve that purpose however, if the ritual is maintained across time (i.e., revisiting a gravesite). In tandem with following societal tradition, individuals may engage in other memorializing that continues long after societal traditions are completed (Castle & Phillips, 2003).

Community legacy. Some people memorialize through creating or financially supporting public objects or programs that relate to a lost loved one's former interests, talents, or goals (e.g., starting a scholarship). The concept of legacy involves pro-social acts that serve to publicly immortalize the lost one, which can also be psychologically beneficial for family and friends (Allen, Hilgeman, Ege, Shuster, & Burgio, 2008). Such public tributes may be particularly common when responding to unexpected or violent deaths, as a way of providing information to the community about dangers (e.g., drunk driving) or diseases (e.g., depression and suicide).

Personal memorializing

Remembering a lost loved one's life and remembering that they have died are two forms of personal memorializing. This type of memorializing is more private than the public forms of memorializing discussed. Personal memorializing may occur alone or involve some interaction with other memorializing behaviors.

Continuing intimacy. Continuing intimacy involves engaging with specific memories as part of one's everyday life so as to create ongoing connections (Alea & Bluck, 2003) to the relationship shared with the deceased (Field et al., 2005). This form of memorializing (e.g., listening to the lost loved one's favorite music, celebrating the lost loved one's birthday) can spur memory of positive although realistic characteristics of a loved one that affirm the significance of the relationship (Moss, 2004). Ongoing connections to the lost loved one that are woven into one's daily life in a meaningful way may allow successful integration of the lost individual into one's own continuing life story (Bluck & Mroz, 2017; Castle & Phillips, 2003).

Confronting loss. Confronting loss focuses on reminding oneself that the loved one has indeed died. This may indicate that the mourner is still processing the reality of the loss (Field et al., 2005) and act as a signal to others to provide emotional support (Cann, 2014). Keeping a lost loved one's room the same, for example, may indicate that the bereaved is not prepared to fully acknowledge the death (Wortman & Boerner, 2011) or even has a futile notion that the deceased will return (i.e., grief non-resolution, Field et al., 2005). While potentially useful for a short time, memorializing that focuses on the fact that the loved one has died may perpetuate post-loss attachment if maintained over time (i.e., absence of meaning-making; Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006). For example, maintenance of the Facebook page of a lost loved one can lead to complicated grief symptomology, especially when the bereaved are finding it difficult to handle the emotional intensity of the loss (Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015).

Predicting memorializing preferences

Every individual has a unique approach to memorializing after a death. Our findings show that, as predicted,

this is guided in part by their already established attitudes and their past experiences with death. Identifying these predictors of memorializing preferences provides insight into underlying motivations when responding to loss (Wortman & Boerner, 2011).

Personal attitudes predict memorializing preferences

Our findings show that holding an attitude of greater acknowledgment of death is related to preferring public memorializing such as following societal rituals, and creating a community legacy, but also private memorializing that focuses on remembering the loved one's life. This is in line with research demonstrating that acceptance of death allows individuals to adjust to loss more readily (e.g., Wong & Tomer, 2011). When individuals are able to acknowledge death as part of life, they may be more prepared to follow public rituals and maintain intimate relationships with the deceased through memory (Castle & Phillips, 2003). In contrast, having a resistant attitude to the idea of death was related to preferring memorializing that reminds the individual that the loved one has died (i.e., confronting loss). This may indicate that when one fears and resists death as a concept, it is harder to accept that a loss of a close other has actually occurred (Field et al., 2005). Individuals who have been disturbed by death in the past are less likely to adjust following further personal losses (Kastenbaum, 2015). They may therefore need to memorialize in ways that help them to confront the reality that the loved one is gone.

Life experiences with death predict memorializing preferences

Individuals who had experienced more losses in their own lives preferred public memorializing: performing societal traditions and creating a community legacy. Those who have experienced more losses in their life, and thereby likely participated in societal rituals in past, may more fully recognize the comfort and meaning of following tradition. Having experienced more losses may also guide individuals to appreciate the potential comfort that can come from creating a relevant legacy that honors the deceased in the surrounding community. Sheer number of past losses was not the only important predictor, however. Individuals who have lost others in past, but were distant from those they lost, prefer future memorializing that helps them confront the loss. Feeling close to others who one has lost in past was related to less preference for memorializing that involves confronting the death. This may reflect that the previous loss of emotionally close others helps one to recognize the finality of death.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, participants expressed their preferences for memorializing, but their actual memorializing practices may not follow these preferences. Future work should examine preferences and actual practices. A longitudinal follow-up (e.g., Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006) that considers preferences as well as practices could also address a second study limitation. That is, it could demonstrate the dynamic, reciprocal nature of the relations of preferences, practices, and grief trajectory over time. Such research might include content analysis of individuals' narratives about memorializing (Bluck & Mroz, 2017) as well as analysis of literary accounts of bereavement to provide a richer understanding of the complex, multifaceted nature of remembering the deceased (Dennis, 2008; Didion, 2012).

A final limitation is that, though we sampled individuals who had experienced a variety of losses, the study included only young adults so some or all findings may not generalize to other adult age groups. As individuals move across the lifespan they experience multiple losses and their life phase context results in different impacts of those loss (e.g., De Vries, Dalla Lana, & Falck, 1994). Changes in death experience and attitudes may also occur with age, and with them, differences in what are seen as meaningful ways to memorialize. As one possible example, older adults who have experienced more losses may need fewer memorializing cues to help them process the reality of the loss (i.e., confronting loss). Future research should investigate memorializing preferences of individuals in different phases of life.

Conclusion

Death itself, but also remembering the dead, is integral to human life (Bluck & Mroz, 2017). This research delineated individuals' choices for memorializing those they lose. This included both traditional and unique methods of publicly honoring the dead, and involved private, personal ways of striving to remember the lives and the deaths of loved ones. Participants' existing attitudes about death and their own past experience with loss were shown to meaningfully guide their preferences for memorializing. As individuals travel through adulthood, the ways that they use memory to process and connect with the life and death of their own lost loved ones may continue to shape and inform their understanding of mortality.

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Appendix 1: Memorializing preferences checklist

1. Planting a tree in memory of the lost loved one
2. Dedicating a small garden in memory of the lost loved one
3. Creating an online memorial website for the lost loved one
4. Writing a newspaper obituary for the lost loved one
5. Creating a memorial at the place where the loved one died (e.g., roadside memorial)
6. Creating a special place in your home for pictures of the lost loved one
7. Creating a scrapbook about the lost loved one's life
8. Reading letters or other materials written by the lost loved one
9. Celebrating the lost loved one's birthday
10. Wearing clothes, accessories, and/or jewelry that belonged to the lost loved one
11. Eating food that you think of as a favorite of the lost loved one
12. Having a religious ceremony, funeral, or memorial service for the lost loved one
13. Bringing flowers to the site where the lost loved one is buried or their ashes have been placed
14. Setting up a scholarship fund in honor of the lost loved one
15. Creating a charitable foundation in honor of the lost loved one
16. Getting a tattoo that memorializes the lost loved one
17. Donating to charity in honor of the lost loved one
18. Naming a child after the lost loved one
19. Burning incense and/or candles as a tribute to the lost loved one
20. Having a party to celebrate the life of the lost loved one
21. Writing a poem or short story in honor of the lost loved one
22. Putting a plaque on a public bench or another public place to honor the lost loved one
23. Keeping a cherished object or possession of the lost loved one to remember them by
24. Having a family reunion in honor of the lost loved one
25. Listening to the lost loved one's favorite music
26. Wearing the ashes of the lost loved one in a locket, necklace, or ring
27. Trying to have a street, building, or park named after the lost loved one
28. Designating a cherished object of the lost loved one (e.g., a book) that will be passed down through future generations
29. Promoting research/awareness of what the loved one died from (e.g., cancer)
30. Creating a video compilation documenting the lost loved one's life
31. Writing a song or poem for the lost loved one
32. Creating an ornament of some kind (e.g., Christmas ornament) to memorialize
33. Living your own life with certain values to honor the lost loved one
34. Sharing stories of the lost loved one with friends and family
35. Sharing stories of the lost loved one with people who didn't know him or her
36. Mentioning the lost loved one at major life events, such as weddings, birthdays, etc.
37. Maintaining a Facebook and/or Myspace page in the lost loved one's name
38. Encouraging children to take up hobbies/interests of the lost loved one
39. Designing a building or sculpture in honor of the lost loved one
40. Keeping the ashes of the lost loved one in an urn in a special place in the home
41. Keeping the lost loved one's room the same way it was before they died
42. Engraving a car or truck window in memory of the lost loved one
43. Visiting the gravesite or place where ashes of the loved one are scattered