

Schriftliche Arbeit zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades

**Bachelor of Arts**

Im Studiengang

**Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie**

Am Institut für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie der Freien Universität Berlin

**Grieving in Neoliberalism**

**An Anthropological Analysis of Contemporary Grief in Anglo-Saxon Societies**

Vorgelegt von

Anna M. Lehmann

Erstprüfer: Prof. Dr. Dominik Mattes

Zweitprüfer: Dr. Marcos Freire de Andrade Neves

Abgabe: 18.08.2024

## Structure

<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Methodological Base .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.1. Literature-based Research .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.2. Positionality.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Theoretical Base .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3.1. Grief in Anthropology .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3.2. Conceptualizing Neoliberalism in Contemporary Societies .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. Understanding Neoliberalism’s Grip on Grief .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4.1. Regulating Grief .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4.2. Individualizing Experiences of Grief.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4.3. Medicalization and Pathologizing .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4.4. The Transformative Potential of Grief.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>5. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Eidesstaatliche Erklärung .....</b>	<b>20</b>

## 1. Introduction

I was 22 years old when my mother died. The grief that preceded and especially the grief that followed this loss left me devastated. I was young, in the middle of my university studies, occupied with projects, in a city where everyone and everything was constantly moving. My mother's death threw me off course. I was confused and didn't know who I could turn to, since most of my friends hadn't experienced a similar loss at their age. I was overwhelmed by all the bureaucracy, deadlines for my studies and wage labor. Soon I realized that there was neither a time nor a place for my grief, which took so much of my capacities to function. In various self-help groups I talked to other individuals who had experienced similar losses and who described experiences resembling mine: Grieving had no place in their everyday life. We felt as if there were no socially viable structures to support our grief, leaving many of us feeling alone and ashamed. It was expected of us to work and contribute to society just as we did before our losses. I realized that I felt guilty, and I pressured myself to function again, even though I was aware of the exceptional situation I was in. This experience led me to develop theoretical questions concerning grief and the place it holds in contemporary society. Why was it expected to function again, why did we feel ashamed of our grief and what is the reason behind the lack of support and understanding for grieving people? I aim to use anthropological methods and literature to explore and analyze some of these questions, which occurred to me after my personal exposure to grief.

I am especially concerned with grief in contemporary, Anglo-Saxon societies, which is why I intend to analyze the ways in which grief is constituted in a neoliberal space and how these neoliberal structures affect the ways individuals grieve. By adding to anthropological studies about grief and by analyzing the role that grief has within this social system, I want to find out how the neoliberal agenda shapes ways of contemporary grieving. Especially in light of current world affairs, wars, and social injustices, grief will play a more important role, individually and collectively, making it even more important to understand what place it holds in neoliberal societies. It is an especially suited topic for anthropology because grief is a socially and culturally shaped way to cope with loss. Anthropological work will allow to highlight these connections and gain an understanding of the social expression of grief.

My thesis will be a literature-based analysis founded on recent publications concerning grief and neoliberalism, in anthropology as well as in cross-disciplinary approaches. Due to the

current state of research, I will narrow my analysis to the Anglo-Saxon region of contemporary societies.

In the first step I will present my methodology to establish an understanding of the selected literature. Additionally, I will explain my positionality in this context. In the following step I will provide a theoretical framework for the discussion. In doing so, I am going to theorize grief as an anthropological concept, by presenting previous approaches to grief and discussing terminology related to the study of grief. Additionally, I will offer a neoliberal, anthropological understanding of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In doing so, I want to be aware of the increasing use of the term “neoliberalism” in anthropology, which is why I aim to discuss this aspect critically and present the potential it nevertheless has for my analysis. Thirdly, a discussion on the interconnections and influences that neoliberal structures have on grief in social and cultural contexts will be presented. To gain a profound understanding of these mechanisms, I will present how grief is regulated in its form and duration and how this is shaped by neoliberal structures. I will present the example of bereavement leave, mechanisms of individualization and pathologization, in the interest of exploring an understanding of grief that reproduces neoliberal discourses. Lastly, I will elaborate on the transformative power of grief and its potential to counter neoliberal agendas.

## **2. Methodological Base**

This thesis is based on previous research and existing literature, aiming to present a detailed analysis and a profound understanding of neoliberal structures within grief. I will explain how the selected literature will be helpful in answering the question posed above. Furthermore, I will state my positionality to illustrate my point of view in the context of grief and neoliberalism.

### **2.1. Literature-based Research**

To gain a first understanding of contemporary research in anthropology concerning grief and neoliberalism I investigated the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, a publisher of annual reviews on current anthropological topics. I explored cross-references focusing on publication with an anthropological background. I engaged with less recent research, such as Gorer’s (1955) work

on death or Rosaldo's (1993) work on grief to provide an understanding of the anthropological foundations regarding the topic. Furthermore, more recent work, such as Granek's (2014) contribution to the political aspect of grief as well as Macdonald's (2020) research experiences on grief, build on contemporary approaches and highlight the topicality of my research question. In addition, the literature I have selected focuses on Anglo-Saxon societies (Moisseeff 2021, Walter 2000), since it will help to narrow down the neoliberal space in question. I aim to provide multi-perspective views on both grief and neoliberalism which is why a critical discussion of the literature will be essential. To include multiple perspectives, I will work with a debate concerning the concept of neoliberalism in anthropology held at the 2012 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory at the University of Manchester (Venkatesan 2015). In addition, I selected literature from other social sciences, like politics and sociology (Barthes 2011, Butler 2004). An interdisciplinary approach to this topic will enrich my thesis, because knowledge gained in other disciplines will complement an anthropological understanding.

## **2.2. Positionality**

As a person who was socialized in the contemporary, neoliberal society I am writing about and as someone who has experienced grief herself, my work does not aim for objectivity. For one, I think it impossible to approach a subject of any personal involvement with objectivity, meaning that my perspective is inevitably shaped by my own encounter with grief. Secondly, I see potential in building on my personal experience. Like Renato Rosaldo (1993) stated in *Grief and a Headhunter's Rage*, the use of personal experience can intensify the quality and highlight the cultural force of grief. He describes the ethnographer "as a positioned subject" (Rosaldo 1993, p.175) whose own subjectivity can generate knowledge and whose emotions can affect the understanding of a field. At the same time, this work is neither a personal reflection of my experience nor an autoethnographic approach, which does not mean that it is not shaped by my relation to the subject. I will ensure that my analysis is balanced and reflect my bias when I critically engage with the literature, to contribute valuable insights to the understanding of grief within neoliberal contexts.

I label the ethnographic region in which I will explore grief as contemporary and Anglo-Saxon, namely the United States, Great Britain, or Canada. I will not specify further to a distinct country

or region, because neoliberal structures work globally across borders and due to a lack of anthropological literature specific to certain regions concerning neoliberalism and grief. Even though I write about experiences of grief in a broad context, I acknowledge that experiences of grief are never universal and differ internationally, nationally and individually. Nevertheless, at certain points in this work generalizations about grief will be inevitable. This work does not aim to construct one universal way of grieving but to highlight potential similarities resulting from neoliberal structures. My analysis should rather be seen as a foundation for an understanding of individual experiences. Furthermore, I will not define the kind of loss that precedes the feeling of grief.

### **3. Theoretical Base**

Having established an understanding of my methodology and of previous work, approaches to grief in anthropology will be presented. Understanding concepts of grief in anthropology will allow a comprehension of its social and cultural place. Discussions and debates about concepts of neoliberalism in anthropology will be explained to establish an understanding of the ethnographic area that I am analyzing. This theoretical grounding will enable an understanding of the intersection of grief and neoliberalism, setting the frame for a comprehensive discussion.

#### **3.1. Grief in Anthropology**

Whereas in German the word for grief, “Trauer”, already implicates in its root to be sad (“traurig sein”) the English language offers a wider lexical range to describe the feeling one experiences after a loss: grief, mourning or bereavement, doing more justice to the complexity of this emotion. Durkheim, Radcliff-Brown and Malinowski provided a first analysis on emotions surrounding death but focused mostly on mortuary rituals and cultural practices (Robben 2018, p.vxi). Malinowski argued for a universal fear of death, Durkheim stated that the individual grief at the death of another is expressed in culturally prescribed ways, including that mourning can draw people together, and Radcliff-Brown suggests that cultural practices produce the emotions that bereaved people should express (Robben 2004, p.2-7). It was understood that mortuary rituals served to restore social ties of a bereaved community, and rituals were seen as

a way to process the loss. In his work *The Pornography of Death*, Gorer (1955, p.50) argues, that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon societies, death has become more and more unmentionable, so that societies associated death with shame and discomfort. For Gorer it was medicalization that distanced the community from the dying. Similar comparisons can be drawn regarding grief. One of the groundbreaking texts in the anthropology of grief is Renato Ronaldo's (1993) *Grief and a Headhunters Rage*, in which the author reflects on his changed understanding of Ilongot rage as a result of grief after his wife died during field work. He highlights the cultural force of rage within grief and reveals, that he too used to equate grief with sadness (Rosaldo 1993, p.168).

More recent anthropological work on grief is rethinking and reconceptualizing emotions of grief and the complexities of death. With a rising interest in cross-cultural studies of emotions, grief gained more importance in anthropology. Recent work in anthropology critiques universalizing models of grief (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.2). Pursuing an anthropological approach to grief means recognizing the cultural, historical, social and political factors as contributing to individual processes and respecting that responses to loss are intersubjective. Grief follows socio-cultural norms, leading to a classification of appropriate and inappropriate forms of grief. Grief is not only sadness, but can also be expressed through rage, shock, pain, indifference or sorrow. Studying grief within anthropology is especially enriching due to methods like long-term field work, which allow the researcher embrace the complexity of grief (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.1-4). In discourses on grief the following ideas persistently reappear: grief is seen “as a consistent entity: grief follows a distinct pattern; is short-term and finite; is quasi-linear with stages, tasks, or phases; is a process that needs to be ‘worked through’” (Macdonald 2020, p.127). Rosaldo (1993, p.172) argues that grief should rather be described as a human process without an ending and criticizes anthropological work for mostly studying processes with a start, middle and ending point.

Anthropological contributions to grief have discussed terminology regarding bereavement, particularly the difference between mourning and grief. In *Unmaking the Anthropology of Mourning in a Psychoanalytical Perspective* (Zeeshan, Dr. Chaudhry, and Khan 2020, p.100), the authors describe both mourning and grief as personal feelings accompanied by social withdrawal, distinguishing grief as inward and mourning as external. This aligns with Durkheim's description of mourning among Australian Aborigines as a community-imposed obligation (Robben 2018, p.xxii). Recent studies, however, abandon this dichotomy and analyze grief and mourning together. Robben argues that “grief and mourning should rather be seen as

communicating vessels that shape and reshape one another in a sociocultural medium” (Robben 2018, p.xxv), emphasizing their social construction. Nancy Scheper-Hughes' (1992) *Death Without Weeping* further supports this view by demonstrating that grief, like mourning, is culturally produced. Her study of Brazilian mothers who felt pity rather than grief after losing infants due to poor conditions suggests that grief is not universal but a cultural product. Despite critiques, her work exemplifies the social production of emotions and norms.

### **3.2. Conceptualizing Neoliberalism in Contemporary Societies**

Just like the discussion of grief, analyzing neoliberalism is an interdisciplinary project. Over the last twenty years, the research on neoliberalism has been of increasing interest in anthropology, focusing on neoliberal policies, including their implementations and consequences (Hilgers 2011, p.315). An anthropological approach to neoliberalism can emphasize the impact neoliberal structures have on aspects that are not only tied “to the market, institutional reforms, or political practices” (Hilgers 2011, p.315). Scholars who studied neoliberalism in anthropology include Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) with *Millennial Capitalism*, Wacquant’s (2010) work on neoliberal prison systems, or Aihwa Ong’s (2006) work *Neoliberalism as exception* on neoliberalism as a technology of governing. Practices associated with the implementation of neoliberalism reshape our understanding of social relations, affect our perception of human nature and change how institutions operate. An anthropological approach to neoliberalism can explore how these practices are produced and expanded on the global scale, while analyzing its involvement in the management of social interactions and experiences (Hilgers 2011). In his analysis of different anthropological approaches to neoliberalism, Hilgers (2011) explains three anthropological forms of knowledge, which provide a different perspective on neoliberalism’s expansion and which will be summarized in the following section. Even though the approaches are diverse, they all view neoliberalism as a “radicalized form of capitalism” (Hilgers 2011, p.352) and share “an emphasis on individual responsibility”, “an opposition to collectivism”, “a promotion of freedom” and agree to see neoliberalism as a “result of a historical process”. One form of anthropological knowledge production is the approach to neoliberalism as culture (Hilgers 2011, p.352-354). This concept views culture as unstable, open and directly linked to the development of material structures. It aims to connect the local to the global by providing an ethnography of neoliberal culture. Studying neoliberalism as culture shows that it is “hard to feel any shared sense of belonging”



(Hilgers 2011, p. 355). The systemic approach, shaped by Wacquant (2010, p.355-358), views the social world as a system, being a sociological approach that seeks to reorganize relationships between the market, state and citizenship. It classifies neoliberalism as a project, whereas the third approach views neoliberalism as a way of acting. Neoliberalism as governmentality analyses social, political and economic transformations and supposes that neoliberalism is based on optimization technologies. One example are the "technologies of subjectivity" (Hilgers 2011, p. 358), which control populations to enhance productivity and adhere to a competitive logic. Another involves an emphasis on the self, resulting in heightened individualization, competition, and personal responsibility. This compels individuals to manage their lives according to market logic, focusing on maximization. These three anthropological approaches to neoliberalism reveal, that neoliberalism can be a flexible, political mode of optimization and questions arise concerning the influence and reach that the logic of the market has in social and cultural realms (Hilgers 2011, p.358).

Although using neoliberalism as a concept can be helpful, significant anthropological debates question its usefulness in research. At the 2012 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory at the University of Manchester, scholars criticized the inflationary use of the term, arguing it fails to account for unique histories and conditions of specific places and people (Venkatesan 2015, p.911). James Laidlaw (2015, p.912) argues, that anthropology should abandon the term since it leads to presumptions rather than specific analysis. Jonathan Mair (2015, p.917) supports this, claiming that focusing on neoliberalism hinders the exploration of moral and economic factors, resulting in poor ethnography. Conversely, Thomas Hylland Eriksen acknowledges concerns about neoliberalism disguising more than it reveals, but stresses the importance of not neglecting the term by emphasizing that neoliberalism affects "life-worlds across the planet, and we cannot afford to ignore this for the sake of a programmatic particularism or because it is being overused" (Eriksen 2015, p.914). Its ideology affects personhood and self-understanding, making an understanding of neoliberalism crucial to an interpretation of the contemporary world (Eriksen 2015, p.915). The concept of neoliberalism is essential to grasp the complexities of modern identity on a global scale and link them to larger economic and political dynamics (Eriksen 2015, p.917).

Situating my anthropological discussion of grief within neoliberalism will enrich the analysis by following a critical examination of the ways in which neoliberal ideologies influence cultural norms around grieving, potentially revealing how market-driven values impact the emotional

and social processes associated with bereavement and uncovering complex interactions, offering deeper insights into the cultural construction of grief in contemporary society.

#### **4. Understanding Neoliberalism's Grip on Grief**

After having established a theoretical foundation for anthropological approaches to grief and an anthropological understanding of neoliberalism, the following section will connect these approaches to gain an understanding of grief in a neoliberal society. To do so, it will be necessary to analyze with which strategies grief is regulated, how individualization in neoliberalism affects grief and why it is important to consider the increasing pathologization of grief within neoliberalism. Further, transformative potential of grief will be evaluated.

##### **4.1. Regulating Grief**

October 29

The *measurement* of mourning.

(Larousse, Memorandum): eighteen months for mourning a father, a mother. (Barthes 2011, p.19)

In most societies, the period of grief is regulated in terms of duration, modes of expression or rituals (Granek 2014, p.61). The mourning process tends to be deeply shaped by religion, which often grants mourners a special status. Regulation of mourning through religion can provide answers as to when to mourn, how long to mourn, or what to wear while mourning (Zeeshan, Dr. Chaudhry, and Khan 2020, p.101). However, by what means is grief being organized in a society where smaller percentage of people are religious? In a diary that Roland Barthes (2011) wrote in 1977 and later published, he reflects on his experiences after the death of his mother, his own exposure to grief and his struggles to feel a sense of belonging in the society. Above other things, he mentions the duration of grief. Barthes' quote shows that grieving people are looking for answers on how much space and time their grief can take up. I argue that the neoliberal agenda regulates the duration of grief in a way that keeps it short and practical for the sake of neoliberalism. This can be seen through the regulation of bereavement leave in different labor policies, which on average grant a two to three day leave after a loss (Macdonald 2020, p.128). This policy practice is apparent in various Anglo-Saxon countries, like Canada

(Macdonald 2020, p.128), the United States (depending on the state) or Great Britain (Employment Rights Act 1996, Section 80EB). Although there is neither a right for bereavement leave, nor an obligation to get paid, different policies share the fact that the leave is only granted for related-by-marriage or blood-related family members. In this way, work contracts manage grief in multiple ways.

For one, they imply a time in which the employee can cope with, manage and organize their grief, and return to work with the same productiveness as before. An effort to support and care for grieving employees is not provided in any of these contracts (Macdonald 2020, p.129). Portraying grief as a limited process that must be overcome, is shown through vocabulary related to grief, for example “grief work”, “managing grief” or “coping with a loss”. As analyzed by Macdonald “these metaphors merge with neoliberal discourses that frame grief as a threat to productivity and thus something that must be resolved quickly” (Macdonald 2020, p.126) or will otherwise become a threat to the work environment and thus to the neoliberal agenda. Grief in a neoliberal society is a problem because it prevents people from working and disrupts productivity (Macdonald 2020, p.130). By reinforcing and encouraging the griever to be productive and contribute regardless of their loss, the logic of the market extends into their private life. This aligns with Ong’s concept of neoliberal governmentality, which, as Hilgers explains, emerges through the integration of market principles into the political realm, creating “a heterogeneous, flexible set of calculations, choices, and exceptions” (Hilgers 2011, p.359). This integration illustrates how neoliberalism extends its influence beyond the economic domain, shaping personal experiences and societal expectations, including how grief is managed and perceived. Instead of adjusting the work environment to the needs of a grieving employee, the employee has a certain number of days to manage and return to work. Since people in mourning can be considered slow, unpredictable or emotional, Macdonald recognizes the bereaved as antithetical to the neoliberal subject (Macdonald 2020, p.130).

Secondly, bereavement leave policies construct a hierarchy of who can grieve for whom and which grief deserves a longer time of absence than another. This upholds a narrative that considers certain losses as more socially significant than others. A parent will be able to get bereavement leave after losing a child, but the loss of a friend or relationship partner that was not bound by marriage seems to be considered not worthy enough (Walter 2007, p.6). This regulatory framework not only limits the personal and emotional space individuals can occupy during grief but also reinforces societal norms that prioritize certain relationships over others and place the intensity of the mourning process on a hierarchy. Such policies reveal how

neoliberal principles infiltrate personal experiences, dictating whose grief is legitimate and worthy of recognition, thereby perpetuating a broader societal narrative that aligns with neoliberal values.

Neoliberal structures affect grief in Anglo-Saxon societies, for example, by managing its duration through bereavement leave in the workplace, by setting hierarchies of whose grief is more worthy than another's, and thus by ensuring that disruption of productivity is limited to a minimum. This regulation goes beyond the workplace because it contributes to a discursive construction of a grief process that can be contained and accomplished. This pervasive influence extends to societal norms and expectations, shaping how individuals perceive and express their grief in all aspects of their lives, thereby embedding neoliberal values in personal and emotional experiences.

#### **4.2. Individualizing Experiences of Grief**

As Eriksen proposes, neoliberalism creates a specific notion of personhood, which positions the individual as a “responsible, bounded, autonomous, maximizing (...) moral agent and a rational person, but fully accountable for his or her actions” (Eriksen 2015, p.917). Neoliberalism arbitrates between the person and the system. Thus, understanding how it affects the self in grief will help to reveal how grief is not only a private matter but also a reflection of societal values and expectations. Furthermore it allows an anthropology which is globally comparable (Eriksen 2015, p.917).

Understanding neoliberalism as governmentality can help us to comprehend how individualism affects grief. Neoliberal governance conceptualizes individuals as self-managed enterprises, emphasizing personal responsibility. This framework enhances a competitive and commercially driven mindset, making it difficult to establish a sense of community and belonging (Hilgers 2011, p.358). Whereas it used to be the case that religion and traditions offered social means and community to deal with grief, a growing responsibility on the individual self to manage feelings has also individualized the experience of grief (Granek 2014, p.62). Strategies to cope with grief in a Western, Anglo-Saxon context are not culturally embedded, but mostly exist in private and individual ways (Walter 2007, p.127). This failure to provide socially viable forms of grief is a political and personal problem that leaves individuals feeling an absence of communal solidarity (Turner 2005, p.247). The example of bereavement leave supports this

argument, because even though the individual is granted some time away from work, this isolation might not be what the individual needs, thus enhancing the isolation. Instead of supporting the needs of the bereaved person, the initial grieving response is to be dealt with in private (Macdonald 2020, p.130).

Consequently, individuals are pushed to view themselves as the architects of their own destinies. Since the responsibility to function again lies with the individual, many griever won't allow themselves to take time for their grief, because of pressure to become a productive member of society again. This argument is supported by Porter and Claridge's (2021) work on the grief experiences of young adults in the United States. One of their participants, when asked to describe her emotional experience shortly after the loss, stated, "I didn't have all the time in the world to ... mope around ... I had to be ready when it was time to go back to work" (Porter and Claridge 2021, p.195). As previously argued, the grieving person can be seen as antithetical to the neoliberal subject. Mourners do not allow themselves to take the time to grieve, because, as I argue, the neoliberal focus on an individual responsibility to succeed does not allow a space in society to grieve which would also mean to be "slow, unsteady, unpredictable, emotional, and irrational" (Macdonald 2020, p.130) at times.

Grief in modern societies has been constructed as something that can be overcome so that the mourner can become an autonomous individual again (Walter 2007, p.126). Since it is the griever's own responsibilities to ensure that they are productive and functioning, strategies including medicalization can ensure a faster way of functioning again, which is why this will be of concern in the following section.

### **4.3. Medicalization and Pathologizing**

The Manual of Mental Disorders published in 2013 by the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association 2013, p.716) included grief-related symptoms, such as sadness or insomnia, as eligible indicators to diagnose depression. Other Western societies, such as Germany, have also added grief to their catalog of psychological disorders. In Anglo-Saxon societies, grief is increasingly seen as a psychological condition, even though the medical interest in grief only dates back a few decades (Walter 2000, p.99). I argue that the absence of socially adequate structures to support people in mourning has led to the shifting of grief into

the medical and pathological domain. What was once considered a normal human reaction is now pathologized and deemed to require medical intervention. An anthropological approach to grief is especially helpful when analyzing this phenomenon, because it underlines the socio-cultural construction of norms and their emotional experiences (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.1). Grief may seem abnormal if the way an individual mourns doesn't align with a culturally sanctioned norm, showing that pathological forms of grief are not universal, but culturally determined (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.3). Especially supported by the narrative that one can be healed from grief, individuals in Anglo-Saxon societies are encouraged to work through these processes and overcome them (Walter 2000, p. 97). This may also be seen as an example of an understanding of neoliberalism as system, showing how the neoliberal system seeks social control in different aspects of life through standardization and regulation (Hilgers 2011, p.355).

In order to overcome their grief, individuals look for help not only in medication but also through counseling by non-relatives who are paid to do it (Moisseeff 2021, p.188). This example illustrates how neoliberal structures influence the grieving process in contemporary Anglo-Saxon societies in two ways.

First, the emphasis on individual responsibility to overcome grief often results in the pathologization of the experience, because the contemporary griever feels shame due to their inability to work (Granek 2014, p.63). By turning to psychiatrists and psychotherapists, individuals manage their experience in medical establishments (Moisseeff 2021, p.180).

Moisseeff points out that

at present, in most contemporary Western settings, the handling of bodies, from birth to death, is a medical matter, undertaken by anonymous third parties who are remunerated for the functions they fulfill. (...) Their corpse is taken in hand by paid professionals, who, away from the mundane world and the public eye, are responsible (...). (Moisseeff 2021, p.188)

Moisseeffs argument makes the point that matters regarding death, including grief, tend to be dealt with in medical settings, away from the public. This renders an otherwise normal experience pathological.

Secondly, the experience of not being able to grieve publicly compels grievers to consume goods in the form of medication, as well as services from healthcare providers, thus supporting the market-driven economy with their personal suffering. Since neoliberal society is highly individualized and neoliberal practices of individualization can make the grieving person wonder what is wrong with themselves instead of questioning social conditions, they will turn

to medication that helps them to function again (Granek 2014, p.63). Considering that it is beneficial for the neoliberal system to have fully functioning individuals as soon as possible, analyzing how neoliberal structures intersect with cultural norms on grief reveals how the “strengthening of a society whose existence relies on the inequalities it produces and which it simultaneously suppresses” (Hilgers 2011, p.355) perpetuates a cycle. Individuals are pressured to conform to productivity standards, thereby masking and sustaining underlying injustices.

Furthermore, what is being classified as pathological can be treated differently. Hence, the question arises, whether grief is treated as pathological as soon as it doesn’t conform with the neoliberal agenda. An anthropological approach highlights the cultural construction of norms, supporting the argument that norms should align with the social system they are embedded in (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.2). Whether grief is considered pathological when not aligning with the neoliberal agenda cannot be answered in the context of this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to critically reflect on this question.

Another example that highlights the medicalization of grief is that of British people seeking a family doctor after their experiences of a loss (Walter 2000, p.99). Multiple reasons can be identified to explain this procedure. For one, pairing bereavement leave with sick leave is often the only way to get extended leave (Macdonald 2020, p.129). Second, people visit their family doctor in order to get help with health problems such as insomnia or depression (Walter 2000, p.99). Family doctors tend to turn quickly to pharmaceutical solutions since they have little experience with grief and do not specialize in the management of it, even though research shows that most grieverers do not need medical care. Grief should not solely be seen as akin to sickness, because it is not something that one can be healed from (Macdonald 2020, p.129-130). As Judith Butler stated “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (..)” (Butler 2004, p.21) highlighting the indeterminate, nonlinear and transformative aspect of grief.

I want to acknowledge that some forms of grief may indeed be pathological, but I nevertheless aim to emphasize that neoliberalism, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, shapes the perception and management of grief by promoting individual responsibility and productivity. Grieverers themselves present their experience as pathological, by turning to family doctors, psychiatrists and medication. However, this occurs because they need to resume functioning within a system that does not accommodate their grief adequately. This framework leads to the pathologization of natural grieving processes, compelling individuals to pursue medical interventions. showing that it’s hard for communities themselves to care for grief next to wage

labor. This reinforces neoliberal values, perpetuates a stigma around grief, distinguishes between normal and pathological grieving, and supports market-driven economic practices.

#### **4.4. The Transformative Potential of Grief**

After having established an understanding of the effects neoliberal structures can impose on grieving people, it is valuable to explore alternative ways of grieving. Experiences of grief are shaped by social, cultural, political, or economic contexts and can thus teach us about larger social and political issues (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.2). As Granek (2014, p.61) argues, the way grief is expressed is always political. Is it possible to transform this expression to bring about change? Although grief and mourning are often associated with sadness, the experiences that can follow a loss have various dimensions (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.1). Emotions inherent in grief can include anger, pain, shock or trauma (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.5). Rage as an emotion connected to grief has previously been studied in anthropology by Rosaldo (1993, p.171), who states that Anglo-American culture tends to ignore the rage that can accompany a loss. Since rage can be an emotion that fosters activism, it can be argued that within grief, there is transformative potential to uncover social injustices and confront the neoliberal system (Granek 2014, p.66). As previously analyzed, individualization and pathologization lead to a focus on what is wrong with oneself when grieving, instead of taking into consideration the social conditions that may surround a loss. Transforming grief from an individual experience into a communal one can resist the neoliberal agenda that wants to individualize grieving experiences and delegitimizes the anger that may accompany grief (Granek 2014, p.63).

Mutual help groups are one example to counter the feeling of isolation when in mourning. The experience of a shared feeling and community can give rise to activism. Initiatives such as Mother Against Drunk Driving are connected through their grief, fostering a collective initiative to draw awareness to societal issues, change the law and fight for restitutive justice (Walter 2007, p.128). Another example are institutions, such as the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute in the United States, which supports families of homicide victims and aims to transform pain into action through school and community work (Granek 2014, p.67).

Nevertheless, fostering grief as a collective feeling can also be instrumentalized. Various political circumstances show how grief is being exploited to legitimize political action. An



example is the invasion of Iraq by the United States after 9/11, which president Bush justified by declaring the official period of mourning over, and announcing that it was now time for action (Butler 2004, p.28-29). This example shows that grief is capable of being transformed into action by politicians, but grief can also be transformed towards political causes and social activism by citizens (Granek 2014, p.66).

The potential for mobilization is shown by the Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace organization, a Palestinian-Israeli group connected through their experiences of loss in the Middle East conflicts (Granek 2014, p.67). Their aim is to influence public and political decisions to choose dialogue and peace over violence and war, with the interest of achieving outcomes based on empathy and understanding. This example shows that grief has the potential to channel emotions, to make us feel connected and therefore fight against injustices. Grief can lead to social activism regarding wars between nations, against social injustices within a nation or against personal maltreatments (Granek 2014, p.67). At the same time, it can challenge the place of grief within the neoliberal order. As Butler argues, we must recognize the connection between passion, grief and rage “all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly, if not fatally” (Butler 2004, p.25), highlighting the sense of connectedness, vulnerability and attachment to each other that can result from grief.

Linking together personal and collective grief can contribute to change, transform grief through meaning, strengthen community bonds and therefore resist neoliberal agendas of fabricating a productive, functioning, individualist citizen by acknowledging that grief has a place within society and can be a constructive emotion for social activism.

## **5. Conclusion**

The study of grief can be used by anthropologists to learn about larger social, economic, and political processes. As shown throughout the course of this work, neoliberal structures can be identified in multiple dimensions when analyzing grief in contemporary, Anglo-Saxon societies. An anthropological approach to grief highlights the cultural construction of norms connected to grief as well as its interactions with social, political and economic mechanisms (Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer 2021, p.4). Whereas neoliberalism can be an ambiguous concept, it helps us to understand the different ways that grief is influenced on a cultural,

systematic and governed level. Especially regarding neoliberal ideals of a productive, contributing and consuming citizen, who is individually responsible for success, the study of neoliberalism can highlight structures that help to understand contemporary grieving processes. Furthermore, the study of grief within neoliberalism reveals the interconnectedness of political and economic systems in private aspects of life.

Feeling like one cannot function correctly or fulfill expectations of productivity has become part of the grieving experience in Anglo-Saxon societies (Granek 2014, p.63). The way one can grieve is implemented in various aspects of life. For example, through bereavement leave in work contracts, which indicate a duration and thus subliminally imply the intensity of a grief experience. Thereby, grief is hierarchized and excluded from the work environment. Furthermore, neoliberal strategies of individualization contribute to feelings of isolation. Bereavement and sick leave isolate the individual even more. In addition, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century neoliberal system holds individuals responsible for their actions, leading them to a pathologization of their experience if they can't conform to neoliberal standards. This reinforces the expectation, that people must remain productive citizens, compelling grievers to medicalize their grief (Granek 2014, p.62). By turning to medication, psychologists and other doctors, individuals render themselves functioning again while also medicalizing an otherwise normal human experience in order to conform to neoliberal standards (Granek 2014, p.62) .

Nevertheless, grief can also carry political potential. Although this could only be touched on briefly in the context of this work, grief has been used to legitimize political action in the past, highlighting the power behind this emotion. However, it can also connect people, initiate social change, support fights for justice and highlight wrongdoings of a neoliberal system.

Further research on grief could focus on the relationship between grievers and non-grievers and analyze how neoliberal structures take part in shaping this connection. Furthermore, gender and other social categories that affect grieving processes could be analyzed. In addition, other forms of grief, for example after the end of a relationship, can show similar symptoms. How are these other forms of grief treated and in which ways can they be portrayed publicly or in comparison to the grief after a death?

In a world where social injustices, a climate crisis, pandemics, wars and conflicts will not cease to exist, grief will, or has already become, an omnipresent part of our lives. Allowing grievers to feel and work through this emotion demands addressing grief and mourning not only as private and personal issues. Grievers should be capable of adjusting their lives according to their grief, not the other way around, to prevent feelings of isolation in their experience, like I

did. My own experience with grief showed me, that grief can be a painful, but also a healing experience. Especially taking into consideration the transformative potential of grief to bring about social change and highlight injustices, its place in neoliberal, Anglo-Saxon societies should be reevaluated, so that grief can be destigmatized, encouraged and embraced.

## Bibliography

- American Psychiatric Association, ed. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. 5th ed. Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association.
- Barthes, Roland. 2011. *Mourning Diary*. London: Notting Hill Editions.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life -The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London, New York: Verso.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John L Comaroff. 2000. "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," *Public culture*, 12 (2): 291–343.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2015. "Debate: 'The Concept of Neoliberalism Has Become an Obstacle to the Anthropological Understanding of the Twenty-First Century'. Opposing the Motion. The Neoliberal Person." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21:914–17.
- Gorer, Geoffrey. 1955. "The Pornography of Death." In *Encounter*, 5:49–52. London.
- Granek, Leeat. 2014. "Mourning Sickness: The Politicizations of Grief." *Review of General Psychology* 18 (2): 61–68.
- Hilgers, Mathieu. 2011. "The Three Anthropological Approaches to Neoliberalism." *International Social Science Journal* 61 (202): 351–64.
- Laidlaw, James. 2015. "Debate: 'The Concept of Neoliberalism Has Become an Obstacle to the Anthropological Understanding of the Twenty-First Century'. Proposing the Motion. A Slur for All Seasons." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21:912–14.
- Macdonald, Mary Ellen. 2020. "The Denial of Grief: Reflections from a Decade of Anthropological Research on Parental Bereavement and Child Death." In *Exploring Grief: Towards a Sociology of Sorrow*, 125–39. Oxon, New York: Routledge.
- Mair, Jonathan. 2015. "Debate: 'The Concept of Neoliberalism Has Become an Obstacle to the Anthropological Understanding of the Twenty-First Century'. Proposing the Motion. The Concept of Neoliberalism as a Moral Schema." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21:917–20.
- Moisseeff, Marika, ed. 2021. "Dealing with Death in Contemporary Western Culture: A View from Afar." In *Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as Cultural Resource*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ong, Aihwa. 2006. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Porter, Natalie, and Amy M. Claridge. 2021. "Unique Grief Experiences: The Needs of Emerging Adults Facing the Death of a Parent." In *Death Studies*, 45:191–201.
- Robben, Antonius C. G. M. 2004. *Death, Mourning, and Burial A Cross-Cultural Reader*. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- , ed. 2018. *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death*. Blackwell Companions to Anthropology 32. Hoboken, NJ Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Rosaldo, Renato. 1993. "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage." In *Death, Mourning, and Burial (2004)*, Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 167–78. 15. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Silverman, Gila S., Aurélien Baroiller, and Susan R. Hemer. 2021. "Culture and Grief: Ethnographic Perspectives on Ritual, Relationships and Remembering." In *Death Studies*, 45:1:1–8.

Turner, Terence. 2005. "Death, Passion and Politics: The Power of Grief and the Charisma of Loss." *Reviews in Anthropology* 34 (3): 245–56.

Venkatesan, Soumhya. 2015. "Debate: 'The Concept of Neoliberalism Has Become an Obstacle to the Anthropological Understanding of the Twenty-First Century'. Introduction." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21:911–12.

Wacquant, Lođc. 2010. "Crafting the Neoliberal State Workfare, Prisonfare and Social Insecurity." *Sociologie Românească* 8 (03): 5–23.

Walter, Tony. 2000. "Grief Narratives: The Role of Medicine in the Policing of Grief." *Anthropology & Medicine* 7 (1): 97–114.

———. 2007. "Modern Grief, Postmodern Grief." In *International Review of Sociology*, p.123-134.

Zeeshan, Mahwish, Abid G. Dr. Chaudhry, and Shaheer Ellahi Khan. 2020. "Unmaking the Anthropology of Mourning in a Psycho Analytical Perspective." In *Global Regional Review*, 1:100–107.