Designing Personal Grief Rituals:

An Analysis of Symbolic Objects and Actions in Grief Therapy

Abstract

Personal grief rituals are beneficial in dealing with complicated grief, but challenging to design, as they require symbolic objects and actions meeting clients' emotional needs. We report interviews with ten therapists with expertise in both grief therapy and grief rituals. Findings indicate three types of rituals supporting honoring, letting go, and self transformation, with the latter being particularly complex. Outcome also point to a taxonomy of ritual objects for framing and remembering ritual experience, and for capturing and processing grief. Besides symbolic possessions, we identified other types of ritual objects including transformational and future-oriented ones. Symbolic actions include creative craft of ritual objects, respectful handling, disposal and symbolic play. We conclude with theoretical implications of these findings, and a reflection on their value for tailored, creative co-design of grief rituals. In particular, we identified several implications for designing grief rituals which include accounting for the client's need, selecting (or creating) the most appropriate objects and actions from the identified types, integrating principles of both grief and art/drama therapy, exploring clients' affinity for the ancient elements as medium of disposal in letting go rituals, and the value of technology for recording and reflecting on ritual experience.

Keywords: grief rituals, grief therapy, symbolic objects and actions, designing personal grief rituals

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The end of the 20th century has witnessed an erosion of people's trust in the authority of traditions and the power of institutions (Walter, 1996). This has led to an increased interest in alternative forms of interpreting the world and human experience. Postmodernism's efforts to integrate the rational-irrational or mind-body polarities (Keenan, 2012) have been also reflected in people's renewed interest in rituals. Rather than returning to traditional rituals, we have seen however a trend towards designing and adopting new rituals emphasising pragmatism, playfulness and creativity to ensure meaning making of self relevant events (Platvoet, 1995).

Ritual studies scholars have noted that this trend towards personal rituals favours authentic, informal and spontaneous emotional expression and sense-making (Lofland, 1985; Walter, 1994; Wouters 2002). Grimes (2004) referred to the need to explore the development of rituals for meeting people's specific needs which formal religious rituals fail to address. Grimes (2000) also noted the emerging interest in constructing such novel rituals and the creativity required for alternative forms of ritualising personal events which mark transitions in human lifecycle. In this paper we focus on personal rituals, for which we agree with Schnell's (2009) definition of rituals as formalized patterns of actions for constructing meaning from a personally relevant event. Whereas interest in novel rituals spans life transitions, those focusing on death and grief have received particular attention both from scholars of rituals studies and those of grief therapy (Gordon & Gordon, 1984; Jackson & Donovan, 1988; Littlewood, 1992).

Emphasizing the importance of developing personally meaningful rituals, Moller (1996) noted that the sole reliance on individuals' coping skills of dealing with death makes grief processing more challenging and intense (Moller, 1996). Noticeable efforts to support personal grief rituals have been made within the field of psychotherapy (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977; Grimes, 2004). Previous work has shown that successful rituals should meet specific therapeutic properties. We know little however about how to design grief rituals to meet these properties and in particular what symbolic objects and actions to use across ritual stages and ritual types. We report on interviews with ten psychotherapists with expertise in grief rituals to investigate the following research questions:

- Which are the *main types* of grief rituals and their functions?
- What are the *symbolic objects* used in different types of grief rituals, and their values?
- What are the *symbolic actions* used in different types of grief rituals, and their values?

Related Work

Rituals in Grief Therapy

This section describes the benefits of grief rituals, their challenges and risks. It also introduces the main types of grief rituals, and their therapeutic properties, with an emphasis on the symbolic objects and actions. Over the last three decades, many therapeutic schools have explored the value of rituals. In a review of formalized religious and cultural rituals, Al-Krenawi (1999) argues for the incorporation of rituals into Western psychotherapeutic interventions. This argument is supported by the benefits of rituals in psychotherapy in terms of individual's emotional health and well-being. Specific benefits include movement towards integration, ventilation and channeling of feelings (Rando, 1985), and the experience of an emotional shift (Gillian, 1991; Wyrostok, 1995). Rando (1985) identified additional benefits of rituals, such as allowing people to act, offering legitimization for physical and affective ventilation, spatio-temporal delineation of grief, sense of control through doing something at an otherwise uncontrollable event in order to work through ambivalent grief feelings and thoughts, enabling social support and opportunities for making sense of grief experience. In addition, divorce rituals can enable a feeling of closure (Jackson & Donovan, 1988). By offering a safe spatio-temporal frame for expressing and processing grief, rituals facilitate the legitimization of emotional exchange, validation of loss, increased control over the loss and separation from the lost loved one (van der Hart, 1983) as well as provision of structure to the uncertainty of grief and sense making (Reeves, 2011). These can contribute increased self-esteem, stronger sense of life direction and community, and body-mind congruency. They also support healthier feelings, attitudes, and behaviors for accepting the reality of the loss.

In order to reap these powerful benefits, grief rituals need to be well designed. This is not a trivial task, as successful rituals need to meet important therapeutic properties, which we review in the next section. Palazzoli and colleagues (1974) noted the value of therapist's creativity in ritual design.

There are also several risks associated with the design and enactment of grief ritual. Rituals in grief therapy are designed for a specific client having unique qualities which will make it less appropriate for other clients (Wyrostok, 1995). Unicity is important to maintain through occasional use, or otherwise the ritual will lose power and become mundane (Reeves & Boersma, 1990).

Previous work identified various functions of grief rituals. Romanoff's model (1998) proposed that successful rituals should support three complementary functions: continuation of the connection with the lost loved one, transition to the new social role, and transformation of sense of self to accommodate a changed relationship with the lost loved one. Similar functions have been identified by Doka (2012) such as affirming a continuing bond, marking a transition in the client's grief journey, validating a relationship or the legacy of the deceased, and promoting symbolic reconciliation with the deceased (Doka, 2012). Van der Hart and Ebbers (1981) distinguished rituals of separation as rites of passage which enable saying goodbye to the past, often represented by a person lost through death or separation. The emphasis on these rituals is on the verbalization of emotions rather than physical actions. Although the destruction of symbols has been previously mentioned, the range of objects and actions has been insufficiently described (XXX, 2014).

Designing Grief Rituals: Therapeutic Properties

Therapeutic success in grief therapy has been defined as accepting the reality that the loved one is physically gone (Kübler-Ross, 2005) to ensure adaptive coping with the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Extensive reviews (Fiese, et al., 2002; Forte et al., 2004) have consistently identified key therapeutic properties of grief rituals which we group into structure, sacred symbolism, sociality and uniqueness (Reeves, 2011; Brin, 2004; Castle & Phillips, 2003; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Wyrostok, 1995; Rando, 1985).

Structure consists of the time-limited context for ritual enactment, as well as its planned sequence of actions. Ritual structure has several benefits. As a focused and time-limited activity, it allows for channeling (Rando, 1985) and containment of otherwise overwhelming grief emotions (van der Hart, 1983; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Ritual structure also enables participants to exercise and

experience control over the chaos associated with the grief process (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Wyrostok, 1995; Rando, 1985).

Sacred symbolism consists of symbolic objects and actions with special meaning which set the ritual context apart from mundane events (Durkheim, 1912; Reeves, 2011). The complexity of the sacred concept has led to various definitions which Evans (2003) explored by differentiating the holder of the sacred (person or group) and the source of the sacred (natural or supernatural). Hence, personal rituals involve the personal sacred, i.e., where special meaning is found in individual's natural (not supernatural) experience which becomes sacred for the individual (rather than the collective).

Van Gennep (1960) indicated that rituals are powerful because they are liminal: by operating at the threshold of consciousness they address both conscious and subconscious emotions (Doka, 2012). Ritual symbols bring attention to the present moment through the engagement of senses (Brin, 2004) and should draw upon the liminal aspects of rituals (Doka, 2012) to ensure sacredness. Sacredness is experienced as a special emotional investment with respect to various domains including places, times, tangible and intangibles things, persons and experiences (Belk, 1988). Wyrostok (1995) defined liminal stage as the most intense part of a ritual, suggesting that its sacredness relates to an altered state of consciousness or *psychic opening* (Holloman, 1974) enabling access to unconscious grief emotions, decreased inhibition, shift in emotions towards integrating the opposites, and a feeling of unity. An important ritual symbol which brings together symbolic objects and actions is human body. Reeves (2011) noted the importance of full mind-body engagement during ritual enactment, with physical enactment predicting positive change more than verbalization (Palazzoli et al., 1978).

Socialities consist of including others in ritual enactment. By enabling protagonists' performance to be witnessed by trusted others, public statements of grief which are usually hidden and tabooed, become public and less intense. Group participation allows bereaved's access to social support, overcoming the solitude associated with liminal stage (Wyrostok, 1995). This reduces bereaved's isolation (Castle and Phillips, 2003), which is particularly heightened in the liminal stage. Group rituals also promote connectedness and solidarity (Imber-Black, 1991). Grief rituals can also be solitary (Doka, 2012), as long as they involve symbol of the lost loved one (Reeves & Boersma, 1990).

Uniqueness of grief rituals refers to designing rituals to meet clients' specific needs (Fiese, et al., 2002; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). Previous studies have shown that bereaved people see such rituals as more relevant and significant to them, than formal rituals such as memorial services (Schachter & Finneran, 2013). This uniqueness quality ensures that the ritual is adapted to the griever's needs and experience of loss. Therapists play a central role in designing rituals, which is a challenging task requiring creativity and sensitivity to identify the best symbolic objects and actions (Palazzoli, 1974; Van der Hart, 1983). One way to address this is by involving clients in the design of the ritual, drawing on their personal narrative of loss (Becker, 1973; Doka, 2012). Wyrostok (1995) also suggested the value of client-generated symbols as core to the ritual enactment. The key property of sacred symbolism is particularly important, and the range of symbolic objects and actions involved in the enactment of grief rituals are further reviewed with a focus on their functions, types and qualities.

Symbolism: Objects, Actions and the Body

Symbolic objects in grief therapy serve the main function of representing the lost loved one or the relationship with the lost loved one (Romanoff, 1998). They also validate the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased, to facilitate remembrance, and encourage feeling and expression of emotion (Castle & Phillips, 2003). Such symbolic objects are usually hard to identify (Van der Hart, 1983), so that the typical ones include wedding rings, gifts or letters from the lost loved one, clothes or photos of the other. Most of personal possessions play specific roles in grief rituals, such as linking or transitional objects, and melancholy objects. *Linking/transitional objects* coined by Vulcan (1972) describe objects used in complicated grief to continue the link with the lost loved one. They provide a focal point in which the self-representation of the bereaved merges with that of the dead person. Such objects represent the emotional value invested in the relationship and are used to manage the separation anxiety. Often intimate things belonging to the deceased, are cherished transitional objects within the bereaved's reach to be seen and touched when the need for attachment arises, bearing thus a fetish quality. An emerging type of transitional objects is represented by *memorial tattoos* (Roth, 2006). They are bodily objects, through which the bereaved claims ownership of the circumstances and agency to confront the passivity of loss, which ensure public communication and maintenance of the ongoing

relationship with the departed. *Melancholy objects* represent linking objects whose meaning undergoes transition throughout grief process, so that they become remembered objects. Such memorialized grief objects often take the form of photos which capture the past without future (Sontag, 1977; Gibson, 2004). In addition to being lovingly held, possessions are also destroyed in rituals of separation (Van der Hart & Ebbers, 1981).

To summarize, the symbolism of rituals in grief therapy is ensured by bereaved's existing possessions with strong personal meaning or grief letters written during the ritual; these objects are either respectfully touched/cherished or destroyed. Hence, grief rituals tend to be individual or dyadic, private, and unique as they are designed for the specific needs of the bereaved people. Much of previous work has explored high level therapeutic properties of grief rituals, including the symbolism of objects and actions. There has been however limited work exploring the specific types of symbolic objects, actions and their distinct value across various types of grief rituals and their stages.

Method

Our study involved semi-structured interviews with ten psychotherapists (Mean Psychotherapy Expertise = 22 years, Range = 5-40 years) (Mean Ritual Expertise = 20 years, Range = 4-32 years) (Age Mean = 54, Range = 33-69) (Gender Female = 8, Male = 2) (Location 6 in the UK, 4 in the USA). All participants were registered and accredited with professional bodies regulating the psychotherapy profession in both the UK and USA, and all have postgraduate training (4 PhD, 4 MSc and 2 Postgraduate Diplomas).

Participants were recruited from online bereavement networks, therapist mailing lists, and each was rewarded with a gift voucher worth £30. We asked participants to recall in detail examples of their most successful personal grief rituals, symbolic objects and actions used for ritual enactment, as well as indicators of their therapeutic success. We also explored the challenges and opportunities for designing such personal grief rituals. A subset of the study findings, focusing exclusively on rituals of letting go and the limitations of digital disposal has been described in XXX (2014). The present paper extends that work with a focus on the three types of rituals, and the value of symbolic objects and actions across them.

Results

The grief rituals described in the interviews are personal and private taking place in therapy settings, homes or wilderness. These rituals are designed with input from the therapists; to be performed individually or in the presence of trusted others. We now describe each of the three identified types of grief rituals, by providing definitions and examples from participants' quotes, together with a presentation of the value of symbolic objects and ritual actions.

Designing therapeutic grief rituals

The process of designing grief rituals is complex. It requires careful preparation usually over several months, creativity and strong clients' involvement for addressing their specific needs. All interviewees mentioned the importance of rituals *"coming from people [and being] meaningful to them [rather than suggested by the therapist]"* [P5]. As a result, they are unique, so that their design accounts for the specific needs of each client. While the therapists provide structure, the clients identify the most powerful objects *"[representing] the essence of the relationship"* [P6]. Within the ritual structure, both the therapists and clients' creativity is expressed: *"many people feel like they are not creative, [but when encouraged by the therapist] it is amazing how creative [ritual] objects are"* [P2].

Such objects are selected among the bereaved's possessions, created during the ritual, or provided in the therapy room. People's spontaneous gestures occurring in therapy sessions are insightful for designing the ritual actions: "*It is not uncommon to see [strong gesture of throwing away something], an intuitive and unplanned gesture [to be] formalized [through ritual]"* [P4]. An interesting finding is the use of ancient elements such as water, fire, air and earth across different ritual types: "*being in communion with the elements it's going to have deeper meaning and more like to facilitate transformation"* [P8]. For example people can lit candle, melt wedding rings, burry ashes of burned letters, place objects in flowing water or release balloons. Interestingly, people expressed preference for specific element: *"I needed water. Fire was more connecting with anger and I didn't want to keep any feelings of anger, hate or hurt. I wanted to be cleansed and pure again"* [P7].

Findings also suggest several risks of grief rituals, relating to participants' preparedness: *"[when they] are not psychologically mature or prepared for such transformation, they can regress*

[and we should ensure that] people have support for the process" [P1]. Rituals can also evoke "*some difficult lingering feelings"* [P2] *w*hich people need support to process. Such risks are mitigated by the rigorous preparation of the ritual, a lengthy process which can take months: *"Ritual isn't like a game; is not pretend; it is real, and so will be the separation [and transformation]"* [P1].

Types of rituals in grief therapy

Study findings indicate three types of grief rituals for honoring, letting go and self transformation. While rituals for self transformation and honoring have been previously explored (Romanoff, 1998), rituals of letting go have received less attention (Van der Hart & Ebbers, 1981; XXX, 2014). We now provide definitions and example for each type.

Honoring rituals help elicit and externalize positive emotions associated with the past love relationship. They are performed to celebrate the bond and honor that relationship *"for however long it was, for what one learned and the gifts that came forth, [because] the more you honor it, the easier it is to move on"* [P1].

Rituals of letting go are rituals for processing and releasing the negative feelings associated with the loss of loved ones through death or separation. They are enacted through physical transformation of symbolic objects representing the relationship, and are performed by people who want to move on but experience difficulties in doing so "*[because] one is so broken-hearted or has much anger and resentment"* [P1]. For example: "*people may cry when they are putting down a particular object […] the tiny little blue shoes and a blue butterfly to represent a stillborn child"* [P6].

Rituals for self transformation are rituals where people evaluate their lives, identify negative feelings which need processing, as well as dreams and planned achievement for the time ahead. These are often performed during life transitions, triggered by changes of role or those due to the loss of loved ones: *"[participant] made something that represents some piece of their life that they want to get rid of [which] they've gone out and buried"* [P10].

Types and values of symbolic objects and actions

Ritual is a practice where objects and actions have rich layers of symbolic meaning. An important finding is that symbolic objects are used across all rituals stages, i.e. before, during and after

ritual enactment, serving specific functions. We found a variety of sources for these objects, which are either provided or suggested by the therapists, or acquired or created by the ritual protagonists (Table 1). A striking quality of these objects is their materiality. They could be imaginary or physical, pre-existing or newly created objects. Rituals' core objects for capturing and processing grief emotions are manipulated but also ritualistically created. Craft is the most common approach for creating objects, together with the act of imbuing material objects with specific emotions, i.e., positive ones in honoring rituals, negative ones in letting go rituals, and both positive and negative emotions in self transformation rituals.

Insert Table 1

Manipulation of objects varies according to the ritual type. Honoring rituals involve mostly holding and sharing cherished objects in the context of reminiscence, while letting go and self transformation rituals involve more complex practices: disposal through ancient elements, transformation through symbolic play, seeding future-oriented objects, and reflection on ritual experience (Table 2). The main types of ritual objects and actions are further described along their main functions across ritual stages.

Insert Table 2

Framing the ritual experience

Objects provided by the therapists support framing the ritual experience and its sacredness, both spatially and temporally, and consist of containing objects and cleansing herbs. *Containing objects* are often used for framing indoor rituals taking place in therapy room. They consist of mundane objects such as a piece of cloth on the floor, or a box in the middle of the room. An interesting property of these objects is their container-like quality, either two dimensional or three dimensional, delimiting the ritual space. They also represent props for stepping into the ritual's mindset *"enabling a shift of consciousness; a cloth in the middle of the room signifies that we are now moving into this sacred, set apart space which marks a difference in how we are thinking and being"* [P5]. While the beginning of the ritual is always clearly marked, its ending is less so. For example, one participant mentioned "*putting a circle of stones in the garden around [the place of a fire ritual of honoring]. [Why?] I think*

it was to mark it, to protect it and contain it" [P8]. Often however, the end of the ritual lacks clear markers, which highlights the challenge of marking the ritual closure, both temporally and spatially.

Cleansing herbs such as sage, cedar, tobacco or lavender also allow for the framing of ritual. Herbs can be used as offerings for running the outdoor rituals in wilderness spaces: *"[people] bring tobacco or lavender as offering in connection with the place where they are going to do the ritual work"* [P1]. Smudged herbs add a sacred dimension to the ritual, by purifying or cleansing the space: *"people have used sage or cedar that they burn and waft around the room [after] their partner has left [to] cleanse the old and open to the new"* [P3]. This confirms previous finding on the value of such objects in ritual practices (Cruden, 1997).

Capturing and processing grief emotions

We identified a range of objects for externalizing and processing both positive and negative grief emotions. Therapy-based objects can be physical and imaginary, provided by the therapists, usually within the therapy room.

Therapy-based physical objects tend to be specific to therapeutic orientation, allowing people to project and process their grief emotions. In sand play therapy we have seen: "*sand box [as] container rooted into the sand. People may choose various objects [to burry or move in the sand]. I've got stones, crystals, buildings, houses, animals, people, cartoon characters, and bits of wood, silk, color […] all objects are doing something for the psyche, [enabling people to] project*" [P6]. In drama, movement and creative arts therapy, therapy-based physical objects support externalization of emotions though music, color, movement or craft, i.e., paint, canvas, glue, musical instruments*: "if people want to make a sound, they may pick up a rain stick or a drum or a rattle"* [P5]. Such objects enable the processing of non-verbal content: *"[sometimes] it's enough that the body can be allowed to work through with it; words can get in the way"* [P5].

Therapy-based objects offer a unique perspective into how objects can facilitate shifts of consciousness: their physical manipulation enables emotional shifts. This is highlighted in the following rituals of letting go enacted through sand therapy: *"People used objects to depict a person, i.e., an animal, or an object that looks like that person; [and] they will use the threshold [figurine]:*

placing the ex on one end of the threshold, and the animal [representing themselves] going through the threshold." [P6]. This quality of therapy-based objects is also exploited in rituals for self transformation, where symbolic actions and objects are used to enact powerful embodied metaphors of self transformation: "*one client has brought a small figurine of a wolf, which is about her wild spirit and she used it to go through thresholds"* [P6].

Therapy-based imaginary objects used during ritual enactment across all therapeutic orientations, are stories. Such stories often involve archetypes allowing people to engage in associative memory retrieval, projection of complex emotions, and their processing: *"I work a lot with ancient fairy stories because they have archetypal or blueprints of human nature which people can relate to and identify without dealing directly with their own stories. For example I use the story of Orpheus looking back when he needs to move on - he doesn't trust his moving on, so he loses the connection with his beloved Eurydice; or the story of a hunter who meets a bird who has great meaning to him and he's in the pathway and comes into relationship with the bird and it's fulfilled. I might use a white feather which people can move and later use to pull somebody else"* [P5]. This quote also indicates that stories can be associated with specific physical objects which may support participants' projection: *"objects are essential [because grief work involves] a lot of memory and reminiscence; an object can be wonderful, because it [helps people access] all kinds of material through the memory associations that they have to a concrete, tangible object"* [P5].

Apart from the therapy-based objects, other objects for capturing and processing grief are produced by the ritual protagonists. Such objects capture the essence of the relationship with the lost one, in honoring and letting go rituals, and with oneself, in rituals of transformation. They lie at the core of the ritual, being directly manipulated during its enactment, and are further described.

Pre-existing symbolic possession are selected by ritual protagonists among their collection of personal possessions, as highly symbolic and valued, physical or imaginary objects representing the relationship with the lost loved one, or with oneself, i.e., old self. They have been used across all three ritual types. In honoring rituals, pre-existing possessions including mostly photos, tend to be kept and cherished. In contrast, in rituals of letting go possessions consist of love letters or jewelry from the lost

loved one and seldom photos, and tend to be ritualistically disposed of (Sas & Whittaker, 2013; XXX, 2014). In honoring rituals, pre-existing possessions such as photos can be used in conjunction with other possessions, connecting the past with the future. The value of such objects consist of enabling important progression towards life affirming choices: "*In a bereavement program for teenagers, a boy brought in a photo of his [deceased] mom and dad dancing. I think the tangibility of the objects brings in an important dimension. Following, the boy has been keen to bring in his electric guitar [and recently] he talked about starting a band. I really feel there's a trajectory from bringing this photograph in, to then bringing other objects: the guitar is something that is in his life now as opposed to the past"* [P8]. The musical instrument has two interesting properties: it acts like a transitional object reflecting boy's bond with his mother, as well as a movement quality which builds on some aspects of the past, i.e. music and dance captured by the photos, towards new dreams and choices. In contrast to the initial photo which could serve merely as a *melancholy objects* that memorializes the grief in a static form (Sontag, 1977; Gibson, 2004), the guitar allows emotional movement and increased opportunity for physical interaction, i.e., being hugged or played.

Objects in honoring ritual can also be imaginary pre-existing possessions such as photos of the lost loved ones in drama therapy: "*the child opened the box, took some time and then took out a picture and looked at it, pretending and showing it to us"* [P7].

Pre-existing *physical possessions* symbolizing the relationship such as wedding rings are also used in rituals of letting go*: "she went to this loved beach and buried [her wedding ring] deep in the sand"* [P1]. Other possessions in rituals of letting go include jewelry gifts from the lost loved one: *"I worked with a woman who brought a medallion and she wanted to let it go in a river […] she said all the things she wanted to say to this person out loud in nature, and when she was ready [she] put the medallion in the water […] it was done with respect and care and love"* [P10]. This quote exemplifies ritualistic disposal practices often enacted by ritual protagonists, which involve the use of ancient elements. Findings suggest that disposal itself also becomes imbued with symbolic meaning: letting go of objects entails letting go of the negative emotional content lying at the core of grief.

A specific type of objects used in rituals of letting go and transformation are those made of natural materials such as crystals and stones which people imbued with symbolic meaning: "*we worked with a crystal to represent her unborn child, and imbued with love, sorrow and apology so that it really got evocative"* [P2]. Other objects capturing negative grief emotions are newly crafted objects such as paper-based letters. These are written by the ritual participants to work through their grief feelings: "*they write about their experience*" [P2], "*in detail and burn them*" [P9].

Another category of symbolic objects are *newly made* ones from either pre-existing possessions or natural material. They are used across all three types of rituals, either to be kept and cherished, or to be disposed of. In honoring rituals, the handmade objects represent "*vessels that really honor the power and beauty of the relationship. [Photo collages] that embody what was really good and the memories that were really sacred for them. That, you don't need to destroy [but kept, although] this object it is actually kind of painful to look at"* [P1]. Keeping such objects is challenging as they can act as constant reminders of the feelings of loss. Newly made objects from natural material and imbued with symbolic meaning, are also used in rituals of letting go: "*a clay vessel [honoring the relationship] embodying what was really good […], the journey they took together and the sacred memories"* [P1]. This extends findings on the role of doing something for reclaiming agency after loss (Van den Hoven et al., 2008).

Pre-existing possessions are also used in rituals of transformation to create novel arts objects such as collages or sculptures: *"It's a three-month preparation, when they are looking over their life, [which] culminates in a creative object that is a vessel that carries the power and energy of their life up to this moment. Lots of time people will do a collage, an art project […] a clay or glass vessel [or] a piece of jewelry, a poetry, a painting, it could be anything [that is] imbued with time and effort. And people bring that with them on what I call a medicine walk for the destruction of that vessel, which is their death: they can give it to the river, bury it, do whatever they want, but they must destroy it.*" [P1]. This quote emphasizes the creativity involved in the ritual and materiality of the creative outcome: even if such outcomes are in the form of poetry or painting, the material used for their representation offers a medium for disposal. Medicine walk is a practice in wilderness where "nature is seen as a mirror of

one's larger life" (Davies, 2014). The therapeutic and sacred power of solitary time in natural world has been emphasized in rituals across cultures, and in particular in rites of passage, with wilderness facilitating restoration, relaxation, and focused attention (Davis, 1998).

In contrast with such vessels which captured the past and its negative grief emotions, newly made objects in rituals of transformation can also capture the future, and positive emotions of hope or aspiration towards the ideal self: *"object would remind them of their best and highest self of their purpose and their vision"* [P3]. Such *transformational objects* are invested with personal meaning, and tend to be made of natural organic or inorganic material: "*They bring an object [from nature: sticks, feathers, shells, seaweed] or draw something that represents their yearnings [and] I ask them to make an object that represents their emerging self. It can be held, just a collage [that] they take home, put it in a safer place for times when they need guidance"* [P2].

A specific category of objects are *future-oriented objects* used in rituals of letting go and transformation. Like transformational objects they embody hope, but rather than being hand-made and kept. Such future-oriented objects are of organic material and tend to have the potential for germination and growth. In rituals of letting go, such objects are represented by seeds or seedlings imbued with the symbolic value of renewal and growth, to reflect the importance of transforming the relationship and grief experience: "*they planted a rose bush over [buried ashes of grief letters] [with the intention of putting it] to rest in the earth and then planting new hope for a happy future"* [P3].

Just as people are asked to reflect on what they are letting go of, these rituals also invite reflection on important future aspects of one's life that can be infused with new energy. When rituals for self transformation focus on future life, then the symbolic objects represent and capture positive emotions related to dreams, goals and future achievements which people hold dear: *"People make two arrows [out of] straight sticks: the first is a death arrow, [imbued with] things people want to let go of, and they put the death arrow in the fire; the second is the life arrow [imbued with] what people want to bring into their lives, and plant it with the intention that it will grow"* [P2].

Remembering and sense-making of ritual experience

The importance of objects for remembering and sense-making relates to the emotional richness of the ritual which is difficult to both remember and reflect upon after the ritual has been completed: "*the person doing the ritual might get so lodged in their emotional state and wonder whether it was real or whatever that means"* [P2]. This quote emphasizes the value of capturing ritual experience for future recall and sense-making.

Ritual mementos are physical objects used during the ritual, and selected as future cues for recalling the ritual experience. The following describes a memento from a ritual of self transformation: "*involving a huge spiral on the floor of the large room: she walked into the center of the spiral as if she was working back through her life […] when finished, she took a stone from the spiral as a memento of that transformation"* [P10].

Recordings of ritual experience are photos or videos of ritual experience captured by the therapists or the trusted others witnessing the ritual: *"I've done phototherapy [where the therapist takes photo of ritual activity so that] the clients rewrite the narrative with their perspective. And then the photograph became a powerful talisman of that process"* [P4]. This involves recordings of the ritual outcomes developed through successive therapy sessions, like in this example from sand play therapy: "*each thing is photographed for about six months so that afterwards we can look through all the photographs together […] people look at them from time to time, or when it has a deep significance they will print, frame it and put it on the wall*" [P6]. The recordings can be also made by ritual participants, albeit not protagonists: "*it was the tiny little coffin that was taken to the grave and balloons being released and filmed. And just how moved the parents were because it reminded them of their baby flying away [and] they could return to it because it was filmed"* [P5].

Discussion

We now discuss the three research questions outlined in the introduction. With respect to the types of grief rituals and their functions, we identified rituals for honoring the bond with the lost loved ones, and rituals for self transformation, echoing Doka's rituals for continuing the bond (2012) and Romanoff's model (1998) of ritual functions for continual connection and self transformation. Findings

also revealed a less explored type of grief ritual, i.e., rituals of letting go (Van der Hart & Ebbers, 1981; Sas & Whittaker, 2013; XXX, 2014). Furthermore, we propose a typology of grief rituals within a two dimensional space: relationship focus, i.e. ritual's focus on the relationship with others or with oneself; and attachment focus, i.e., ritual's focus on holding on or letting go (Table 3).

Insert Table 3

Table 3 suggests the complexity of rituals for self transformation which support both the function of letting go (to aspects which are no longer relevant for the current self), and holding on (to those relevant for the future self). While rituals focusing on relationship with others are predominantly oriented towards the past, rituals for self transformation have a strong future orientation, towards the dreams and aspirations of the ideal self. This suggests that rituals of self transformation have an additional layer of complexity regarding temporality, i.e., future, which is minimally addressed in rituals of honoring and those for letting go, i.e. where the focus is most on the past.

An important challenge in ritual design is identifying the most appropriate symbolic objects and actions for ritual enactment (Van der Hart, 1983). Our findings confirmed those from psychotherapy studies regarding the value of symbolic cherished possessions representing the relationship with the lost loved ones, i.e., wedding rings, gifts or letters from the lost loved ones, or photos (Van der Hart, 1983; Castle & Phillips, 2003). Interestingly, among symbolic possessions, we have found no reference to *linking objects* (Vulcan, 1972), possibly because they may hinder rather than promote grief work. We have found however reference to melancholy objects, as photos memorializing grief and capturing the still past without the future (Sontag, 1977; Gibson, 2004). Symbolic possessions are limiting in two important ways; they talk about past and its completeness, with little power to support hopes or dreams for the unfolding future.

More importantly, besides symbolic possessions, our findings revealed a much larger and diverse types of ritual objects, both during, as well as before, and after the ritual completion. For example, containing objects and cleansing herbs in the initial stage help framing the ritual, setting it apart from the mundane; while ritual recordings and mementos support remembering and sense-making of ritual experience. While post ritual objects such as mementos and recordings highlight the potential

of technology, we found limited accounts of this and none beyond photos or videos. We argue that this potential could be met by the research on interactive systems supporting remembrance and forgetting (Sas & Whittaker, 2013; Davies et al., 2015; Van den Hoven et al., 2012), as well as reflection (Sas & Dix, 2011) on both everyday life and ritual experience (XXX, 2014).

During the ritual, besides symbolic possessions representing the relationship with the lost loved ones, various new types of objects are used to capture and process grief, including therapy based physical or imaginary objects, i.e., figurines in sand play therapy, archetypal stories, color, sounds and movement in drama therapy. Among objects acquired or created by ritual protagonists, we identified crafted and symbolically imbued objects from natural inorganic material such as crystal, clay, stones; or collages of symbolic possessions. These capture either the positive or negative grief emotions about a past relationship, or aspects about the self. The latter are reflected in what we called *transformational objects*, capturing negative aspects of the current self or positive ones such as hopes and dreams about the future self. Interestingly, in some cases, transformational objects mark the shift to the dreams of the future while relating to a symbolic possession representing a static melancholy object from the past. Such objects are particularly potent, facilitating a movement between the stuckness of the past to the life affirming future dreams.

A particular new type of objects is *future-oriented objects* made of organic material such as seeds or seedlings which are sowed in the ground as a metaphor of shifting towards the life affirming future and its hope. These outcomes extend Reeves (2011)'s suggestions on the value of ritual symbols that represent not only the past and present experiences of loss, but also the future wishes and dreams emerging from the loss. Future-oriented objects are imbued with positive emotions of hope for the future, like in the case of letting go rituals, or with dreams about the future self, like in the self transformation rituals. The complexity of rituals for self transformation is once again reflected in the crafting of such future-oriented seeds; while in the rituals of letting go they are merely sowed, in rituals of self transformation seedlings may be further crafted and adorned with feathers or beads, i.e., arrow of life.

The third research question explores the types and values of symbolic actions, and our findings are interesting at two levels. First, the rituals' core objects which are used for capturing and processing grief emotions are not merely manipulated like in rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960; Durkheim, 1964) or in grief rituals (Romanoff, 1998; Castle & Phillips, 2003) but also created. We have found strong evidence for the *ritualistic creation* of such objects. Creative craft is the most common approach leading to photo collages, drawings or assembles of natural materials such as clay, stones, wood, wool or feathers. Interestingly, we found no reference to the use of technology, although its potential in supporting craft has been previously suggested. For example, Schachter and Finneran (2013) developed the photomontage technique where the bereaved works with grief and art therapists to develop a digital image capturing memories and dream.

Second, we also found novel findings regarding the manipulation of symbolic object, specific to the three types of grief rituals. While respectful holding has been previously suggested in honoring rituals (Romanoff, 1998; Castle & Phillips, 2003), the complex symbolic actions in rituals of letting go or in rituals for self transformation have been less explored. Here we found the value of symbolic play for enacting embodied metaphors of self transformation. Findings indicate a rich range of disposal practices employed to process negative grief emotions in both rituals of letting go and those of self transformation. Disposal is often facilitated through the ancient elements of earth, water, fire and water. While the symbolism of the elements is also employed in rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960; Durkheim, 1964), their value in grief ritual has been less explored (Doka, 2012; XXX, 2014).

Due to the specific study sample, the identified personal rituals hold value for understanding the design and use of grief ritual in the context of grief therapy. Future work should explore the extent to which the identified types of rituals and their symbolic objects and actions can be found in grief rituals outside clinical settings.

We now discuss the value of our findings for designing grief rituals, and in particular for tailored creative co-design. Grief rituals benefit from the involvement of the clients into the design process, which is facilitated by the therapists. Thus, the clients can identify the most significant objects and actions to employ during ritual enactment. The proposed taxonomy of symbolic objects and actions

can serve as building blocks for inspiring the design of grief rituals, particularly novel objects such as transformational and future-oriented objects. Rituals can also be tailored by accounting for clients' affinity for the ancient elements, particularly for rituals of letting go and self transformation. The creativity in ritual design ensures that each ritual is unique, meeting the specific needs of a client. Creativity can be supported through the integration in *grief therapy* of methods and technique from *art and drama therapy*. This in turn supports craft, often employed for the ritualistic creation of new ritual objects, and symbolic play for the ritualistic enactment of transformation. This integration of two therapeutic perspectives supports not just the verbalization of emotions, but also stronger mind body congruency and non-verbal processing of grief. Not at least, we suggest the value of technology, not just for recording ritual experience but also for supporting reflection on it.

Conclusion

We conducted an interview study to explore rituals in grief therapy and their therapeutic properties captured by the sacred symbolism of ritual objects and actions. Grief rituals support three main functions of honoring, letting go and self transformation, with the latter being complex and more encompassing of the other two types. Symbolic objects capturing the essence of the past relationship or the dream of the future self, are ritualistically created and manipulated during the ritual. We identified several types of ritual objects including new transformational and future-oriented objects. To interact with these objects, people employ a variety of symbolic actions such as creative craft for ritualistic creation of artefacts, and respectful handling, disposal or symbolic play for their manipulation. Additional symbolic objects are used for framing, remembering and sense-making of ritual experience. The derived taxonomy of symbolic objects and actions offers a basic vocabulary to encourage reflection and debate in this research area. It can also be used to support the design of personal grief rituals in psychotherapeutic practice.

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