

The Significance of Political Grief: An Examination Through Major Global Events

OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–20
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DOI: 10.1177/00302228251337278

journals.sagepub.com/home/ome



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Abstract

The impact of political events, actions, policies and ideologies can be both profound and far reaching, with many people experiencing significant losses and major grief as a consequence. There is now a growing interest in what has come to be known as political grief. This paper has been developed by a working group of grief professionals to reflect the basis of the group's discussions and the conclusions drawn. It seeks to provide an understanding of political grief and its consequences and explores a number of examples of major political events that can be seen to have given rise to significant losses and generated considerable grief.

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Keywords

political grief, disenfranchised grief, suffocated grief, ambiguous loss, non-death loss and grief

Introduction

Political grief represents a complex emotional, social and spiritual response to significant political events that disrupt individuals, families, communities, nations and identities. This paper explores how such phenomena as Brexit, the political divide arising from the Trump presidency, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the issues surrounding China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as the treatment of Aboriginal people, have resulted in collective sentiments of loss and mourning. Understanding this phenomenon is vitally important not only for historians, but also for policymakers, sociologists and a wide range of human services professionals whose work brings them into contact with grieving individuals.

Political grief reflects the sorrow, pain and disruption experienced by individuals, families and communities when faced with loss or change due to political actions, events, policies and ideologies. This grief may originate from a variety of sources, including the loss of social justice, democratic processes or identity within a community. It manifests itself in various forms, from personal feelings of despair and injustice to collective mourning observed during protests or commemorative events. [Solomon \(2020\)](#) captures it well when he comments:

For many Americans, myself included ..., the November 8, 2016 election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States engendered a poignant and profound sense of grief. (p. 61)

And [O'Rourke \(2016\)](#) commented that

Indeed, Trump's election, was as ominously traumatic as other catastrophic landmark moments in recent history, such as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy (JFK), Martin Luther King (MLK), and John Lennon, or the September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. Each of these events produced a torrent of "grief of mourning something that feels irrevocably lost." (as cited in [Solomon, 2020](#), p. 61)

Defining Political Grief

[Harris \(2022\)](#) offers a very helpful definition in the following terms:

The concept of political grief can be seen as a poignant sense of assault to the assumptive world of those who struggle with the ideology and practices of their governing bodies and those who hold political power. Likewise, political grief would also include the direct

losses that are experienced by individuals as a result of political policies, ideologies, and oppression enacted and/or empowered at the sociopolitical levels. (p. 572)

There are many losses involved in political grief, such as a sense of safety; one or more aspects of our identity; hope; faith in sociopolitical processes and systems; and relationships riven apart by political differences. Significant reactions to these losses include ontological insecurity (a sense of no longer feeling spiritually comfortable with who we are and how we fit into the wider world) and a profound sense of alienation (a feeling of disconnection that undermines our sense of belonging and connectedness), as well as the potential loss of rights and individual freedoms. There can also be practical losses – for example, access to a particular resource or facility.

The emotional responses to political grief can be perplexing, combining anger, sadness, disillusionment, and a sense of disenfranchisement. This combination complicates the narrative around grief and highlights how politics and emotion are intricately interwoven.

This phenomenon has far-reaching implications for individuals, communities, and whole societies. At an individual level, the tendency to associate grief narrowly with bereavement can mean that people do not realize that they are grieving when experiencing political grief, adding to the confusion, distress, and potential trauma. In circumstances of acute grief but where no death has occurred, many people will not make the connection between what they are feeling and the experience of grief (Harris, 2020).

A further implication is the divisiveness within families (sometimes to the extent that family ties are severed) that may not be visible outside the family, resulting in the absence of social support for a loss that members of an individual's support system may not be aware of. Other losses can relate to fear of loss of income, not being able to live an open lifestyle, lack of medical choices for women or support for transgendered children

At a broader community and societal level, public memory and historical contexts play a large part in shaping how political grief will be experienced. Sociologists like Puri (2021), in their work on the sociology of death, highlight the importance of remembering figures like Du Bois, Martineau, and Wells, who addressed trauma amid political struggles. Their legacies provide a foundation on which contemporary analyses can be laid, urging us to consider how collective memories forge identity in the face of grief. For this reason, we shall later comment on the significant role of memorialization.

Understanding Political Grief

The emotional, social, spiritual and practical repercussions of political occurrences can span generations, with key grief-prompting events becoming part of the collective memory and an element within the cultural narrative that becomes passed on from generation to generation. Examining the scope of political grief involves considering

not only the immediate aftermath of an event, but also its long-term effects on communities, especially the impact of the losses remains for many years, or even generations.

How political grief is experienced by individuals and communities will, of course, vary considerably, as is the case with all grief experiences. While there will no doubt be common themes, there will also be considerable variations. For example, the coping mechanisms adopted through acts of remembrance can vary immensely, depending on differences in cultural and personal narratives, making it important to study these divergences, examining how different communities deal with their grief.

The concept of political grief fits well with other key concepts that cast light on the significance of loss and grief. We shall consider in turn how political grief fits with disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2001); suffocated grief (Bordere, 2019); and ambiguous loss (Boss, 2004).

Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief, as it relates to political contexts, reflects the largely ignored emotional experiences of individuals affected by sociopolitical events. Many demographic groups encounter this type of grief, particularly marginalised voices whose grief is neither legitimised nor acknowledged by larger societal narratives. Therefore, it becomes vital to examine how disenfranchised grief manifests in various political landscapes and how societies can move towards recognising these experiences.

In considering Brexit, for example, the absence of acknowledgment of the grief experienced by those who felt a disconnection from their (inter)national identity could result in feelings of isolation and unrest. Efforts to validate these emotions could lead to improved discussions about the impact of such decisions on individuals' mental wellbeing. By understanding the collective losses experienced by significant populations, such as immigrants or young people, communities can begin to develop a sense of solidarity that can contribute to enhancing well-being.

In addition, it is important to recognize that disenfranchised grief not only exists at the personal level but also resonates within larger collective movements. Historical injustices, such as those experienced during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, represent profound collective losses that shape communal identities. Recognizing these narratives can promote reconciliation and empathy, facilitating healing among those affected.

Suffocated Grief

Bordere's (2019) concept of suffocated grief describes the experience of marginalized groups whose grief is not only dismissed but also actively penalized (e.g., through stigma). This occurs when individuals from certain communities express grief in ways that are considered socially inappropriate, leading to further marginalization and isolation. Minority ethnic groups are particularly prone to this type of unfair treatment.

Suffocated grief is often collective and can manifest in various ways, including feelings of anger, despair, hopelessness and alienation. Bordere's concept of suffocated grief emphasizes the experience of certain groups having their grief invalidated and punished. The roots of this are, of course, political in terms of how racial injustices are allowed to persist over time, from generation to generation.

Suffocated grief contributes to disempowerment for grieving people (Wood, 2024). Bordere (2019) emphasizes that the cultural context is crucial to understanding how grief is expressed and received, particularly among African American families, where traditional expressions of grief may be stifled by the norms of wider (white) society.

Ambiguous Loss

Ambiguous loss refers to situations where the loss is unclear and lacks closure due to an absence, such as when a loved one is missing, a soldier is missing in action or when there is a lack of definitive information about their status (Boss, 2004, 2016). This type of loss can create profound psychological distress, as individuals have to contend with uncertainty and the inability to fully process their grief (Boss, 2007). In some ways, suffocated grief can be linked to ambiguous loss, in the sense that there is no scope for closure. Children in the affected communities are born into a context of suffocated grief and will likely face it throughout their lives. In this way, the ambiguous nature of the loss can be seen to exacerbate the challenges faced by members of marginalized communities.

Political grief encompasses the collective mourning experienced by communities facing systemic injustices, such as violence, oppression, and loss of rights (Hollander, 2016). In situations of ambiguous loss, particularly in contexts of political violence or social upheaval, the grief experienced is not just personal, but also collective, affecting entire communities. For example, families of the disappeared in conflict zones often experience ambiguous loss, where the absence of a loved one is compounded by the political context that renders their loss invisible or unacknowledged (Hollander, 2016).

The psychological implications of ambiguous loss can hamper the grieving process, as individuals struggle with the uncertainty of their loss (Boss, 2007). This phenomenon can lead to complications in grieving, where the lack of resolution prevents people from moving forward, a situation that is particularly pronounced in cases of political violence or systemic oppression (Carroll et al., 2007). The interplay between ambiguous loss, suffocated grief, and political grief highlights the necessity for social recognition and validation of diverse grieving processes, particularly for those affected by systemic injustices (Bordere, 2017).

Ambiguous loss serves as a critical perspective by which we can understand the experiences of suffocated grief and political grief. It underscores the complexities of mourning in contexts where social norms, political realities and personal experiences intersect, leading to compounded grief experiences that require nuanced understanding and support.

Historical Contexts of Political Grief

To fully appreciate political grief, we must first consider its historical underpinnings. From revolutions to oppressive regimes, various global events have engendered grief among affected populations. The examination of previous epochs provides insights into how political grief has historically affected societies. Significant examples would include; colonialism, the Holocaust, human rights violations, terrorism, mass shootings, Brexit, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Dutch discussion of 'Black Pete' and many others.

Although it is relatively recent, political developments that have spurred the growing interest in political grief and the experience to which it refers are certainly not new. Looking back over centuries, significant revolutions and regimes, such as the Russian Revolution and apartheid in South Africa, have produced substantial grief among disadvantaged populations. The policies enacted during these periods not only gave rise to immediate losses—such as lives disrupted or lost—but also engendered long-term feelings of disparity and alienation. The emotional residue left by these instances reverberates through time, both reinforcing and reflecting collective memories that serve to cast light on contemporary grief. The history of slavery is also relevant in this regard, with the symbolism of removing public statues and other forms of memorialization that speak to the political grief generated by enslavement then and now.

In today's increasingly globalized world, understanding historical contexts is paramount when considering responses to contemporary events that generate political grief. As parallels are drawn between historical injustices and modern dilemmas, a sense of duty emerges to document and comprehend feelings of loss from multiple perspectives. These historical perspectives offer valuable narratives to societies embroiled in political grief today. Having emphasized the importance of historical context, we are now ready to explore a number of examples of political events that have led to significant loss and thus grief – losses that can be disenfranchised, suffocated or ambiguous or any combination of these complicating factors.

Brexit and (Inter)national Identity

The decision by the United Kingdom to leave the European Union (EU), known as Brexit (British exit) has had major divisive consequences. It roughly split the country in two, with one camp welcoming the change and the other regarding it as a disaster in a number of ways. One of the key elements of this was identity. In the UK, national identity is complicated. This is partly because the UK comprises four nations, England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is even more complicated because of the contested nature of the relationship between Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland (see the discussion of 'The Troubles' below). In addition, the historical nature of the British Empire means that there are many UK citizens whose roots lie beyond the British Isles (a significant number of British Asians, e.g.). However, in terms of Brexit, the question of identity related to the extent to which

people felt a sense of belonging to Europe – some having little or no sense of European affiliation, while others felt very strongly a sense of European citizenship.

Those who felt alienated by the decision to leave the EU were left wrestling with profound feelings of loss related to their previous identity as part of a broader European community. The wounds remain open to this day, as the significantly detrimental economic consequences of Brexit have strengthened the belief of people who voted to remain that it was a disastrous move and has fired a growing movement in favour of rejoining the EU. Currently, though, the UK Government's position is that, while closer ties to Europe are to be pursued, rejoining the EU is not an option. All this adds to the sense of anger and disillusionment that form part of political grief.

The grief surrounding Brexit can be related to concerns about not only identity and global interconnectedness that strike at the very core of what it means to belong to a community, but also the loss of the EU as a framework for peace and cooperation in the face of past and potential future conflicts. It is widely recognized that the EU has played a major role in securing peace and international cooperation. In addition, there have been significant practical problems in terms of UK citizens losing the right to live and/or work in the 27 countries that now make up the European Union. Many international education and research opportunities have also been lost, while many businesses whose customers were mainly in the EU have 'gone to the wall' because of the additional bureaucratic obstacles to trade that EU membership previously removed.

Brexit serves as a clear case study in understanding collective grief as a reaction to significant politically determined losses. As people continue to confront the ramifications of altered relationships and political alliances, the emotional, social, economic and political fallout will no doubt continue for some considerable time.

The Trump Presidency: A Nation in Mourning

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2016 generated a strong and pervasive sense of political grief across broad swathes of the American people and beyond. His presidency not only shifted the political landscape, but also generated deep emotional responses, particularly among those who perceived his rise as a threat to values associated with democracy, inclusivity, human and reproductive rights and social justice and to the need to address climate change. What adds a further layer of concern is that certain populations are affected more than others, with their often recently gained freedoms and rights being threatened. These include LGBT + communities, immigrants, certain religious groups and even members of the military,

The election created a strongly polarized response. Groups identifying with liberal and progressive values expressed a shared sense of loss and mourning for the institutions, both social and political, that seemed vulnerable under Trump's leadership. This wave of emotional turmoil prompted an outpouring of activism, reflecting a quest not only to mourn but also to reclaim agency in a context of democratic regression. Civic groups aiming to protect human rights and civil liberties mobilised into a burgeoning resistance, transformed through the perspective of collective grief.

Many grief professionals have noted an increase in anxiety about the future as a result of Trump's approach to government. This would include concerns about possible deportation, threats of war, threats to social security and medical insurance, and so much more. There has been much talk by some citizens about leaving the country because of the tensions and insecurities. Trump's impact on the composition of the Supreme Court tilted the balance in a right-wing direction, and the January 6, 2021 storming of the Capitol further highlighted the significant shift in political values. This engendered yet more political grief – mourning the loss of faith in the security and fairness of key institutions and the Constitution. This sense of injustice has been intensified by the lack of accountability in relation to Trump's role in the uprising. His re-election in 2024 can be seen as a fresh wave of political grief for those who fear his authoritarian tendencies and avowed vengeance towards those he believes to have acted against his interests or attempted to stand in the way of his ambitions.

Media narratives around the Trump presidency also played a role in shaping public sentiment. News outlets that focused extensively on controversies surrounding his administration often capitalized on feelings of loss, creating a feedback loop where collective grief was manifested in media consumption and interpretation. Substantial efforts emerged to document the emotional impact of policies that divided communities, deepening the sense of grief across the nation. Several books were written highlighting the deficiencies, dangers, and destructive tendencies of the shift to the authoritarian right that his popularity represents (e.g., [Woodward, 2019, 2021, 2024](#); [Woodward & Costa, 2022](#)), even one by his own niece ([Trump, 2020](#)) and another by his national security adviser ([Bolton, 2020](#)).

In examining the political grief caused by Trump's success, it is important to recognize that its implications extend far beyond the United States. The pervasive feelings of despair, frustration, and disillusionment created by his actions influenced international relationships, causing ripples of discontent and uncertainty that reverberated globally. As political leaders seek to come to terms with these challenges, collaborations focusing on mutual understanding will be necessary to mitigate the wounds inflicted during this tumultuous period. These wounds are likely to feature throughout the second presidency and for years to come, with potential changes to international global warming agreements, peace treaties and mutual defence agreements

The 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland: Collective Sorrow and Resilience

The experience of what came to be known euphemistically as 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland serves as a further example of political grief, reflecting decades of conflict that produced profound emotional distress, upheaval, and insecurity within both nationalist and unionist communities. The sociopolitical divide engendered by this violent struggle for identity is marked by collective sorrow, resilience, and the striving for peace and reconciliation. The most turbulent times were between the late 1960s and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, but some tensions remain to this day.

At the heart of the situation is the key role of identity in both national and religious terms. The majority Protestant population, descendants of English and Scottish settlers in the 17th century affiliate themselves to the United Kingdom and are therefore referred to as Loyalists. The minority Catholic population, referred to as nationalists or Republicans (but not in the United States sense) ally themselves with the Republic of Ireland, believing that all of Ireland should be united under one government as a unified nation, separate from the UK.

The 'Troubles' refers to republican and loyalist paramilitary groups engaging in a campaign of violence against each other and against civilians, a conflict that has resulted in the deaths of over 3500 people and caused widespread devastation, distress, and, of course, grief.

The large number of lives lost during *The Troubles*, along with countless profoundly affected families, created an environment where grief became ingrained in the collective memory. The legacy of violence continues to disrupt the lives of the Northern Irish people, despite considerable progress and extensive efforts towards reconciliation. Despite the overwhelming grief, the Northern Irish people have continued to display remarkable resilience. Various groups have emerged to promote reconciliation, demonstrating that collective grief can act as a spur to change. Efforts to promote better understanding have led to innovative peace initiatives and commemorations, acknowledging the past while also seeking reconciliation.

The art of remembrance – through dedicated museums, ceremonies and other initiatives – serves to validate experiences of loss while also honoring the complex history that binds communities together. Such commemorative practices promote reflection on the emotional landscape characterised by decades of political struggle and the grief that was engendered.

The Israel-Palestine Conflict

The Israel-Palestine conflict represents one of the most protracted instances of political grief on a global scale. With its roots stretching deep into the past, the enduring suffering and loss have echoed across generations, resulting in the intertwining of layers of grief and complicating the narratives of both Israelis and Palestinians as history progresses.

The establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, coupled with the subsequent displacement of Palestinians, marked a pivotal moment in this conflict. For Palestinians, the *Nakba* or catastrophe, became ingrained in collective memory, giving rise to a lasting sense of grief over lost homes, lands, and identities. Conversely, feelings of vulnerability and grief exist among Israelis stemming from historical oppression and existential threats. The cyclical nature of grief in this context often leads to further entrenchment of positions, inhibiting pathways to dialogue and reconciliation. The intertwining of individual and collective grief becomes evident as victims recount their stories. Exploring firsthand narratives of loss offers a poignant perspective from which

the emotional dynamics of the conflict can be appreciated, highlighting how grief shapes perceptions and reactions across different groups.

Political grief arising from the Israel-Palestine conflict has also produced various movements advocating for change and redemption. Activism often arises as a response to grief and sorrow, reflecting a desire for resolution in the midst of pervasive pain. Such movements strive to address grievances while demanding acknowledgment of histories marred by violence. As communities struggle with their grief, the potential for understanding and dialogue offers hope in an otherwise tumultuous landscape.

China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan

The contentious and complex relationships between China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan bring forth complex layers of political grief. Each entity's evolving identity is weighed against historical legacies, national aspirations, and the struggle for recognition in a global context. The political climate surrounding the Chinese government's increasing control over Hong Kong has given rise to a sense of grief among those who cherish the region's distinct identity. Grief overflows particularly among individuals who felt betrayed by loved ones and public figures whose views on governance have shifted from a firm stand for liberty and free speech to repressive stability and self-censorship. Protestors advocating for democratic freedoms react not only to political changes but also wrestle with feelings of abandonment as international allies appear to withdraw support in the face of authoritarianism.

Taiwan, too, experiences political grief as it responds to challenges to its claimed autonomy and identity. The island's continuing assertion of independence contrasts starkly with Beijing's objectives, leading many Taiwanese to mourn the potential loss of what they consider their freedoms and the sorrow resulting from increasingly opposing views on self-determination between and within generations. The emotional toll of fear and uncertainty regarding the future creates a collective consciousness marked by grief.

As political narratives evolve, making sense of how communities confront grief while striving for identity becomes an important goal to pursue. Acknowledging grievances within the broader framework of identity potentially paves the way for future discussions on coexistence and mutual understanding.

Black Pete

The Dutch tradition of Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*) has sparked intense political and cultural debates, exposing a deep vein of political grief within Dutch society. Traditionally depicted as the companion of Saint Nicholas during the annual Sinterklaas (Saint Nicolas) celebration, Black Pete has long been portrayed in blackface, a representation rooted in colonial imagery. For many, the character embodies cherished childhood memories and cultural heritage, symbolizing joy and festivity. However, for others, particularly those of African descent, Black Pete represents a painful legacy of

slavery and racism, evoking grief tied to systemic inequalities and historical injustices. The discourse surrounding Black Pete has polarized communities, generating grief on both sides: One side grieving the perceived erosion of cultural traditions and the other grieving the losses associated with the continued marginalization and erasure of Black identities. This conflict highlights the intersection of collective grief and identity, as Dutch society grapples with the tensions between tradition and inclusivity. Efforts to reconcile these perspectives have seen shifts toward less offensive representations, but the debate remains a poignant example of how political grief manifests in cultural and historical contexts.

Aboriginal Rights

The treatment of Aboriginal people across North America, Australia and elsewhere evokes profound grief tied to histories of oppression and cultural erasure. The persistent legacies of colonialism and systemic inequality underscore the importance of honoring these narratives and promoting recognition. Aboriginal peoples experience political grief not only through loss of land, but also through the extensive marginalisation of their cultures and identities. Accounts of cultural genocide resonate throughout various communities, demonstrating how the perpetration of intergenerational trauma on these communities continues to shape emotional landscapes. These experiences necessitate careful consideration when engaging with Aboriginal narratives across different national contexts.

In struggling to address this grief, various movements have emerged, pushing for recognition, reparations and reconciliation. Commemorative practices, such as memorial events, educational initiatives and legislative changes, serve to uphold the unique histories of Aboriginal peoples while allowing broader societies to confront historical injustices.

The path to reconciliation is fraught with challenges yet essential for responding to political grief. Creating space for dialogues that recognise the nuanced contexts of Aboriginal experiences allows for greater understanding, empathy and compassion across communities.

The Role of Political Grief in Social Movements

We could continue to give examples of political factors that have generated immense grief, with the added complications of such grief being disenfranchised, suffocated, or ambiguous, as discussed earlier. However, we now move on to consider further dimensions of political grief, beginning with a consideration of the role of social movements.

Political grievances often act as catalysts for social movements, marking the point where collective mourning gives rise to action. As people contend with feelings of loss, they mobilize together, aiming for systemic changes to address the injustices involved. Historical events – such as the civil rights movement in the United States or

contemporary climate justice activism – demonstrate the profound role that political grief plays in activism. Individuals responding to injustices experience emotional turmoil that develops into collective actions advocating for change. These movements embody intertwining grief and resilience, where mourning serves as a powerful motivator for change.

Tragedy on individual and community levels can also motivate collective efforts for change in response to political grief. When describing the transformation of grief experienced by those who have lost loved ones in a drunk-driving crash to anger, which was then harnessed to become the energy and motivation for effective social action, Kroeker et al. (1994) aptly labelled this process as the grief-anger-social action continuum. In her discussion of survivor advocacy, Sofka (2017) reviews relevant literature that defines this concept and documented case studies of the political uses of grief, including the quote by Holst-Warhaft (2000), which states that “Control of the expressions of grief represents power...the energy of extreme grief may offer a unique opportunity for social mobilization and political action.” (p. 9)

The Trauma Foundation (2001) describes ‘survivor advocates’ as people who survive the traumatic loss of a loved one and channel their grief into preventive action. Over time, Sofka’s (2017) definition of survivor advocacy and digital survivor advocacy has expanded to reflect the diverse goals of these efforts beyond political change and to incorporate the increased role of social media in advocacy efforts:

The use of traditional advocacy strategies and/or digital technology and/or social media by individuals who are dealing with illness, impending death, those who have survived a tragedy, or who are coping with grief and loss to promote change in something (e.g., awareness, knowledge, individual behavior, societal practices, policies/legislation) that could prevent another person from experiencing a similar illness, tragedy or loss and/or to increase access to resources or support to those dealing with these life events (C. Sofka personal communication, 2022).

Social movements often harness the power of storytelling to articulate grief-related experiences and promote understanding. By crafting narratives surrounding loss, activists can evoke the emotional resonances essential for galvanizing support. The manifestation of grief in these discourses not only underlines personal experiences but also presents a shared basis from which deeper understanding can emerge.

Within the modern world of digital communication, the use of social media not only serves as a platform for mourning but also as a space for political mobilization, where grief can be politicized to challenge existing power structures (Granek, 2014). Digital alliances therefore have the potential to play a significant part in channelling grief and frustration into positive political acts. Hashtags affiliated with specific causes (#MarchForOurLives, EndGunViolence #DeathwithDignity, #EraseHate) unite those with common loss experiences who are engaging in advocacy efforts (Sofka, 2017).

The nature of political grief demands solidarity within movements, accentuating compassion and empathy as key drivers for change. While there are clearly challenges

in addressing grievances specific to different communities, engaging with shared experiences provides ways and means for building coalitions in pursuit of justice.

Terrorism and Political Grief

Political grief can also play a significant role in the dynamics of terrorism. The emotional responses elicited by acts of terrorism often lead to a cycle of grief that can be exploited for political ends. For example, the politicization of grief can serve to mobilize communities towards collective action or, conversely, to give rise to further violence (Heath-Kelly & Jarvis, 2017). The emotional landscape associated with terrorism is complex, as grief, anger, and resentment can fuel radicalization and play a part in justifying violent responses (Crociani-Windland & Hoggett, 2012).

It is important to recognize the two-way relationship between grief and terrorism. On the one hand, acts of terrorism will be responsible for generating considerable grief among those who are directly or indirectly affected by such events. Such grief can lead to a range of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and complicated grief, significantly impairing quality of life and the ability to function (Fischer & Ai, 2008). Feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, and fear for both individuals and communities can further exacerbate the psychological impact of an attack. Wayment (2004) highlights that, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, individuals who were not directly bereaved but were part of a community affected by the attacks reported significant disaster-focused distress. This reinforced the point that (political) grief can be vicarious and communal in nature (see also Wayment & Silver, 2018).

On the other hand, terrorist activities can arise as a consequence of grief. In some cases, people who experience significant loss and grief may be susceptible to adopting extremist ideologies and become prepared to use violent means of achieving their aims (Gurwitsch et al., 2002; Laor et al., 2006). These individuals may seek to inflict pain on others as a way of coping with their own suffering or in revenge for the losses they have endured and/or to strike back at what they see as oppressive actions, attitudes, and beliefs. This can lead to a cycle of violence whereby acts of terrorism create a climate of fear and mistrust, leading to a vicious circle of further acts of violence and loss. This cycle can be perpetuated by the grief and trauma experienced by victims and survivors of terrorism. In this regard, a better understanding of political grief has the potential to contribute to breaking such cycles. For example, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the American Association of Retired People (AARP) ran a robust grief support program for the three cities most affected directly by the attacks.

Saka (2017) emphasizes the importance of community support in helping bereaved individuals come to terms with their grief following terrorist attacks, returning us once again to the collective nature of political grief. Such support systems can facilitate the grieving process and help people find meaning in their loss, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and despair.

Having explored some key dimensions of political grief, we now turn our attention to the important question of how people respond to political grief, personally, socially and spiritually.

Mental Health Support

Political turmoil can have a highly detrimental effect on the people so affected, resulting in feelings of anxiety and depression and even trauma. Understanding the mental health consequences of political grief is therefore an important undertaking. A holistic approach to mental health promotion is an important basis for addressing the psychosocial and spiritual effects of political grief. Support groups and trauma-informed practices can play key roles in creating safe environments conducive to regaining emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

Addressing the stigma associated with political grief and its impact can help to generate conversations around mental health. Developing understanding requires recognizing shared experiences that go beyond borders, creating the emotional space for sensitive conversations that can play a part in making progress in dealing with the issues involved. This will involve moving beyond a medical model that conceptualizes mental distress in narrow individualistic terms without taking account of the wider social (and political) circumstances (Thompson, 2019).

Addressing political grief requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges its complexity and the sociopolitical contexts in which it occurs. One effective strategy is the development of social support networks that can provide emotional, practical and spiritual assistance to those affected by political acts (see the discussion below of social movements).

Commemorative Practices

Commemorative practices offer a space where grief can be acknowledged and explored collectively. These events can facilitate connections with past events, while emphasising the value of lived experiences that inform the present and help plan for the future. The Living Memorial movement illustrates how political discussions surrounding grief can enhance political consciousness and community resilience (Mikecz, 2021). This movement emphasizes the importance of reframing grief as a collective experience that promotes community building and political engagement. Such social responses highlight the interplay between grief and identity, where shared mourning can lead to a reconfiguration of national narratives and collective memory (Poulter, 2017).

Public memorials, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, which lists the 58,000 names of service men and women who lost their lives in the Vietnam War, or the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City, stand as a testament to collective grief, transforming spaces into sites of remembrance and reflection. Such commemoration allows affected communities to honor individual stories embedded within broader historical contexts. By creating tangible reminders of loss,

communities can engage actively with their grief while promoting solidarity, resolution, and resilience. Memorialization can play a part in facilitating discussion of current and historical political factors that have given rise to political grief and thereby allow communities to address complex emotions associated with loss. In doing so, they can open channels for communication and understanding – important elements of responding to any form of grief, but especially so in relation to political grief which has the potential to be disenfranchised, suffocated, and/or ambiguous.

Educational Initiatives

Educational programs focusing on political grief can promote an understanding of past and current injustices as well as possible coping strategies, feeding into ongoing discussions around potential reconciliation. Schools, community groups, and universities can all potentially contribute to shaping more comprehensive narratives of grief that enrich awareness, empathy, and compassion in relation to these issues. In a grief literate society, people would understand that grief is unique and variable, avoiding stigmatizing others based on their own assumptions, experiences, beliefs, and expectations (Breen et al., 2022). These authors issued a call to action for grief literacy initiatives that include validating grief from non-death losses and not ranking these losses in comparison with human death loss. Individual differences in grieving styles would be understood and accepted, and people would feel comfortable talking about loss experiences, both their own and those of others, instead of avoiding the subject or showing discomfort.

The Key Role of Identity

Political grief can be seen to be closely related to cultural identity (as some of the examples highlighted above have illustrated) and the perceived threats to that identity. When faced with political changes that undermine cultural practices or traditions, such grief can provoke feelings of conflict and loss. In this way, identity crises often accompany these sentiments, reinforcing the need to understand how communities respond to grief in line with their cultural heritage and traditions. Political grief highlights the significant impact losses can have on understandings of identity and belonging. Within contexts of such turmoil, facing grief often leads individuals and communities to reassess the foundations of their identities. What is also highlighted is how various social identities and aspects of identity combine to inform experiences of loss. An inclusive approach to understanding political grief can help to ensure that the voices of all cultural groups are paid attention, with no group or subgroup being marginalised at a time when they feel particularly vulnerable.

Reaffirming cultural identities can therefore be central to making progress in terms of peace, reconciliation, and the promotion of social justice. Engaging with traditions and heritage encourages cultural consolidation and allows people to find solace and mutual support in their identities and community. Such practices can feed into broader

narratives about political grief, thereby contributing to the development of communal resilience and hope.

The Importance of Leadership

Another important consideration is the role leadership plays in enabling communities to process and transcend political grief (see [van Wielink et al., 2023](#)). Effective leaders serve as secure bases, promoting psychological safety and resilience in their societies. They engage deeply with the narratives of loss and transition, acknowledging the pain of political upheaval while guiding their communities towards collective meaning and purpose. Leaders who embrace their own roots and biography can inspire hope, mobilize action and shape transformative paths. Leadership in this context is not directive but rather deeply relational, inviting dialogue and promoting inclusivity. By embodying empathy and vision, leaders can help bridge divides, honor the past, and co-create futures that address the root causes of political grief. This requires not only strategic acumen, but also the courage to engage with conflict, the wisdom to facilitate integration and the discipline to hold space for healing.

Conclusion

Political grief encompasses the collective mourning experienced by communities in response to systemic oppression, violence, and loss of rights, which can be exacerbated by societal structures that deny or diminish the legitimacy of their grief ([Bayatrizi et al., 2021](#); [Gross, 2022](#)). This type of grief is commonly associated with a broader sociopolitical context where people mourn not only personal losses, but also the loss of community, identity, and agency due to systemic inequalities and/or morally and spiritually harmful political developments. In societies marked by growing divides, addressing grief in readily accessible ways connects communities that may otherwise feel alienated from one another. As challenges such as polarization grow, prioritizing conversations surrounding political grief will be fundamental to mitigating anger and disenchantment often accompanying such divides. Future engagements should search for ways forward that give hope and moral strength to people who have borne the brunt of destructive and fearsome political circumstances, while encouraging openness and recognition of shared narratives.

It is to be hoped that engaging with political grief allows individuals, families, groups, communities, and whole societies to forge connections and alliances that promote resilience and empowerment. Recognizing and processing grief as a universal experience frees communities to explore solutions collectively. By taking account of the complexity of political grief, there is scope to face uncertain futures with empathy, compassion, and a commitment to finding ways forward that channel anger, frustration and disillusionment into ways of promoting social justice and inclusive humanitarian values.

Through an exploration of political grief experienced as a result of significant political events and regimes, it is clear that grief deeply intertwines with identity and political action. Further exploring this phenomenon can cast light on important issues that enable the forging of paths towards future resilience and collective action.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement (IWG) for providing the structure and support for our collaboration on this project.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Statement

Ethical Consideration

This manuscript is a scholarly paper and does not involve reporting of research findings from human subjects and no consent for participation from human subjects. Therefore, no ethical declaration is related to human subjects, human data, or findings from a research ethics review board.

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Data Availability Statement

No data was generated in the creation of this manuscript.

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