HIERARCHIES OF LOSS: A CRITIQUE OF DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

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ABSTRACT

Two aspects of the concept of disenfranchised grief are examined: its binary assumption that grief is either enfranchised or disenfranchised, and its emancipatory agenda that grief should not be socially regulated. Focussing on the mourner’s relationship to the deceased, we argue that social norms about the legitimacy of bereavement are not binary (yes-no), but are scalar or hierarchical, or even more complex still. We report on a tool for identifying hierarchies of loss, and describe the hierarchy identified by this tool in one British study. If norms about loss are not binary but hierarchical, how has disenfranchised grief – which claims to be a theory of norms - become an uncontested concept within bereavement research and clinical practice? We point to its rhetorical value in the postmodern politics of grief and its seductive emancipatory symbolism within the clinic; its value both for clinical practice and for empirical research into bereavement norms, however, may be limited.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of disenfranchised grief (hereafter DG) has become well-established within bereavement research and practice. It was first introduced to refer to griefs where there is no social acknowledgement of the mourner’s relationship to the deceased, or of the mourner’s loss, or of the mourner’s ability to grieve (Doka, 1989). This was later expanded to include the lack of social recognition that particular kinds of death entail a loss, the dismissal of particular styles of grieving (e.g. instrumental) (Doka & Martin, 2002), and the dismissal of certain components of grief (e.g. behavioural, meaning-making) (Corr, 2002). Kauffman has argued these processes can also be internalised so that mourners disenfranchise their own grief, indicating a psychological as well as a sociological phenomenon (Kauffman, 2002, 2010). DG can therefore refer either to grief not being recognised, or how the person grieves being dismissed (Corr, 2002). This article addresses only one aspect of DG, namely norms as to which types of relationship end in bereavement.

DG researchers made a major theoretical and empirical advance by highlighting that there are social norms about grief (Brabant, 2002), not least about ‘who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve’ (Doka, 1989, p. 4). ’Each culture creates its own grieving rules, defining the ways an individual is expected to grieve’ (Doka & Martin, 2002, p. 338). This enriched death studies by placing grief within a social context, drawing on research in the sociology of emotions (Durkheim, 1915; Hochschild, 1983); however isolated mourners may be, their grief is experienced within a social context which is not indifferent to how they feel and behave (Brabant, 2002). The Durkheimian idea of grief being socially
Hierarchical norms, (dis)enfranchised mourners

To enfranchise, according to any English dictionary, is to set free and admit to civil or political privileges. ‘In the most familiar sense, to enfranchise is to set a person free from his or her prior condition of incapacity by admitting that person to the electoral franchise (that is, by granting the individual permission to vote). Disenfranchisement applies to those who are not accorded this social franchise to have their voices heard or their votes counted and who are thereby confined to second-class status and political subjugation.’ (Corr, 2002, p. 40). This clearly indicates our two main points. First, we are dealing with a binary concept: either you are enfranchised or you are disenfranchised, either you have the vote or you do not have the vote. (Likewise with a more recent commercial meaning of ‘franchise’: either I have a franchise to operate a hamburger bar in my town, or I do not.) It is a matter of either-or, not a continuum. Second, in its main political sense, to be disenfranchised implies second-class status and subjugation: this is not a neutral concept, but one with clear moral and/or political overtones. We will come back to this second point toward the end of the article, but now we wish to examine the either/or-ness of the notion that grief is either enfranchised or disenfranchised.

Our focus in this article is social norms about which relationships are worth grieving. We argue that they are hierarchical (‘more’ or ‘less’) rather than binary (‘either/or’, ‘yes/no’). Indeed, evidence for this is provided in a number of giveaway sentences by DG theorists. Fowlkes, for example, announces his binary thesis that grief feelings and behaviours are ‘socially regulated so as to either permit or deny the individual mourner access to a socially legitimate grief role’ (1990, p. 636), yet his article gives a number of instances of partial legitimations and concludes that ‘not all losses set in motion – fully or at all – the ritual and interpersonal forces of consolation’ (1990, p. 649). Less than full, ie partial, legitimation is thus acknowledged. Similar shifts from either/or to partial legitimation are found in Doka’s classic book on DG, for example, ‘All of these losses…may be disenfranchised to a degree.’ (our emphasis) (Doka, 2002, p. 8). This is a curious use of language: how can one have the vote to a degree? Or again: ‘Younger cohorts may be more supportive (than older cohorts) of the loss of an unmarried cohabiting couple.’ (Doka, 2002, p. 9). If the loss of a cohabitee is acknowledged by some people and not by others, this
loss too is disenfranchised only to a degree. A number of research studies purporting to demonstrate the existence of DG use multi-point scales to measure students’ attitudes to different kinds of loss, and then try to convert the scalar results into yes/no findings as to whether certain kinds of loss are or are not enfranchised (Thornton & Zanich, 2002). We ask here whether it was easier for the researchers to use multi-point scales rather than yes/no questions because they were actually attempting to measure a scalar and not a yes/no phenomenon? In fact, Thornton & Zanich report a number of their findings about who should be grieved in terms of ‘more or less’ rather than ‘yes or no’.

What then is a hierarchy? It is a ‘classification in graded subdivisions’ (Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary), ‘a body of persons or things ranked in grades, orders, or classes, one above another’ (Oxford English Dictionary). A hierarchy could be pictured in linear form like a ruler, continuum, or ladder, but it is often the case that classifications have fewer people in the higher categories than the lower because it requires extra privilege, power or skill to be at the top. This, for example, is the case with political, economic, and social hierarchies. Thus it might be helpful to picture a hierarchy not as a line, but as a pyramid. This, we contend, is the most accurate picture of grief hierarchies. Given the nature of human attachments (Stiller & Dunbar, 2007), there are typically just one or at most a handful of people who are deeply distraught at someone’s death (e.g. the widow, the parents), somewhat more who are rather less distraught, and many more who acknowledge the death possibly to the extent of attending the funeral or writing condolence cards but who would perhaps define themselves as mourners but not as bereaved and certainly not as bereft. Social norms reflect this, privileging the grief of the widow but also recognising the loss experienced by other close family members and other intimates, and recognising that a much wider range of people may miss the deceased. In this situation what we have is a pyramid rather than a continuum, and certainly not a loss that cannot be anything other than total or non-existent. Please note that we refer to hierarchies (plural) as we do not assume social consensus about grief norms. A few others have written about grief hierarchies (Faulkner & Wallbank, 1998; Littlewood, 1992; Marris, 1974), but writers on disenfranchised grief have not engaged with them so we hope this article will remedy that.

Most writers on disenfranchised grief, along with the words they use, imply that disenfranchisement is a bad thing. Kamerman (2002), however, has listed some very good social, economic, legal and even personal reasons why some bereavements are not rated at all highly, and he has identified the social and economic costs that would be incurred if all bereavements were recognised. Total equality in claims-making to grief could never become socially acceptable. Though some people have taken their cat’s death harder than their wife’s, HR managers’ work would be impossible if employees could negotiate bereavement leave on equal terms for any kind of loss, and indeed colleagues might well resent being required to cover for those claiming extended leave for an apparent minor loss; thus HR policies often state a hierarchy of relationships and the bereavement or funeral leave appropriate to each (Pratt, 1981). Granted such policies might be driven in part by economic considerations (Reynolds, 2002), but it is difficult to see how businesses could operate without them. Inheritance law likewise states who will inherit from someone who has not made a valid will (Cretney, 1997).

Moving from economics and law to families, consider these hypothetical examples: a bereaved parent would justifiably be upset if the child’s teacher claimed the role of chief mourner, as would a wife if her deceased husband’s mistress got to
the funeral director first and arranged his funeral (Kamerman, 2002). Or consider the offering of oral condolences. This would be very difficult without some initial working assumptions about the grief the other is likely to feel; the sensitive condoler will pick up cues that initial assumptions may need modifying, and there is a kind of mutual dance until the appropriate level of condolence can be given and taken. To approach bereaved teachers, pet owners, and spouses with no initial assumptions seems to us more rather than less likely to lead to faux pas and inappropriate levels of condolence.

So there are hierarchies of loss, and there have to be hierarchies of loss. This causes no problems if the individual mourner accepts his or her designated position within the hierarchy. If the mourner grieves less than the hierarchy expects (e.g. feeling relieved when your father dies), there may need to be some careful presentation of self, both to others and possibly even to oneself. In more formal societies, social presentation in such circumstances simply entailed behaving appropriately and wearing the appropriate mourning attire (Taylor, 1983), while in more informal contemporary Anglo societies lacking such dress codes a more subtle presentation of self may be necessitated. If the hierarchy indicates someone should grieve less than they actually do, however, then he or she will feel their loss is not recognised, and will feel disenfranchised. This may well be an either/or experience: either my loss is properly recognised or it is not. In other words, disenfranchisement may be a fairly accurate term for the experience of some mourners when the hierarchy places them in what they feel to be the wrong position, but it is not an accurate term for the social norms that give rise to that experience. Normative hierarchies of loss are thus the precursor for the felt disenfranchisement of certain mourners.

We now present a research tool for identifying hierarchies, and report on the findings from testing the tool on a small British sample. The findings are presented simply to show that the tool works, that is, it is capable of identifying hierarchies of loss. We make no claim that our findings are representative of British people as a whole, still less other populations.

**HOW TO IDENTIFY HIERARCHIES**

**Method**

The research tool we developed draws on Kelly's repertory grid to identify personal constructs (Kelly, 1991), which provides respondents more freedom to demonstrate their own constructs than do conventional attitude scales. We designed three imaginary networks of relationships, each around a central character who has just died, with a coloured card representing each character (see Appendix):

- ‘David’ (aged 40, only child, dies of cancer)
- ‘Elsie’ (aged 88, widowed, dies in sheltered housing where she has lived for 20 years)
- ‘Martin’ (aged 10, dies in a road accident).

For each character, participants were given 15 white cards representing 15 potential mourners - they may have been spouse, child or parent to the deceased, or a friend, neighbour or work colleague. Each person’s card gave only minimal information: the relationship to the deceased, gender and length of relationship (where this was not obvious), and age. Participants (to be described in the next paragraph) were asked to arrange the cards to represent the likely intensity and duration of each person's grief relative to the others, based on their relationship with the deceased. It was made clear that i) there were no right answers, ii) participants would not be asked to justify
the choices, iii) all the relationships should be viewed positively, i.e. no-one secretly hated the deceased. Participants were encouraged to be intuitive, and they soon realised that with such limited information to go on there was little point in agonising over their decisions; they had to make sweeping judgements, drawing on their personal constructs of typical relationships. The researcher then turned each white card over, preserving the hierarchical pattern, and the random coding letters on the reverse side enabled her to record the pattern for analysis. Although participants were not asked to comment, any oral comments they made as they sorted the cards were noted.

The tool was tested on a non-random sample of 50 participants known to us. Having had the task explained to them, they assured us that past grief from any personal bereavements was unlikely to resurface as a result of their participation. We asked participants their age band and whether they were a parent or grandparent. All had grown up within mainstream, white, English culture, and had the characteristics shown in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70+</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of hierarchies began with awarding points to each character according to how highly they had been placed: 15 for the top card, down to 1 for the lowest. Cards placed equally had the available points averaged and shared between them. For each of the three deceased characters, all fifty participants’ data were added and averaged, so that a final hierarchy of points - rather like a soccer league table at the end of a season - emerged for each of David, Elsie and Martin's groups of mourners. If a particular type of relationship was placed low down on the hierarchy, it was because overall the sample group felt that such people would not experience strong feelings of grief over that particular relationship. We also produced bar charts showing the range of responses for each character.

We complemented the card exercise with gathering certain other data more familiar to DG researchers (Thornton & Zanich, 2002). We followed the card exercise by asking four questions about each deceased character. Who in each deceased person’s network would participants expect:

- to receive sympathy cards?
- might be unable to resume work after the funeral, and if so, be granted compassionate leave?
- to have the right for their floral tributes to be on the coffin at the funeral? (two characters only)
- to choose the design and wording for the memorial stone?

We also examined some companies’ compassionate leave policies, and which relationships are recognised in condolence cards on sale in local shops. We
triangulated these data with the card exercise to see whether they produced similar hierarchies.

**Findings**

We report here the findings of the card exercise, as this tool is new. The small size and lack of representativeness of our sample limit our findings simply to demonstrating that the tool can successfully identify hierarchies of loss. We report here on those hierarchies, but obviously their composition is likely to change with further use of the tool with more and bigger samples - or with different cultural groups, or with specific age groups.

Defining *consanguines* as kin (i.e. blood relatives, supplemented by spouse), *affines* as relatives by marriage (i.e. kin of spouse or sibling’s spouse) (Firth, Hubert, & Forge, 1969), and *fictive kin* as friends and neighbours drawn into a family role (e.g. godparent, or the ‘auntie’ who is in fact the mother’s friend), the following patterns emerged for David and Martin:

i. Consanguines are deemed to experience more intense grief than affines.

ii. Primary kin (parent, child, sibling, spouse) rank higher than secondary kin (such as grandparent, niece, cousin).

iii. Fictive kin may infiltrate the group of affines but not rated above any consanguines.

iv. Neighbours, work colleagues etc are deemed to grieve less than kin, with the exception of Martin's childminder who scored higher than his very young half-sister.

v. Those with a professional or contractual relationship to the deceased are deemed to suffer significantly less grief than any kin.

Elsie’s circumstances – including age and likely lack of mobility - resulted in a different balance of characters in her fictional network of mourners. Unlike the other scenarios, her cards provide some information about geographical proximity and how often the characters saw Elsie when she was alive, and this extra information challenged the hierarchical assumptions of the participants, many of whom commented that this scenario was harder to sort than the other two. Thus, although the overall hierarchy was similar to that for David and Martin, distance and frequency of contact made a difference. The grief of Elsie's son was judged unusually low for a primary consanguine due, according to participants’ comments, to the fact that he lived far away. Geographical distance may also have been the reason for the demotion of Elsie’s son’s wife to below that of neighbours in the adjacent apartments who might have interacted with Elsie on a daily basis.

The range of placements received by a character is almost as informative as the final average score, since this gives an indication of the degree of consensus among the 50 participants. For instance, there was more agreement about the grief of Martin’s mother than of his godparents or of the driver, or of David’s ex-wife. The driver and the ex-wife actually received ranks spanning almost the whole range, from 1 to 14. The degree of consensus indicates how consistent the expectations about the severity of a mourner’s loss would be if our fifty participants were all part of the deceased’s social network. DG in the binary sense assumed by the literature would occur only if there were near total consensus that certain characters would feel no grief. Apart from David’s doctor whose scores ranged from 1 to just 2.5, no such characters emerged in our card study. To what extent this reflects the fluidity of relationships in contemporary Britain is hard to say without replicating use of our research tool in more traditional societies.
In the following sections, we look at the main categories within the hierarchy of mourning.

**The chief mourners**

In Jane Littlewood’s research into adult bereavement, chief mourners had:

‘few obligations other than to mourn… This person… also acted as an agent of the dead person, speaking, as it were, on their behalf [and] it was not seen to be appropriate to question this person's interpretation of the dead person's wishes. The majority of offers of support, condolences and practical help were directed towards chief mourners - presumably in the belief that this person would require the most support.’ (Littlewood, 1992, p. 104)

In our study, David’s was the only scenario which involved conjugal bereavement and his widow topped the hierarchy, though his ex-wife received a wide range of placements. Bereavement researchers themselves have privileged spousal bereavement, particularly among those widowed before old age, for most studies into bereavement before 1990 concerned prematurely bereaved widows. Inheritance law ranks spouse and dependent children above all others when a person dies intestate (Cretney, 1997), as do many company HR policies (Charles-Edwards, 2000), while the etiquette manual, *Debrett’s Guide to Bereavement*, is unequivocal that the best seats at the funeral, on the front row next to the aisle, must be reserved for the grieving widow or widower (Mosley, 1995).

In Martin’s scenario, his parents clearly occupied chief mourner status, and there is a wealth of research and clinical practice that indicates the severity of grief felt after the death of a child, of whatever age. The extent to which this is particularly so in modern societies in which parents expect their children to outlive them, and does not necessarily characterise the high child mortality societies in which all humans lived until about a century ago and in which many still live, is of some debate among anthropologists and historians, and need not detain us here. We would expect hierarchies of loss – in detail at any rate – to be specific to specific societies, depending not only on mortality patterns but also on kinship structures, and it might be revealing to use our tool in societies with high child mortality. It seems likely that, with societally appropriate character cards, the tool should be usable in any society.

Martin’s parents were divorced, while David’s were not. The average score for Martin's father was lower than for David’s, and the range of points Martin’s father received was enormous, from equal first with mother (14.5) down to the lowest of all (1.0). This suggests little consensus about the effect that Martin's father having remarried and started a new family would have on his feelings for his dead son. Indeed, while most participants assumed that Martin lived with his mother and sisters, three male participants interpreted him as living with his father. Given the diversity of scores for Martin’s divorced father and for David’s ex-wife, it might be illuminating to modify the characters in our tool to reflect more accurately the complex family relationships experienced by increasing numbers of westerners, including LGBT relationships. We predict this will lead to more, and more complex, hierarchies.

In Martin’s scenario, his mother clearly won the place of chief mourner, with an average score 1.51 points above the next contender (the 12 year old sister), followed closely by the father. In David’s scenario, his wife only just gained an average score over his mother to gain chief mourner status. Elsie had neither spouse nor parents to mourn her. Participants therefore disagreed who would grieve her the most, a ‘competition’ won by her twin sister, but with daughter and brother not far
behind. In real life, competitions for chief mourner status do occur and can have objective consequences:

Whilst on the surface such disputes might appear petty and ungenerous in spirit they undoubtedly reflected deeper and more central preoccupations…, i.e. that of exclusive possession of the memory of the dead person… The position of chief mourner became vitally important in terms of the access it gave to the holder effectively to speak on the half of the dead person, i.e. it gave them literally, as well as figuratively the last word. (Littlewood, 1992, p. 115)

In sports games, the aim is to win; either you win, or you are one of the losers (an either/or result). In mourning, there may be competition for chief mourner status, but that does not mean all ‘losers’ are equal. Mourning is more like end-of-season sports league tables, where there can be consequences for where in the league non-winners are finally placed, as we see in the following sections.

The first reserves
If the deceased's spouse and parents vie for the (for them) coveted status of chief mourner, our results show that the ‘third place play-off’ is likely to be between the deceased's children who have lost a parent, and the siblings who have lost their brother or sister. Though the death of one’s elderly parents is nowadays one of the most commonly experienced primary kin deaths and might be considered part of the natural order, there is evidence that it can be acutely felt. ‘Ties between parent and child are often among the longest of the life course. They have spent decades sharing experiences and developing joint views of reality.’ (Moss & Moss, 1997, p. 347)

There is therefore considerable potential for a bereaved adult child claiming chief or at least joint-chief mourner status that is not universally recognised by their social network, and hence the potential to them to feel their loss devalued.

Researchers vary in their estimation of the severity of sibling bereavement, with one study identifying sisters having grief as severe as widows (Cleiren, 1991, pp. 196-197), though Parkes’ judgement is that ‘Most studies do not indicate that the loss of a sibling in old age… is a major loss for most people’ (Parkes, 1996, p. 123). But twins, and particularly identical twins, are an exception (Segal & Bouchard, 1993). Two of our participants had a twin. Both placed Elsie's twin sister on the top row of the hierarchy of her mourners, and the one who was an identical twin put Elsie’s twin alone at the top, indicating that no other characters’ grief would be as prolonged or intense. This suggests that although our participants in general rated Elsie's twin’s grief highly, this might still somewhat undervalue the grief felt by a real-life twin.

The lesser mourners
Once we get beyond spouses, parents, children and siblings, as well as grief being rated less highly, there is also much less consensus from participants, suggesting that it is outside of this close kin group that certain individuals – because of their particular attachment to the deceased - are most likely to find their loss not socially validated, at least by some within their network. This fits the literature on disenfranchised grief which regularly identifies stepchildren, childminders, foster parents, mistresses, ex-spouses, friends, work colleagues, health care professionals, nursing home staff, pet owners, celebrity fans, etc as likely to find their loss disenfranchised (Doka, 1989, 2002; Fowlkes, 1990; Hall & Reid, 2009). Where it is known that there has been regular or close contact with the deceased (e.g. Elsie’s niece, David’s cousin), more grief was anticipated by many of our participants but not
automatically assumed - hence the variation. Lesser mourners were not expected to be granted compassionate leave. All this fits the privileging in modernity of nuclear family relationships, in life as well as in death, to the exclusion of attachments based on extended family or community (Lasch, 1977).

The only unrelated character in our study to regularly break into the ranks of the family mourners was the ‘best friend’. David, Martin and Elsie’s social circles all included a best friend figure and, of the three, Elsie’s emerged with the highest average score, possibly because they had been friends a long time. However, only 3/50 participants imagined Elsie’s best friend receiving any condolence cards. With the increasing importance of friendship alongside family in modern western societies, and the fluidity of friendship in contrast to the more formal structures of family relationships, it seems inevitable that there will be considerable variation in how the grief of friends is socially assessed (Allan, 1996; Rubin, 1985).

Given the increasing importance of intimacy within families (Giddens, 1992), we wonder whether intimacy or closeness between family members (what psychologists refer to as attachment) might in time be increasingly prioritised over more traditional family-based grief hierarchies. The daughter who is ‘best friends’ with her mum might be thought to grieve more over mum’s death than the daughter who was more emotionally distant. For the time being, however, our study clearly indicates the importance of formal familial relationships in determining hierarchies of loss, at least in the hypothetical scenarios of our character cards. Whether this is reflected in real-life, we cannot tell from this tool. One real-life dataset that indicates both a process of individualisation and the continuation of formal family relationships is a 2010 Mass Observation archive of mourners’ writings about behavioural norms in contemporary British funerals.

As well as the increasing importance of friendship and intimacy, the other contemporary trend likely to undermine consensus across the whole range of mourners is the increased prevalence of divorce, remarriage, and blended families. The bereavement literature, such as it is in respect of step-families, suggests that step-relationships may often be closer and more significant than society expects. The odds of a mismatch between grief experienced and grief expected are further raised as no social conventions have yet developed around the roles and strength of feeling involved in step family relationships, in life, let alone after death (Allan, 1996). Giddens (1991) sees becoming a step-parent or step-grandparent to an adult child as a ‘pure relationship’ in which traditional duties, obligations and power imbalances do not determine the strength of the relationship, which may therefore sit anywhere between nominal and a strong bond of mutual satisfaction. When it comes to inheritance practices, however, one study found that ‘people overwhelmingly resorted to the principle that blood is thicker than water’, with for example a man who was closer to and cared for by his step-daughter leaving all his estate to his blood daughter (Bornat, Dimmock, Jones, & Peace, 1999, pp. 259-260).

Summary of findings
The tool demonstrated a hierarchy of social expectations about grief, rather than binary expectations of losses being either allowed or disallowed. Participants did not bunch characters into one group experiencing a loss, and another group experiencing none. Participants easily understood the instructions, and placed cards in a variety of patterns.

The overall hierarchy elicited looked like this, with the horizontal lines indicating clear boundaries between levels:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOST GRIEF</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
<th>Primary attachment figure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Primary, consanguine kin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Primary, consanguine kin</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
<td>Primary, consanguine kin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent</td>
<td>Secondary, consanguine kin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandchild</td>
<td>Secondary, consanguine kin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best friend</td>
<td>Non-relative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-in-law</td>
<td>Affine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunts/uncles/cousins</td>
<td>More distant secondary kin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling-in-law</td>
<td>Affine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Godparents</td>
<td>Fictive kin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbour</td>
<td>Non-relative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step-relative</td>
<td>Fictive kin</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work colleague</td>
<td>Non-relative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEAST GRIEF</td>
<td>Professional/contractual</td>
<td>Non-relative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though participants’ constructs reflected social norms, they were also shaped by their own bereavement experiences and familiarity with certain social or family settings, for example: the participant who had personal experience of the step-grandfather/grandson relationship, the vicar who made pastoral visits to the elderly in residential homes, the participant with a twin sibling, the nurse who understood the grief a doctor might feel.

Our research tool not only produced ‘end-of-season’ league tables, but also revealed the range of positions each character was placed in by the fifty participants. This suggests that real mourners may be concerned not only with whether their loss is sufficiently recognised, but whether enough people recognise it, and whether the right people recognise it.

Our contention therefore is that disenfranchisement is not a norm, but a feeling experienced by mourners whose personal grief exceeds their position in the hierarchy either as generally perceived or as perceived by one or more significant condolers. Our study focused on social recognition of the relationship between mourner and deceased. We have not researched whether there are similar hierarchies concerning social recognition of the loss (e.g. perinatal deaths, abortions, pet loss), though our hunch is that there are. And there may be certain losses that are entirely unrecognised socially, such a miscarriage or elective abortion that nobody else knows happened. Concerning social recognition of the griever (e.g. very young children, people with learning disabilities) we do not know whether there is widespread consensus that such people simply do not grieve or whether they typically are deemed to fall in the lower part of hierarchies of social recognition.

Where we suspect that social recognition may be binary (either/or) is with grieving styles. Martin and Doka (2002; 2010) have identified instrumental (problem
solving) and affective (expressive, intuitive) styles, and have argued persuasively that employers tend to legitimate only instrumental grief, while many grief counsellors have legitimised only affective grief; this is complicated by a social expectation that men should grieve instrumentally and women affectively, which can create complex expectations, for example for female mourners within the workplace. Social expectations about grieving styles may add up to neither one simple binarity nor a hierarchy but a complex interaction of either/or binaries, and deserves considerably more research.

CONCLUSION

If we are correct that social expectations about who you grieve, and possibly also some other expectations about grief, are not binary as theorists of disenfranchisement assume, but hierarchical, how is it that since the publication of Doka's first book in 1989 DG has become an uncontested concept within death studies? We believe that the answer may be found by disentangling the three ways in which the concept of DG has been used: emancipatory/political, clinical, and in research.

DG and emancipation

The enfranchised/disenfranchised binary is at the heart of how the concept is used as political rhetoric. To be disenfranchised implies that one ought to become enfranchised; the word performs the logical alchemy of turning an ‘is’ into an ‘ought’. One alchemist, John Reynolds (2002, pp. 352, 384), writes: ‘Disenfranchised grief is as political as it is clinical. Enfranchisement is a political term meaning to admit to citizenship, to set free, to liberate, as from slavery… The utility and clinical efficacy of Doka’s invocation of a political term such as disenfranchisement is that it suggests action and mobilization.’ Reynolds goes on to outline what an enfranchising social policy could look like in a number of areas, not least compassionate leave policies. Another DG evangelist writes: ‘By including… disenfranchised grief issues within our death education courses, we broaden the concept of loss and honor all of life’s survivors.’ (Zinner, 2002, p. 400)

In the view of most writers on DG, ‘Grieving is an inalienable right… abrogating this right is an act of oppression.’ (Reynolds, 2002, p. 355) Feminist historian Lou Taylor (1983) sheds light on the history of this right in Britain. Upper class Victorian society imposed a clear hierarchy of mourning, dictating how long people (which mainly meant upper class ladies) should mourn for particular relationships. These rules were intended to legitimate not personal feeling but the patriarchal family, thus ladies were expected to mourn more deeply for their husband’s father than for their own child. This patriarchal system was overthrown toward the end of the 19th century by precisely the same kind of upper class women who were suffragettes, fighting for the vote. They felt that mourning should reflect personal sentiment, not patriarchal family values. From them developed the twentieth century idea, rooted in romanticism (Ariès, 1981; Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1992), that grief (like love) should reflect not social convention but personal attachment, that grief is an inner feeling that should be private, protected from the scrutiny and gossip of others (Walter, 1999) - though it took several decades for this idea to permeate to lower social classes. We have seen, however, that social expectations about grief based on kin structures still exist and it is these expectations that DG evangelists challenge. It may be significant that, despite British scholars’
reputation for sociological research on grief, all the main writers on DG hail from the USA - the country most ideologically committed to personal liberty.

That said, there is within the covers of Doka’s (2002) classic edited collection some ambivalence about the appropriateness of grieving rules, with Brabant (2002) noting their presence in all cultures and Kaman (2002) acknowledging their functions. Other authors, however, having demonstrated that grief exists in a cultural context, then immediately pronounce this to be inherently oppressive (Reynolds, 2002). It is not coincidental that this is the majority position among the contributors to Doka’s book. Doka himself has done much to reveal the norms that govern grief, yet his choice of the word ‘disenfranchisement’ to describe the inevitable consequence of grief norms implies that we all should be working toward a world without any such norms! This is music to the ears of the vast majority of authors who have participated in the explosion of writing about grief in the late twentieth century, for they mostly subscribe to the idea of grief as personal feeling rather than social requirement. Indeed many argue that grief is so personal that there should be no rules about it. Those who write about DG, indeed most writers on grief, are moral entrepreneurs participating in a social movement to liberate grieving from all forms of social opprobrium, a movement that Lofland (1978) terms the happy death movement.

This is the first time in human history that a significant number of people have advocated a world in which no grief is socially regulated, and the jury is still out as to whether such a world is possible (Walter, 1999). We suspect it is not. This does not mean we do not ourselves support an emancipatory agenda, simply that anarchy (a self-regulating, rule-less social system), however attractive to utopians, is as unlikely to work in mourning as in most other areas of social life. But in the meantime, the concept of disenfranchisement has great rhetorical power within the politics of grief, and resonates with the commitment to anti-oppressive practice embraced by professions such as social work (Dominelli, 2002).

DG and clinical practice
Many writers on DG are clinicians who frequently work with clients whose experience of grief exceeds the hierarchical position allotted by their social network. The level of loss experienced or type of grief expressed is not fully acknowledged by some or all of their network. Describing this lack of social legitimation as ‘disenfranchisement’ carries a liberatory message from the clinician who wishes to validate the client’s experience. A more accurate sociological term would be to term the grief socially ‘deviant’, i.e. deviating from social norms (Becker, 1963), but this would not give the therapeutically required message of acceptance.

Reynolds, writing from experience within social work, states that many clinicians see their practice as empowering and emancipatory: ‘All clinical encounters are client-focused attempts at client empowerment’ (Reynolds, 2002). Doka and Martin (2010), however, indicate that many bereavement counsellors have actually disempowered clients who employ an instrumental style of grieving; clinicians have often attempted to socialise the client into an affective style which they believe - on the basis more of clinical lore (Wortman & Silver, 1989) than of empirical evidence - to be more therapeutic. Martin and Doka's work is important because it reveals how professionals intending to empower clients can in practice disempower them.

It is possible that clients might benefit if clinicians were to resist being seduced by the emancipatory rhetoric of terms such as DG and adopt more measured words. Clinicians might, for example, simply discuss with clients how their grief is disallowed or unrecognised by significant others. To this end, it could be helpful to
ask clients who in their social network recognises and who does not recognise their loss, that is, to explore the hierarchies underlying their own experience of disenfranchisement. Somehow, helpful and truthful ways have to be found to enable clinicians to move from the binary fiction to helping clients deal with a complex hierarchic reality of grief expectations.

**DG and research**

If DG is a powerful tool politically and and seductive clinically, what about its usefulness for researchers? It has been argued that, within social work at least, “researchers should seek to promote emancipatory research” and research agendas should "respect fundamental human rights". (Butler, 2002, p. 245) As we have seen, many writers on DG see the right to grieve as a human right. However, using DG as a concept within research can, if we are not very careful, get us into muddled thinking and poor research.

First, we have argued in this paper that norms about who should be mourned are hierarchical and not binary as implied by the concept of DG. Even writers on DG regularly provide evidence of the social legitimation of loss being more-or-less rather than either/or. When an individual’s grief exceeds their allotted place in the hierarchy, they may well feel disenfranchised. In other words, disenfranchisement refers to the individual's experience of deviating from social norms, not to the norms themselves. This needs a bit of unpacking. In everyday language, people and populations can be disenfranchised; grief and norms cannot. People – not norms or bereavement or grief - have the vote or gain (or lose) privileges. For example, people with Alzheimer's are typically disenfranchised, losing the right to drive or to go out by themselves (Beard & Fox, 2008). Grief emotions and behaviours cannot be enfranchised, but they can be legitimated, validated, allowed, accepted; and conversely, they can deviate from social norms or be stigmatised. Terms such as legitimated, validated, allowed, stigmatised, deviant (Littlewood, 1992) are of more use to the researcher as they are descriptive, and imply no ought.

Disenfranchisement is thus an experience, and possibly an objective reality, of certain persons. Normative hierarchies that legitimize some losses more than others are a precursor for the experience of disenfranchisement. And that experience may possibly be binary, either you feel your grief is fully acknowledged, or it is not, either you are content with the social support you receive or you are not – though that too needs empirical demonstration.

In conclusion, then, disenfranchised grief’s rhetorical power in the politics of grief should not blind us from questioning its value both, in clinical practice and as a tool for research into norms about who may mourn whom. Whatever its other merits, the concept of DG does rather little to help clinicians, clients or researchers understand norms about who should be mourned, for such norms are not binary but hierarchical. The rhetorical and emancipatory concept of DG thus needs to be supplemented by the empirically illuminating concept of hierarchies of loss.

This article has described a tool for identifying hierarchies of loss, together with the results of testing this tool with a small British sample. We hope other researchers may develop and use it with different and bigger samples in order to map hierarchies more comprehensively. In particular, we expect that hierarchies will become more complex and fluid as family relationships become, with time, more complex and fluid, along with the diverse sexualities that may underlie them.

Turning our rather academic critique of DG into practice guidelines remains a challenge. And whether it is empirically correct that other grief norms – for example,
about grieving styles, or whether certain people are able to grieve – are also
hierarchical rather than binary requires further research and possibly the development
of new research tools. In the meantime, we should beware being seduced by DG’s
emancipatory rhetoric into seeing what is not there in the client’s story or in the
research data.

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APPENDIX


Son by first marriage (14)  Mother (63)

Ex-wife, was married to David for ten years (41)  Grandmother (87)

Neighbour of ten years (72)  Best friend since schooldays (40, M)

Cousin, close friend since childhood (38, F)  Secretary of eight years and family friend (31, F)

Business Partner (35, M)

Daughter by first marriage (13)  Wife of four years (36)

Father (62)  Brother-in Law (brother of David’s wife) (39)

Aunt and Uncle, David’s godparents (51, 54)  Doctor (M), (54)
Elsie, aged 88. Widowed. Dies in sheltered housing, where she had lived for 20 years.

Son (58), married, two children. Lives far away

Sister-in-Law. Also lives in same sheltered housing complex (81)

Granddaughter (38), lives close by

Fellow resident, lived in adjacent flat for 15 years (84, F)

Son-in-law (64), lives close by

Twin sister (88)

Daily home-help (32, F)

District nurse, visited daily (47, F)

Daughter-in-Law (57). Lives far away

Best friend since childhood (83, F)

Fellow resident, lived in adjacent flat for 2 years (76, M)

Niece, visited weekly (53)

Brother, unmarried, used to live with Elsie (79)

Sheltered housing warden (48, F)
Martin, aged 10. Dies in a road accident.

Mother (34)

Step-grandmother (66)

Best friend (10, M)

Martin’s godparents (34, 36), parents of his best friend

Maternal grandmother (60)

Sister (9)

Step-mother of six years (35)

Step-grandfather (65)

Class teacher (33, F)

Sister (12)

Half-sister (4)

Driver of the car in the accident (not at fault in any way) (48, F)

Maternal grandfather (64)

Father, now divorced and remarried (40)

Childminder of eight years (40)
We thank Tara Bailey, Ian Butler, and Omega’s anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

To our knowledge, the first scholar to write about this kind of ‘dance’ and to attempt a social psychology of condolence was the eighteenth century economist Adam Smith (1976).

Further details of method and analysis are given in Robson (2002).

Although participants were specifically asked to rate grief on the basis of the person’s relationship to the deceased, the method could also be used to measure how much a character (such as a baby, or someone with learning difficulties or dementia) is deemed capable of grief.

Ongoing doctoral research by Tara Bailey at the University of Bath. Information about Mass Observation may be found at [http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm](http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm)

If the bereaved is a young child, then this relationship becomes ‘Primary attachment figure’.

For an example of how to analyse complexly interacting binaries of death attitudes, see Williams (1990).