

Perinatal grief and the social world of objects: (re)ordering the past, the present and the future

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.Supporting quotes from the interviews*

Consolidation

[...] this armchair is the only belonging of hers that I have, because I sat here [while pregnant] with her. I mean, I don't have any clothes she wore, I have the hand and footprints, but really I haven't touched them [...]
(Claudia, stillbirth)

Suspension

[...] it's all still there, I don't know what's going to be a memory or not, ... , I still haven't gotten rid of anything, I don't know, I mean, I didn't, I didn't put anything on him [...]. I don't want to rush into any decisions, because at the start there were a lot of decisions [...]
(Begoña, neonatal death)

Contraction

arriving home is, it's... so hard, because everything is ready to welcome a baby [...]. So we got home, eh, we got everything of hers together [...]. we put it in bags and that, we took the cot down and we took it to Cáritas [...]. He [the priest] asked us, "Is all this yours?", and I said, "No, all this is our daughters."
(Julia, stillbirth)

Expansion

now [...] it's a shamrock, because I realised I was excluding Juan [husband]. Because in reality there weren't three of us, there were four of us. [...] Now, what I have is a shamrock, one with four leaves. [...] I make them [from a type of felt] and I gave one to my sisters-in-law.
(Charo, neonatal death, twins)

*Interviews conducted in Spanish, quotes translated by the author

INTRODUCTION

Objects related to the baby (hand/footprints, photographs) are highly valued by parents and play an important role in bereavement, helping to affirm identity, continue bonds and processes of meaning making. The objective of the study was to **explore in greater depth the role that objects play in grief** in order to develop further understandings of the complexities of perinatal bereavement.

METHOD

11 **narrative style interviews** were undertaken with parents (3 couples and 8 mothers) whose baby had died following stillbirth, termination of pregnancy or in the neonatal period. Informed written consent was given prior to the interviews, which were recorded, transcribed and analysed using **discourse and qualitative analysis techniques**.

RESULTS

As parents tried to give meaning to death and reconstruct their lives, objects were found to play benevolent, ambiguous and malevolent roles, which presented different possibilities and challenges. A spatial and time based dimension is evident in the way parents:

- 1) **consolidate the material world, hold on to and protect valuable/benevolent objects**, often those related to positive or happy memories (past) of the pregnancy or those directly associated with the baby, often thought of as his/her 'belongings'. These objects are very diverse, and often surprisingly mundane, and are an important source of support, solace and continued bonds/presence. They also help to establish parental identity and personhood and provide resources for conversing about the baby and/or resisting social stigma.
- 2) **defer decisions about objects with ambiguous meaning**, i.e. those that have no strong place in the family's history or that aren't thought to 'belong' to the baby, but may still have some social value (e.g. a gift from a family member). Hence the postponing of action until meaning can be established.
- 3) **contract parts of the material world, i.e. getting rid of malevolent objects** whose meaning is too strongly associated with an absent future and whose presence is too distressing. In some cases these can be converted to positive objects, e.g. through donation.
- 4) **expand the material world through the purchase or fabrication of new objects**, which often occurs in response to problems or dilemmas presented by other objects and is strongly related to evolving meaning making focused on the future.

Many of these 4 actions often require collective negotiation and decision-making showing that grief and reconstruction has a strong social dimension.

CONCLUSION

(Re)ordering the material world is part of social and personal grief processes that are embedded in family histories and broader socio-cultural values. Objects are important because once invested with value they oblige social action (material and discursive) and provide resources for parents to take control of a disordered world and work towards the future while keeping parts of the past (letting go/holding on) firmly in the present.

Ethics: Ethics approval was not required from the principal author's institution (Universidad Complutense de Madrid) for non-clinical studies.

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