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Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder as Fetish

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Abstract

Though grief and loss have been normalized in mental health discourse, a particular class of bereavement remains as diagnosis- Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder. Discussion of this more complex and enduring condition is undertaken in what follows. The dynamics of grief and loss are discussed through this diagnostic category in light of the cultural and psychological concept of the fetish. Fetish serves substitution, evocation, and symbolization in many domains but is particularly relevant in the inertia associated with pathological grief. The complex phenomenon of significant loss and the concept of the fetish as substitution for/defense against complexity is provided.

Keywords: grief, inertia complex grief, fetish, deliberate and reflective process

Grief is endemic to human experience. In fact, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has removed bereavement from its formal mental health classifications because of its ubiquitous nature (APA, 2013). Loss is more accurately seen as a highly personalized experience defying symptom specification, stages, checklists, or classificatory system.

Nonetheless, mental health professionals have retained for themselves the right to specify what they call persistent complex bereavement disorder (PCBD; APA, 2013). The PCBD designation pertains to individuals trapped in the initial inertia associated with loss (Moules & Amundson, 1997).

Symptoms associated with this sort of persistent grief include longing for the lost object—usually a particular person—and strong, invasive emotions such as sadness, guilt, longing, anger, loss of motivation or energy, and cognitive inhibition or disinhibition (Jordan & Litz, 2014). As well, although there is not a specified period of grief per se, which differentiates PCBD from more normative response to loss, it is generally accepted that for longer than 6 and up to 12 months, the sufferer experiences the symptoms above, in conjunction with distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other areas of functioning (APA, 2013). It is, indeed, the unrelenting presence of symptoms that serves diagnosis.

In this article, PCBD is visited in the context of both the psychological and anthropological concept of the fetish. In this discussion, this state of prolonged grief is set in a phenomenological frame of reference. Such perspective elaborates upon the underlying dynamics and the “function” associated with this dysfunctional response.

Fetish as Anthropological Concept, Psychological Construct, and Beyond

In the popular discourse, fetish in psychology has been predominately associated with paraphilias. Paraphilias are longings and fixations, in an erotic sense, upon particular objects of desire. The subject is slave to the object, which exerts strong influence over the will and motivation of the individual. Select paraphilias are in fact observed as violation of the law, acts which invade the privacy and integrity of another. Others are more circumscribed and within the domain of relative civility and consensus. The intention here is less to elaborate the psychodynamic or behavioral description of these practices than to understand the nature of the associated fixation.

The fetish is described in the anthropological sense as an object of awe or reverence; a container of power and even protection (Frazer, 1993). As with the psychological construct, it is a substitution, the symbolic containment and replacement of one thing, for example fear, for another, such as protection or courage. Extended beyond the erotic or spiritual associated with psychoanalysis or Indigenous practice, however, fetish has been applied to political discourse and cultural studies (Apter & Pietz, 1993; Guibert, 2014; Matory, 2018). Marx (1867/2009)

used the concept of the fetish within economic theory. Consumption and the desire for particular objects associated with economic success, product names, or “that car,” “that garment,” “that role/status,” “job,” or “title,” and so on, reflect the condensation of power, meaning, and energy within an object (Veblen, 2009).

As well, linguistic fetishism deals with social definition or positioning in implicative meaning, the word or phrase representing more than its explicit content: value, longing, vision, and so on embodied in a particular word or phrase, reflecting symbolic rather than literal exchange (Baudrillard, 1981). In this sense, Kelly-Holmes (2000) spoke of the distinction between language as symbolic, or fetishized medium, and language as more utilitarian. Words or phrases such as “cancel culture” or “liberal” substitute utilitarian meaning for emotive evocation. Further exemplars are found in ethnic descriptors: one displays one’s social position in the use of terms that describe the other: “negro” vs “African American,” “Indian” vs “indigenous person,” “Latino” vs “Latinx,” and so on (House, 2003). This extension of the cultural and psychological definition of the fetish into the domain of politics, language, and the arts links fetish to bereavement as well. Nonetheless, it is with anthropology and psychology that this connection is best articulated.

The Cultural Fetish as Object of Power

The colonial history of the fetish originates in its connection to Indigenous culture and spiritual/religious beliefs (Pool, 1990). As with the premise here, when faced with uncertainty or change or related daily indeterminates, fetish emerges as defense against intra- or inter-personal distress (Kaplan, 2006). It represents a congregation of hopes, fears, beliefs, larger cultural/more personal narratives, and social congruence (Pietz, 1985). In unpacking these features and their place in a particular society, the pueblo culture of the American southwest offers an example.

The Zuni are an Indigenous population whose ancestral homeland has been the American southwest. Artistically, they are renowned for pottery creation and the Kachina doll—a depiction of the gods who keep our world in order (Colton, 1959). For our purposes, however, their fetishes are of interest—stone carvings representing the forces that guide and protect individuals. They are animals, each possessing, and embodying, select power and potential influence (Hamilton-Cushing, 1966). For example, The bear, associated with the Western direction as well as the color blue, provides strength, healing, and wisdom, especially during

times of transition and depression. Winter hibernation is a period of introspection for the bear, a time of deep thought and mental preparation.... The bear fetish symbolizes the immense power of all beings to adapt to change over time, like a bear in hibernation.... The hibernating bear also symbolizes the ability of every living creature to self-heal during personal times of rest and reflection.... In addition to its transformative healing powers, the bear's strength and courage also make him a protector of the Earth and guardian of the West. It is common practice for members of the Zuni tribe to leave a pinch of cornmeal under the nose of a bear symbol when going away. They believe that the bear will guard and protect the home in the owner's absence. (Kachina House, 2013, paras. 1–4)

Within this description is condensation: the evocation of multiple dimensions of emotional succorance, enhanced personal agency, and deference of the personal to something larger. Belief and investment in the symbolization—the granting of power to the object—reduces the cognitive demands of anxiety, confusion, uncertainty, suffering, or sadness, and can even evoke obligation and responsibility. Among the Pueblo First Nations people, the fetish is not prayed to in the sense one would pray to a saint, but rather is there to provide the resource sought, as long as the person seeking or in need is a worthy recipient. “Worthy” means demonstrating proper attitude, virtue, and deference. When there is not the courage, insight, patience, or relief the fetish is imbued with forthcoming; it is not the failure of the fetish but the lack of accountability in the supplicant. Hence, the object is both a means of relief and obligation. This distinction is important for it differentiates the cultural fetish from the psychological fetish. The former invites obligation and reflective intent whereas the latter represents a turning away.

Fetish as Psychological Concept

The *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (American Psychological Association, n.d.) has defined fetishism as

a type of paraphilia in which inanimate objects—commonly undergarments, stockings, rubber items, shoes, or boots—are repeatedly or exclusively used in achieving sexual

excitement.... Fetishism occurs primarily among males and may compete or interfere with sexual contact with a partner. (para. 1)

This definition is introduced here less as ingress to paraphilia and sexuality than to position the fetish as substitution, or partialism. It is an emphasis upon an object as substitution for the larger or the real, or a focus upon the lesser to avoid the larger. Freud, in his discussion of substitution, spoke of avoidance: the replacement of one thing for another (as cited in Zepf, 2012). Zepf (2012) described it as an action that puts aside or avoids something feared or otherwise unmanageable, spoken in psychodynamic theory as one of the many defense mechanisms.

The concept of the defense mechanism is central to classical psychology. Defense mechanisms help one cope with uncomfortable thoughts or feelings and are both functional and, to my point here, dysfunctional (Baumeister et al., 1998). In the latter sense, the problem is with engaging in particular habits of thought that promise satisfaction but no enduring relief. Post-Freudians have elaborated on this idea, describing what is essentially a cul de sac, where application of more of the same thought or behavior leads less to relief than to repetition of ultimately self-defeating behaviors (Weakland & Wendel, 1995). Think of compulsive eating or drinking, where the pursuit of satisfaction ultimately evokes mental, or physical, anguish. There is extensive literature on trauma and its contribution to these sorts of patterns: the use of anger, drugs, isolation, hyper-ideation, or activity to run from the anguish or anxiety associated with harmful historical events (Adelman, 2018; Gold, 2017). This situation seems all the more important when focus is upon the life narrative of the individual: to transfer the dynamics associated with substitution, defense mechanisms, and the life narrative through the medium of fetish to bereavement.

PCBD as Fetish

Personality and character lay the groundwork for PCBD—grief as fetish in service to avoiding the questions that loss, and especially death, pose. Where such characterological predisposition exists—life narrative, confusion, or disorientation regarding the internal and external response one suffers, and avoidance of anxiety at any cost—grief is empowered, carried like the bear fetish, as protection. The fetish reduces complexity and cognitive challenge to a simple formula. Where loss or tragedy has been seen as opportunity, as with posttraumatic growth (Calhoun &

Tedeschi, 2006), here it is the opposite. In the anthropological sense of the fetish, PCBD protects the bearer from exposure to the challenge associated with loss. Moules and Amundson (1997) have spoken of PCBD as inertia, even being frozen in time:

Suspended in unsparing light
The sloping gull arrests its curl
The glassy sea is hardened waves
Its waters lean through shining air
Yet never crash but hold their arc
Hung rigidly in glaucous ropes
Muscled and gleaming. All that
Should flow is sealed, is poised
In implacable stillness.
Joined in Non-time and halted in free fall. (Riley, 2019, p. 37)

Livia Soprano and PCBD

The HBO series *The Sopranos* was popular between 1999 and 2007. This award-winning show, involving a criminal syndicate and its grim family drama, provides an exemplar of grief as fetish. Livia Soprano, the mother of the protagonist, has lived a life of violent interaction with her husband and toward her children, on the periphery of violent crime. Angry and addicted to suffering and complaining, facing the mortality of those around her, actual and always imminent, and her own, she retreats to the self-defeating pattern of interest here.

Like the bear fetish above, grief is shown to be condensation in service to the needs of the character. In this case, Livia Soprano is familiar to the dramatic cluster of personality disorders: hard done-by in life (Akass & McCabe, 2002; Wolcott, 2018–2019). This pervasive theme is manifest in her grief response to the death of her husband, and her psychological loss of her children. Although the dramatic narrative illustrates the domestic abuse and violence that she suffered and inflicted in her marriage and her relationship with her children, PCBD as fetish emerges as a barrier to any such acknowledgment of that reality.

In fact, the personal life of suffering and complaint she lived then, in violence from her husband and toward her children, manifests now as suffering and complaint related to the loss of the violent man/violent mother then, saint(s) now. Her tears of frustration emerge in her proclamation of his sainthood and how good he was to her and her pronouncement of her own sainthood: “I gave my life to my children on a silver platter” (as cited by Guse, 2016, para. 10), only to be deserted and cast into the life of a “shut-in” (para. 1) in their rejection. Here, PCBD as fetish offers shelter from what Heidegger (1964) would see as the “not at home” experience, cast out into the world by the inevitable anxiety each person suffers when the door to their “home” is

burst open by realization of death.

Like the bear fetish, PCBD protects against primary anxiety, but unlike the bear, which would sponsor courage to go forward, this grief reaction strives to reconstruct previous existential defenses. PCBD becomes substitution through subscription or even addiction to suffering and complaint: inability to adapt to contextual demand and entrapment in behavior that “does not confer survival value” (Bateson, 1979, p. 178); i.e., adaptation to one’s post loss environment. Boelen et al. (2006) have identified three aspects in failed adaptation: inability to integrate loss into autobiographical history, negative and poor interpretation of grief reactions, and fearful avoidance (p. 109). In this triad are the essential disabling psychological features that open the door for PCBD.

Actuarial events are significant in setting the course of our lives; those experiences that have defined, and by which we define, ourselves (Pasupathi, 2001). Personal narrative, however, is also cause and effect in grief reaction, defining for good or for bad how we ought to interpret and manage the sensate, psychological, and social responses that arise in loss. Adaptation is essentially finding a home for feelings perhaps never experienced, as in the case example in the next section. Finally, avoidance of anxiety is like the Irish ghost, something that, if you run from it, will chase you forever. PCBD as fetish, then, is an attempt to avoid this anxiety, to run from it, and yet like all compulsions, there it remains.

Formidable Demand

In the opening paragraph, I stated that “grief is endemic to human experience.” PCBD as fetish gestures toward relief but places demand in equal proportion. As a normative experience, then, it is expected that, for most, grief will arrive, linger, impact, and then be assimilated into a life narrative. With PCBD, when inertia lingers, the emotions associated become fetish in service to the previous life narrative, difficulty with the psychological emotions involved, and anxiety.

As with Riley’s (2019) poem above, nothing moves.

Consider this case example: A mother presents for a psychological consult relative to the death by suicide of her son. She is distraught in that almost a year has passed, and she says she is still plagued by tears and sadness. She is employed as an administrator at a significant level of authority and accountability. Specification and process govern her success in that field, and so

have been evoked in the inertia of grief: that there is a right and specific protocol to be followed, and with such all shall be well. She details how she has followed the psychological recipes found in the literature and online, has attended grief groups and kept a diary, each day engaging in prescribed rituals of gratitude and reconciliation and so on.

The fetish here is reflected, and personified, in the mother's tendency to control and manage through protocol and precision. The urgency in such undertaking is consistent with her "go-to" role in other places in her life as problem-solver and person of efficiency. Application of the right procedures, however, and efforts redoubled to the point of emotional exhaustion, have not produced results; i.e., controlled the emotions she has suffered. The consumption of the menu of bereavement recipes provided by professional psychology and other experts has satisfied no real hunger. Although treatment proper is of less relevance here, freedom from the power of grief as fetish and urgency and the belief that a particular ritual would set her free was achieved through a change in that narrative. That essentially, it was okay for her to take her time and find the right place for sadness, anger, guilt, and the constellation of responses to the loss; that it was too important not to be put in the right place. Hence, all rituals to that point had been accidentally in service of not taking time to put it in the right place, the misplaced belief that such action(s) was the right place.

Formidable demand, then, is defined as deliberate and reflective action in the face of cognitive and emotional uncertainty. Returning to Heidegger, "It is only the concrete experience of the loss of meaning and therefore, in whatever form, a disturbed relationship with the world that raises the question... what is it all for? Why am I here?" (as cited in Ellenberger, 2020, p. 235). Instead of a self-soothing yet self-defeating ritual that avoids the tough stuff—as with Livia Soprano and the case of the grieving mother (the doing of something to avoid the doing of something else)—nonpathological grief is the ability to tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, and at base existential questions unanswerable: to avoid them as "appeal to a self-defined grasping of all our own possibilities" (Ellenberger, 2020, p. 238).

Years past, it was said that people got into messes when they chopped up the ecology (Bateson, 1979), meaning being willfully blind to how one thing leads to another, editing complexity in service to affect bias. As with the psychosexual fetish, the erotic elicitation of the shoe leads to a foot or leg, upon which stands a person and the formidable demand of person exceeds emotional management, so one stays with the shoe. Using religion as an additional exemplar, the

fundamentalist is in fact right: a particular tenet, and adherence, does “save” them. Psychology has demonstrated that religious affiliation—“spirituality”—is associated with resilience and well-being (Smith et al., 2012), although not necessarily as defined by tenets of a particular faith, at least in the sense that it protects or insulates or serves as the “foot” relative to the formidable demand of human existence. The individual is “saved” from the inherent complexity of the human condition, in general, and its evocation through death or loss.

Complexity in loss has been well defined. Stroebe and Schut (2002) described loss as involving multiple dimensions of the individual’s experience. This experience includes roles; identities; anticipatory projection; responsiveness to one’s own and others’ expectations; economic, social, and relational alterations; emergent responsibilities; reappraisal of representations of oneself and of the object of loss; and cultural, spiritual, and existential reflection. In death and loss there is a lot—perhaps too much for any of us all at once. Perhaps it will always be in proper dose that grief will be experienced: each aspect of significant loss taken in its own measure in its own time with each individual.

In contrast, however, is the fetish of PCBD. Robert Downey Jr. once told a judge, relative to his battles with cocaine, that using was “like I’ve got a shotgun in my mouth, with my finger on the trigger, and I like the taste of the gun metal” (as cited in ABC News, 2006, para. 7). This metaphor captures the paradoxical nature of PCBD as fetish: the pleasure of wrapping oneself in the contours of loss yet smothering in the comfort. In this choreographed suffering is a perverse joy; the same elation felt by Robert Downey Jr, or one who cannot stop eating though suffering satiation, or self-destructive physical exertion, or the rock star who suffers unto death with fame: a profound but self-defeating jouissance.

At another level, the inertia and adjustment to the taste of a smaller portion of grief (PCBD as fetish) interrupts rebuilding the house. As with any over-adaptation, or addiction, as larger reality and complexity threaten, effort is required to edge it out: whether in the litanies of denial as seen in Livia Soprano or in the urgent ritualization of the specified directives in the grief manuals, as with the mother who lost her son. Finally, this lesser portion denies any “poetic urge” (Rorty, 1991, p. 37): opportunity to create, invent, enliven, and drive personal narrative forward.

And, what might one bring to this task? Although many have speculated upon life after death, it would seem in the face of death the question will always be concern with life before death. Oishi and Westgate (2021) have provided a coda in this regard. In their research they have identified

not only positive affect- and meaningfulness-fulfilling potential—happiness—as cornerstones of a subjectively good life but also a third element. This third element they referred to as *psychological richness*, reflected in “openness to experience, curiosity, and affect intensity” (Oishi & Westgate, 2021, p. 17). Borrowing from literature and philosophy and their own empirical investigation, they described the limits to simple pleasure and meaning. In expanding upon this idea, they proposed that novelty and challenge are essential to greater well-being, that humans need stimulation beyond the regular, expected, or routine. And is this not what people are compelled to do at any length? Even in the most ordinary sense, there is the book that was read, the religious service that inspired, the sunset experienced, or the joy of companionship over a bottle of wine. As well, is this not the similar experience in the day-to-day vexations in life, the large and small defeats or challenges? However, Oishi and Westgate stated that novelty and challenge are either in service to clinging to what one has or wants to hang onto, leading to predisposition to grief as fetish, or in exploration and foraging for the new or novel.

Hence, as with successful aging, success with death is associated with a life well lived. But many of us are not so fortunate to have that life, and for us then we need courage to see that death reveals us to ourselves, and it is this revelation that may provide the essential distinction between bereavement as inevitability in life and the pathology of PCBD.

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