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Book reviews

***The Nature of Grief: The Evolution and Psychology of Reactions to Loss*; John Archer, London: Routledge, 1999. 317 pp. ISBN 0-415-17858-4, Paperback \$31.99**

Is Grief Really Maladaptive?

The Nature of Grief is so engagingly written, so well organized, and so authoritative that it is hard not to admire it even if, like me, you disagree with its central premise. In a series of papers starting in 1987, John Archer has developed a deep expertise and consistent position on the nature of grief. This book brings all of that together with his considered judgment of some 800 references. You would expect such a work to be plodding and dense, but he knows the material so well that he can find the perfect quote from Oscar Wilde or Elizabeth Barrett Browning to set the scene, the right statistic to make a point, and the right example to summarize a complex issue. Who would image that a book on grief would be a good read!

The chapters proceed logically, addressing the big questions in a natural order. His chapter on the history of grief provides a clear and interesting overview of past work, although it is mostly limited to the past century. The chapter on the biology of grief provides considerable evidence for both its universality in humans and its substantial cross-cultural variation, with a smattering of animal evidence. Subsequent chapters then describe grief in detail, using literary sources, engaging illustrations, and a solid review of grief scales and factor analytic studies. Such a wide-ranging perspective is, needless to say, rare and welcome. For a topic as delicate as grief, this approach maintains scientific rigor while providing a humanistic perspective that avoids a coldly analytical approach to this most personal and agonizing experience. The sections on theories of grief are well done, but the chapters on variations on the expression of grief are the strongest. He starts with demographic variables, and he argues that association of grief with reproductive value is a secondary effect of the closeness of attachment relationships, not an adaptation that detects and responds to reproductive value. In subsequent chapters, he reviews evidence on how grief is influenced by the kind of relationship with the deceased (specifically, loss of a child or of a friend), and the age and sex of the bereaved. All of this exposition is admirable. In fact, in considerable other reading on the subject, I have found nothing that compares.

However, there is a problem at the very core of Archer's analysis. When he addresses the central question of whether grief is an adaptation or an epiphenomenon, he concludes, confi-

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dently, that grief is “a maladaptation.” He sees grief as “a by-product of the way in which biologically important close personal relationships are maintained” (p. 62). This could, of course, be right, and to his credit, he reviews several suggestions about how grief might be useful and the evidence that convinces him that it is not. But his evidence on this crucial question is weak. First, he notes the increased mortality following bereavement. This finding has been somewhat suspect on methodological grounds, but even if the correlation was strong and consistent, any increased mortality rate might well result not from grief itself, but from other factors associated with the loss, such as moving, decreased income, changes in diet, etc. He further notes that some studies have shown that cortisol levels increase during bereavement, and that high cortisol levels may decrease immune competence. All of this makes a most tenuous chain to the conclusion that grief is useless. Finally, he notes that grieving individuals show decreased interest in sex and eating. But if such grounds demonstrate that grief is a maladaptation, then pain, fever anxiety, and the stress system would all also be maladaptations. They are not. People who have a fever tend to die more than others, function poorly in everyday life, and probably tend to be uninterested in sex, but we do not conclude from these facts that fever is useless. The conflation of defenses and their associated suffering with the problems that arouse them is an error that is as prevalent as it is serious.

Archer considers, and rejects, several functions that have been proposed for grief, including the maintenance of relationships in case the lost person returned, and that grief might elicit pity. In considering the Thornhills’ position on the benefits of psychic pain, he goes so far as to say that “Even for physical pain, the assumption that it must be functional is problematic” (p. 63), citing the existence of pathological pain syndromes. But this is irrelevant. Every defence can be expressed at the wrong time or excessively, and this is no evidence at all on whether the basic capacity is an adaptation or an epiphenomenon. The authority he cites on pain (Melzack) is very clear that it is an adaption, the strongest evidence being that people with a congenital inability to experience pain usually are dead by early adulthood. Archer finally considers Klinger’s seminal suggestion that depression functions to disengage individuals from pursuing incentives that no longer are available. The main difficulty with this, as he notes, is that a global decrease in motivation also prevents the individual from moving on to something else. If depression were just to disengage effort, it would be tightly focused on the enterprise that is not paying off, and it would be associated with increased energy and enthusiasm for other things. Unfortunately (at least we imagine that it is unfortunate!), we are not designed that way. Whether this is a misfortune resulting from the vagaries of natural selection, or a benefit whose utility we have not yet recognized, is a profound and important question.

Archer settles on the explanation that grief is the “cost of commitment” (a phrase from Colin Murray Parkes). He considers the possibility that organisms could have two systems, one for separation and another for death, but he rejects this, following Bowlby in saying that “separation is much more common than death in natural circumstances, and the mechanisms controlling the reactions are not sufficiently flexible to apply to one and not the other. Therefore, the maladaptive response to bereavement is the price to pay for the overall much more frequently used separation reaction. The costs involved in grief can therefore be viewed as a trade-off with the overall benefits conferred by separation responses” (p. 61). This is a plausible hypothesis that makes testable predictions. The first is that separation and grief reac-

tions should be the same. This seems unlikely. If you lose touch with a close friend who moves to another continent, you might well miss the person, but if later you learn that your friend has died, an intense new reaction is aroused. It also predicts that grief will be proportional to attachment, and that people who do not experience grief were not actually attached. From the substantial frequency of absent grief, this almost certainly is false, but little evidence has been analyzed with this hypothesis in mind. It also predicts that grief should reflect the degree of personal attachment. What then, are we to make of the national outpourings of anguish at the deaths of Princess Diana and John Kennedy Junior? Did media exposure trick our evolved mechanisms into attachments with them? Or is there something about the loss of a very attractive public person that arouses grief, irrespective of the one-sidedness of our relationships with them?

Perhaps most significant, however, is the untested prediction about the effects of blocking grief. It is not known for sure if antidepressants block or decrease the normal grief response; if they do not, other drugs may. If such agents are found, they will be widely used. Will this be wise? If Archer is right, then we can block the suffering of grief with impunity—it is, after all, unnecessary. If, however, aspects of grief are useful, then this interference with a normal process will be about as sensible as giving morphine to a football player who wants to keep playing despite having a broken leg. This is not the place to lay out all of my thoughts about how grief could be useful, but the situation of loss of a loved one is of vast adaptive significance, and a special state shaped to cope with that situation—by signaling others, by changing goals, by preventing further losses, by reassessing priorities and plans and other relationships—seems likely to be useful indeed. Conversely, someone who just goes about life in the same old way after such a loss would, to my way of thinking, almost certainly be at a disadvantage.

But I am not sure that I am right about this. Trying to test evolutionary hypotheses about emotional states is a devil of a business, one in which it is hard to even pin down exactly what we are trying to explain, where comparative evidence is difficult to come by, and our standards of evidence are fuzzy, to put it mildly. Furthermore, human minds seem to have a tendency either to see the body as a miracle of subtle adaptations or as a bundle of serious compromises and tradeoffs that often result in pathology. Then, they tend to defend whichever position they take. In this book, Archer does a far better job than most in outlining the positions, stating his own clearly, reviewing alternatives, and citing evidence. So my complaint is simply that he is too confident that he is correct, and that, like many others, he uses evidence to support his position, instead of presenting a balanced consideration of the state of the evidence and our ignorance. With all the other riches this book offers, this is a small complaint. Besides, he could be right.

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