

Interdependence in Death and Grief Among Hong Kong Chinese

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Introduction

Grief is a journey that all of us will eventually take (Leming & Dickinson, 1998; Wartik, 1998). The ways we grieve, on the other hand, are shaped by sociocultural factors and have significant variations across cultures and even individuals (Rosenblatt, 2001). It is important for us to understand the specific ways of grieving among Hong Kong Chinese so that culturally appropriate palliative service can be given.

The most consistent finding in cross-cultural psychology is that Chinese people are more relational and interdependent oriented as compared to their Western counterparts. Several conceptual frameworks have been proposed to describe this phenomenon. Examples include the interdependent-independent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and the individualistic-relational self (Ho, 1997). A detailed discussion of the above theoretical frameworks is beyond the scope of this paper, however a summary of the major characteristics of the interdependent/relational self versus the independent/individualistic self is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. The Conceptualization of Self

<p>The Interdependent- Independent Framework (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994)</p> <p>Interdependent Self (Eastern)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A flexible, variable self• Emphasis on<ul style="list-style-type: none">– External, public features such as status, roles, and relationships– Belonging and fitting in– Occupying one's proper place and engaging in appropriate action– Being indirect in communication and "reading others' minds" <p>Independent Self (Western)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A bounded, unitary, stable self• Emphasis on<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Internal abilities, thoughts, and feelings– Being unique and expressing the self– Realizing internal attributes and promoting one's own goals– Being direct in communication

The Relational-Individualistic Framework (Ho, 1995, 1997)

Relational Self

- Interdependent, not independent from one another
- The boundary between self and nonself is not sharply demarcated: the self is not distinct and separate from others
- Intensely aware of the social presence of others, actual, imagined, or implied

Individualistic Self

- The centrality of sovereignty of selfhood
- A sharp self-other demarcation and hence individual identity
- The self “belongs” to the individual and to no other person

Stimulated by the above frameworks, we began in early 2001 to examine whether there exists an interdependent-relational dimensional of death and grief that can enhance our understanding of the experience of Hong Kong Chinese confronting death and bereavement. In this short paper, I will outline the preliminary results of two on-going projects investigating death and grief in Chinese. One project is on death metaphors and the other is on grief reaction among Hong Kong Chinese.

Study on Death Metaphor

Figure 1 is the ancient Chinese character for ‘death’. It shows two persons, both experience *loss* - one lost his life and another a loved one. The loss stimulates a powerful emotion, called *grief*, within the survivor (Leming & Dickinson, 1998), and the socially constructed ways of grieving (presumably weeping besides the body of the deceased as depicted in Figure 1) is termed mourning in modern psychology (Parkes & Weiss, 1983). In one single character, this ancient Chinese character illustrates three important concepts related to death, viz. loss, grief, and mourning.

Another feature of the character (Figure 1) that attracts our attention is the relational nature of death. Note that the ‘picture’ focuses not only on the deceased but also on the reactions of the significant others. This relational, other-focused dimension of death namely, the concern about the adjustment of the survivors, is different from the Western conceptualization of death that emphasizes personal death (Simos, 1979) but is consistent with the interdependent relational framework mentioned above.

Figure 1. The ancient Chinese character: Death



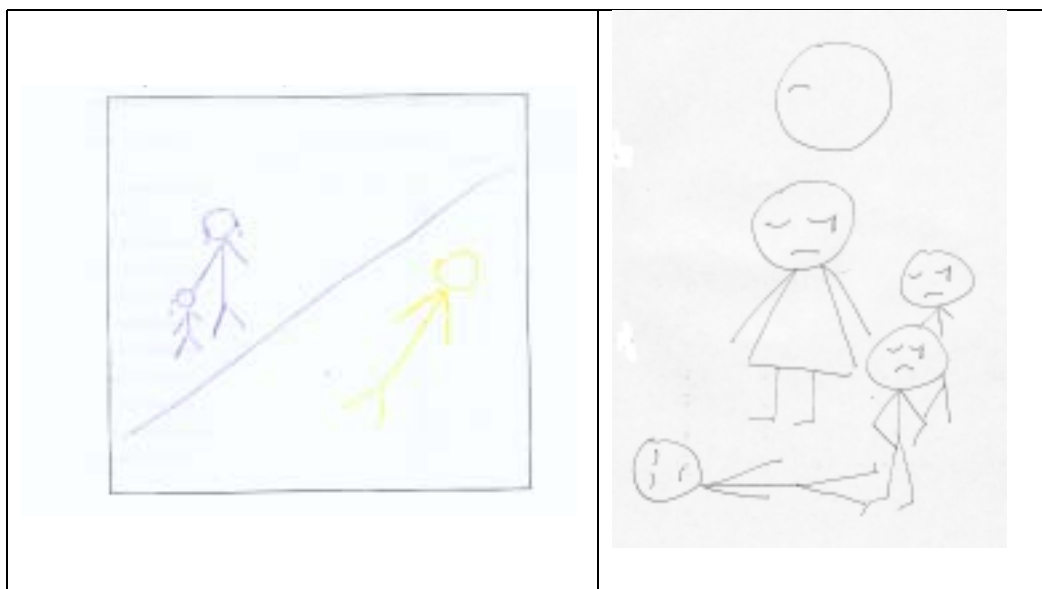
Based on the above observation, we began to study people’s drawings of their personal conception of their own death. Study on death images or metaphors is not new in thanatological literature. Ross & Pollio (1991) proposed that death metaphors may relay death concepts that are difficult to convey by spoken languages and that can better reveal

unconscious attitudes and anxiety towards death (McLennan & Stewart, 1997).

In early 2001, we started collecting people's drawings of their conception of their own death. In a conference, we asked 53 health care professionals to complete the Revised Death Fantasy Scale (RDFS) (McLennan & Stewart, 1997) and to draw a picture of their personal conception of their own death. The RDFS consists of 8 positive metaphors and 8 negative metaphors. Subjects were asked to rate according to a 5-point Likert scales (0 – not at all; 5 – quite well) the extent to which each metaphor described their images of death. Two subscores, Positive Metaphor score and Negative Metaphor score, were obtained. It was reported that the RDFS could successfully tap unconscious attitudes toward death (McLennan & Stewart, 1997).

The most relevant finding here was that 4 out of the 11 respondents (36%) with very high negative metaphor score (> 30) had drawings that could be categorized as interpersonal in nature (Ho, 2001). Some even resembled the ancient Chinese character of death as shown in Figure 1. Two examples of such drawings are shown in Figure 2. The other pictures among the high negative metaphor scorers depicted uncertainty and pain related to death. We believe that the relational-independent dimension of death may be an important theme related to death anxiety among Chinese that needs further exploration. Thus, when thinking about their own personal death, the anxiety related to fear of separation from significant others and concern about the well-being of significant others after their death may be prominent among Chinese. We are now in a process of modifying the RDFS to incorporate the interdependent-independent dimensions of death metaphors in the questionnaire and examine the relationship of these two dimensions with death anxiety among a sample of Hong Kong Chinese.

Figure 2. Examples of Relational Dimension of Metaphor



Study on Grief Reaction

The other line of research originated from a study to establish a grief assessment questionnaire for Hong Kong Chinese (Ho, Chow, Chan, & Tsui, 2002). In the study, we

found that the only culturally specific item - : “I do not want to abandon him/her” - that was not included in existing grief inventories developed in Western countries obtained the highest endorsement among the bereaved individuals. We believed that some more culturally relevant items should be developed before we could gauge the grieving experiences of Chinese. Subsequently, Tsui (2001) conducted a qualitative analysis of 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews and developed a pool of 183 grief reaction items. Tsui (2001) compared her list of items with several popular Western grief inventories including the Texas Revised Inventory of Grief, the Hogan Grief Reaction Checklist, the Grief Experience Inventory, and the Inventory of Complicated Grief. She reported that some items from her subjects were not covered in the existing inventories. Tsui (2001) then adopted the interdependent-independent framework to categorize her item pool and create a list of interdependent items not included in existing Western inventories. Examples of such items are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Interpersonal items of grief reaction Tsui (2001)

Roles/Responsibilities	Social relationship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would continue to uphold my responsibilities (我會做好自己本分) • I have to maintain this family (我要繼續維持個家) • I would try my best to carry out his/her wishes (我努力為佢完成遺願) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would feel I had no one to rely on (我覺得好似冇依靠) • I would worry that others would be affected by my grief (我會擔心自己會影響到其他人) • We support and respect each other (我同其他家人互相體諒支持) • I would pretend to be strong in front of others (我響人面前佢裝堅強)

** Interdependent items are defined by those items with a focus on roles and social relationships after the bereavement experience*

We are now planning to administer this item pool to a group of community subjects and to try to establish a shorter grief inventory with both interdependent and independent oriented items. We shall then try to establish a predictive model of grief among a sample of bereaved individuals.

Conclusion and Implication

In conclusion, our findings so far provide initial support for the existence of an interdependent-relational dimension to grief among the Hong Kong Chinese. Future research should explore the dimensions of interdependent grief among Chinese as well as the association between interdependent grief and psychological adjustment. We believe that palliative workers should address the client’s concerns in relation to the surrounding context that shapes the client’s behavior, experiences and sense of self rather than focusing solely on the intrapsychic experience (Yeh & Hwang, 2000). In addition, the primary sources of self-esteem for individuals with a strong interdependent self-construals are connecting with others and fitting into the social system (Singelis, Bond, Sharkey, & Lai, 1999). Helping bereaved individuals to retain or reconstruct roles (functional and social) as well as to integrate them into the social network should be beneficial.

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