

The grieving killjoy

Bereavement, alienation and cultural critique

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Published in:
Culture & Psychology

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.1177/1354067X20922138](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X20922138)

Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Kofod, E. H. (2021). The grieving killjoy: Bereavement, alienation and cultural critique. *Culture & Psychology*, 27(3), 434-450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X20922138>

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The grieving killjoy: Bereavement, alienation and cultural critique¹

Abstract.

In recent years, a range of scholars have put forth critical analyses of the consequences of the ideals of happiness, future-orientedness and productivity which dominate contemporary Western cultures. The experience of grief – with its sadness, preoccupation with the past, and lack of initiative – is inherently at odds with such ideals. This conflict between grief and cultural ideals of happiness are reflected in the recent efforts within bereavement research to delineate pathological mourning from uncomplicated, normative mourning. While the latter is characterised by a gradual decline in emotional pain, sadness, lack of initiative etc., complicated mourning is marked by a failure to meet normative standards for recovery. In this article, I will draw on loss experiences among bereaved parents in contemporary Danish society in order to shed light on how profound losses may catalyse estrangement from and opposition towards what has been termed the happiness imperative of contemporary Western societies. More specifically, I borrow the figure of *the feminist killjoy*, paraphrased as *the grieving killjoy*, as a lens through which bereavement experiences may be theorised and understood as a starting point for experientially driven cultural critique.

Keywords: bereavement, grief, happiness, positive psychology, feeling rules, cultural critique.

¹ Author version accepted for publication. For published version, see: Kofod, E. H. (2021). The grieving killjoy: Bereavement, alienation and cultural critique. *Culture & Psychology*, 27(3), 434-450. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X20922138>

Introduction: The cultural turn to happiness

“Oh Happiness! our being's end and aim!
Good, pleasure, ease, content! whate'er thy name:
That something still which prompts th'eternal sigh,
For which we bear to live, or dare to die,
Which still so near us, yet beyond us lies”
Alexander Pope (1688-1744), *Epistle IV* (Pope, 1828).

Across different times and places, happiness has been conceived of as a significant good in human life. For Aristotle (1976), happiness was the chief good – that “which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this)”, as he famously states it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (book I, 2). However, the conceptions of what happiness is have changed significantly from the times of Aristotle up to contemporary time. While happiness for Aristotle was defined in teleological terms, based on universal characteristics of the function or purpose of human beings, contemporary conceptions of happiness slide towards subjectivism and moral relativism. Today, happiness is largely understood as a subjective state of mind, and likewise, the pursuit of happiness is seen as a highly individual endeavour. In spite of the subjectivist approach to happiness, insofar as the *content* of each individual's happiness is thought to stand outside the realm of morality, happiness *itself* is nevertheless a prevailing moral ideal in contemporary society.

The cultural *turn to happiness* (Ahmed, 2010b) is a phenomenon which is visible practically everywhere: in global happiness indexes, in the blooming discipline of positive psychology, in positive journalism, in political initiatives to increase the happiness of the population, in the proliferation of self-help books, magazines, blogs, TV programs and websites concerning how to be happy, and so forth. Happiness is a global industry of measurements, hopes and promises, and its psychological, cultural and political appeal is immense.

In this article, I will analyse bereavement experiences in light of this recent turn to happiness. I will start by addressing how contemporary conceptions of (and preoccupation with) happiness relates to recent developments within our culture towards troubling grief, which is perhaps best illustrated by the recent introduction of diagnostic categories for prolonged or complicated grief in the world's leading diagnostic manuals (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2018).

Next, I will analyse experiences of bereaved parenthood within this cultural framework. Drawing on interview data from a qualitative study of loss experiences among bereaved Danish parents², I argue that experiences of profound loss and suffering may create a sense of alienation from the cultural pursuit of happiness. I will chart how these experiences of being estranged are linked to the most often tacit and pre-reflexive, yet nevertheless powerful normative feeling rules which mediate affective regulation in social encounters (Hochschild, 1979). As I attempt to show, happiness seems to be a guiding principle in shaping these feeling rules, insofar as the duty to be happy challenges the right to grieve.

Finally, I will show how these experiences of estrangement may in turn give rise to resistance against and cultural critique of the perceived happiness imperative. For this endeavour, I borrow the feminist scholar, writer and activist Sara Ahmed's

² The data are thematically selected from an ongoing qualitative research on bereavement experiences among Danish parents, affiliated with a larger research project [name of research project hidden for anonymized review]. The research design includes a total of 15 informants (3 couples and 9 individual informants) who lost a child between the age of 0 and 24 years of age. The interviews have been conducted by the author, mainly in the homes of the informants. Each couple or individual informant have been interviewed for a total of approx. 2-4 hours. The interview guide developed to structure the interviews is based on an epistemological interest in exploring the cultural, situated and normative aspects of bereavement experiences. In a series of selectively conducted follow-up interviews, interview questions were designed with the aim of elaborating emerging themes from the first round of interviews. The verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were subjected to hermeneutical analyses, simultaneously informed by (1) the original research questions, (2) themes emerging from repeated reading and re-reading of the empirical data, as well as from (3) reading of academic and popular literature on grief and suffering. For further elaboration of the development of design and interpretation of individual and couple interviews, see Kofod (2017).

(2010) figure of *the feminist killjoy*, paraphrased here as *the grieving killjoy*, as a lens through which we can understand this process of estrangement between bereaved individuals and the contemporary culture of happiness.

Affectivity as a culturally and materially mediated phenomenon

In arguing these claims, I am informed by a theoretical line of work emphasizing the embodied and extended aspects of affectivity, i.e., how affective phenomena are scaffolded and mediated by socio-cultural and material practices and artefacts (see e.g., Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; Griffiths & Scarantino, 2009; Krueger, 2014; Slaby, 2014). From this perspective, grief cannot be adequately grasped as an inner mental state or process. Instead, we need to take into account the ways in which specific historical, cultural and material conditions of possibilities enable and restrict how we grieve (Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018).

Hereby, I want to draw attention to how affective regulation in bereavement is mediated by the normative practices of everyday life. As the German philosopher Jan Slaby (2016) argues, affective phenomena—spanning from emotional categories with specific intentional contents, such as grief or shame, via pre-intentional, pre-reflexive intersubjective affectivity, to unspecific moods, affective atmospheres, etc.,

“are never merely matters of ‘internal mental states,’ nor just narrow ways of being affected, but usually encompass sequences of *active engagement* with the world, usually in highly social and relational ways” (p. 3, italics in original).

To illustrate the point, imagine being at the funeral of a beloved deceased, and how your affective responses to this loss is mediated not only by your relationship to the deceased in a narrow sense, but also by the social scripts connected to the specific situation and location you find yourself in (such as the normative expectations connected to being a mourner at a funeral, social feeling rules concerning how to grieve etc.). Furthermore, you find yourself responding to situational cues imbued with preexisting meanings, such as the solemn organ music, the expressions and condolences given by the other attendants, the minister’s sermon on the deceased’s

life, and so on. While you may undoubtedly feel overwhelmed by grief in this situation, my argument is that this cannot be reduced to a causal reaction to any of these situational circumstances. Instead, my claim is that our affective responses as well as our more reflexive enactments of grief are mediated and scaffolded by the complex composition of normative practices and material artifacts that are entailed in the situation. In short, our affective responses – as part of our minded being in the world – “is organismically embodied, contextually embedded, and environmentally extended and distributed” (Brinkmann & Kofod, 2018, p. 161).

The directed nature of affective phenomena places them in the field of normative evaluations, insofar as they can be assessed by the extent to which they realize the purpose of or holds significance to “what is ultimately at issue and at stake in the domain,” as Slaby phrases it – the latter also being open to normative evaluation and negotiation (Slaby, 2016). Slaby emphasizes the dialectical relationship between individual subjectivity and our socio-cultural reality, i.e., how our subjectivity and personhood simultaneously shape and are shaped by our “in-medias-res human sociality” (Slaby, 2016, p. 9). This is a point that echoes the cultural psychological notion of mediation as a process that simultaneously shape and are shaped by the intentions they carry (Brinkmann, 2016). Such a position asserts a radical unity between the normative and performative aspects of human practices and subjectivity, insofar as “[norms] exist only as concretely enacted and situated, while there are no acts which are outside the ambit of social rules and normative patterns” (Slaby, 2016, p. 8).

For the present purpose, I want to address how grief is enacted in specific social situations, i.e., with particular focus on what Slaby (2014) has termed the *synchronic scaffolding*, or “occurrent, ‘online’ shaping of emotional experience by direct coupling and continuous interaction with the environment” (p. 40). However, I propose, such scaffolding is conditioned by the diachronic scaffolding “by cultural frames, scripts [and] templates” which shape the feeling rules at play in any particular social situation (Slaby, 2014, p. 40). In the following, I will outline how cultural norms of happiness have come to play a crucial part in the shaping of the feeling rules that mediate and scaffold bereavement experiences and enactments in our culture.

The science of happiness

As Sara Ahmed (2010) points out, the science of happiness which has gained ground within the recent decades rests on a set of fundamental assumptions: Firstly, it rests on an implicit assumption of happiness as indisputably *good*. From Aristotle, via Kant, to modern philosophy and psychology, happiness has been depicted as a universal longing. Happiness is something we all want and wish for – albeit we do not necessarily know exactly what this something looks like. In her historical account of happiness, Ahmed sets out by suspending this notion of happiness as necessarily good. Drawing on feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, she points to how we tend to use descriptions of happiness as a defence of certain situations – e.g., when the figure of the happy housewife is used to “[erase] the signs of labor under the sign of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 573).

Secondly, the science of happiness rests on a belief in the possibility of *measuring* happiness (and accordingly, we might add, of measuring misery as well, which is exactly what is aimed for in the diagnostic approach to grief which I will return to in the next section). In contrast to the Ancient Greek conception of happiness as *eudaimonia*, which designated a virtuous life, contemporary happiness studies to a large extent equates happiness with “feeling good.” Attempts to measure happiness, then, becomes a question of *finding objective means for measuring subjective states*.

Furthermore, the science of happiness rests heavily on the utilitarian principle set forth by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century, according to which morality is defined as a quantitative measure of happiness (Crimmins, 2019). Hereby, promoting what causes happiness becomes a moral obligation, and consequently “*happiness itself becomes a duty*” (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 7).

The moral legitimacy of such an imperative rests on a premise of individual agency, that is to say, the assumption that happiness is a *choice*. As Ahmed points out, the etymology of the term happiness points back to a more fatalistic conception: the root of the word, hap, implies contingency, as in “happen”. Happiness, then, once designated something contingent, something that may – or may not – *happen* to us,

much equivalent to chance, luck or fortune. In contrast, the depiction of happiness as it is expressed within contemporary positive psychology does not merely leave chance out of the equation – it defines it against it. In the words of Mihály Csikszentmihályi (2008),

“Happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather on how we interpret them. Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person” (p. 2).

Happiness, then, is determined not by external conditions, but by internal choices. It is suggested that happiness depends on the individual’s ability to cultivate the right mindset of positivity, self-efficacy, determination and resilience, i.e. through learning to *choose happiness*, regardless of his or her life circumstances.

Furthermore, to understand how happiness becomes a duty, it is necessary to stress the *social* and *promissory* nature of happiness. The social nature of happiness pertains to how one person’s happiness depends on other people’s happiness. However, Ahmed stresses that the terms of this conditionality are unequal: “If certain people come first – we might say those who are already in place (such as parents, hosts, or citizens) – then their happiness comes first. For those who are positioned as coming after, *happiness means following somebody else’s goods*” (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 56).

Ahmed further suggests that happiness involves an end-oriented intentionality, not only in the sense that we can be happy *about* something, but also in the sense that we come to describe certain things and situations as happy by imagining them as causes of happiness. Happiness, then, takes the shape of a promise: “if you do this or if you have that, then happiness is what follows” (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 576). By means of this anticipatory causality, we are directed towards what we are taught to be causes of happiness, even before we encounter them as such. Think for example of how little girls have been taught to imagine their future wedding day as ‘the happiest day of their life’, and how nonconformity to this cultural expectation is

dealt with.³ As Arlie Hochschild (1979) notes, we tend to align our emotions with the affective expectations of social situations. Even so, there is a potential gap that opens a room for alienation and disappointment: of not being amused by what we ought to be amused by, of not feeling what we ought to feel vis-à-vis a certain situation or object. In such situations, we are thrown back at ourselves: ashamed, individuated and alienated from the shared affective atmosphere of the social situation.

Happiness and the troubling of grief

The experience of grief – with its sadness, preoccupation with the past, and lack of initiative – is inherently at odds with the cultural pursuit of happiness. When happiness is transformed, first from possibility to right, and subsequently from right to plight (Ahmed, 2010b; Bruckner, 2011), suffering is increasingly seen as an adverse and fundamentally unnecessary, meaningless condition, which threatens the individual's right and plight to be happy and fulfilled. The cultural quest for happiness translates into a corresponding obsession with eliminating suffering through risk management, prevention and treatment. As the British sociologist Nikolas Rose (1998) phrases it, the task is no longer to endure suffering, but to reframe it, to manage it as a challenge and stimulus to the powers of the self (p. 159).

Of course, one may argue that bereavement is a condition which may create a room where expressions of sadness and mourning are indeed socially sanctioned. At least since the 1970s, Western cultures have undergone a transformation towards feeling rules that do not merely allow for, but also encourage, emotional expression of grief (Walter, 1999). In previous works, I have argued that grieving in contemporary Western cultures is imbued with normative uncertainty, i.e., the normative

³ The latter is brutally illustrated in Lars Von Trier's film *Melancholia*, where the utterly unhappy and melancholic main character Justine, played by Kirsten Dunst, is confronted by her uncle at her wedding day with the question "Do you have any idea how much this party has cost me?", after which she reluctantly accepts his proposed deal to be happy (Transcript from *Melancholia*, retrieved July 11th from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1527186/characters/nm0000662>)

expectations surrounding grief are heterogeneous and often conflicting (Kofod & Brinkmann, 2017). However, I believe we would be mistaken in assuming that the heterogeneity of contemporary grief culture implies that “anything goes” in bereavement. Rather, normative heterogeneity creates its own demands on affective regulation – for people in grief as well as for those around them: How intense and for how long is one expected to express grief? Is talking about the loss helpful or harmful for the bereaved? Under which circumstances and how is it acceptable to talk about grief and loss? However, in contemporary bereavement research and popular culture, these questions are increasingly framed as questions concerning health and well-being. In spite of grief’s existential and cultural significance, the majority of contemporary bereavement research is firmly grounded within the health sciences. Next to pathological effects of bereavement, resilience and so-called post traumatic growth are some of the most researched topics in contemporary research on loss and trauma (see e.g., Bonanno et al., 2001; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001). In popular discourse, mourners are expected to recover from loss within weeks or months (Penman et al., 2014). With the removal of the bereavement exclusion criteria from DSM-5, depressive reactions following bereavement may now be diagnosed as major depression as early as 14 days after the loss of a loved one (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the present study, several of the participants stress the necessity of invoking “the right to grieve”, hereby indicating that this is not granted without prior social negotiations.

In a broader perspective, the widespread proliferation of heroic narratives – not only of sportsmen, adventurers etc., but also of people in suffering, grief and illness – testifies to a strong wish to believe that happiness and success are matters of personal will. In these heroic tales, the sufferer is positioned as a fighter who conquers hardships and gains wisdom, strength and a deeper kind of happiness and gratefulness towards life. In this light, continued suffering and grieving without closure becomes a failure – a failure to transform hardships into victory; a failure to choose happiness.

This conflict between grief and cultural ideals of happiness are perhaps most clearly reflected in the recent efforts within bereavement research to delineate pathological mourning from uncomplicated, normative mourning. While the latter is

characterised by a gradual decline in emotional pain, sadness, lack of initiative etc., complicated mourning is marked by a failure to meet normative standards for recovery. The pathological mourner remains preoccupied with the loss and continues to suffer. As described in the diagnostic criteria, she may be tormented by feelings of sadness, guilt, anger, denial, blame, emotional numbness, feelings of having lost a part of herself, difficulties with accepting the death, or with engaging in social activities (World Health Organization, 2018). Briefly put, a person suffering from prolonged grief disorder or complicated mourning is quite a miserable and unhappy figure. What I want to address here is not the legitimacy of such a diagnostic description, but rather how it is connected to the prevailing happiness imperative of contemporary culture. Following Ahmed (2010), I will proceed by examining the consequences of the cultural preoccupation with happiness from the perspective of “those who are banished from it, or who enter this history only as troublemakers, dissenters, killers of joy” (p. 17). In this story, the grieving subject is positioned not merely as a victim of unfortunate circumstances, but as a culpable *killjoy* who not only ruins her own chances of happiness, but also, by embodying loss, suffering and sadness, threatens the happiness of others. By examining this story from the vantage point of the mourner, it becomes evident that being in grief often involves being in conflict with, alienated from, or excluded from the shared efforts to create a happy atmosphere. In the words of Sara Ahmed, the killjoy,

“spoils the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 65).

Killing joy: Grief’s entry at the table of happiness

In similar ways, the grieving individual might be conceived of as a killjoy who, by expressing grief and not being amused, happy, or hopeful, is seen as a threat to the joint pursuit of happiness. A grieving individual who cannot be amused by what those around her are amused by becomes a stranger and an outsider in the affective community she used to be part of. Instead, she may be drawn towards revisiting her pain, she may be amused by gloomy jokes, or by sharing experiences with other sufferers. All in all, she is not aligned with what is conceived of in our culture as

good. She is not aligned with the promise of happiness. Bluntly put, the grieving killjoy is a misfit at the table of happiness. Whether it is intentional or merely by virtue of her bad fortune, she poses a threat to the good atmosphere. She “encounter[s] the world as resistant” (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 11), she feels alienated from the world and from other people. In the following, I will take you through a series of different modes of killjoy experiences articulated by the bereaved parents I have interviewed.

I will begin by addressing how the mere *reality of the loss* involves a risk of being positioned as a killjoy and a stranger in many social situations. Prior to *how* the bereaved individual enters into a social situation, she reminds others of what there is to be unhappy about. As such, the loss itself is a hot potato that needs to be dealt with in order to preserve and repair the affective atmosphere. In many situations, this will involve considerations of whether to be a killjoy or not. Lene⁴, for instance, one of the parents I have interviewed, expresses it like this,

“If you’re at a party, you need to take stock of the situation. Okay, I *am* a killjoy, right? It’s no fun to talk about, is it. Should you bring it up or not?”

Of course, it is not always possible to choose whether or how to manage the position as a potential killjoy. As Christian describes the following situation from a dinner with a group of new fellow students,

“Often it happens that the attention is moved away from – I mean, all of a sudden, you become the centre of attention. I tried once at a dinner party, where I was sitting and chatting with the guy next to me. I didn’t know him. I didn’t know anybody there, really. And then he does this thing where he starts questioning me, and then I answer him. And as I answer, I suddenly have twelve men sitting around the table staring at me. That’s okay, I can deal with that. But that’s not really what they were all there

⁴ The names of the participating parents are changed for reasons of confidentiality.

for – to hear about my tragedy. In those situations, I am a bit uncertain about how I should deal with it.”

His wife Maja fills in,

“Yes, because you don’t have an intention of stealing the picture or ruining it all, do you.”

Although Christian says he can handle the sudden attention his story leads to, he emphasises the inconvenience of bringing it up in this situation. His wife’s comment underlines what is at stake: by potentially stealing the picture or downright ruining it all, the loss poses a threat to the good atmosphere of the social situation.

Therefore, efforts are made to avoid this from happening or to repair the atmosphere when the loss has brought it down. For example, Maja describes the following situation from a friend’s bachelor party,

“There too I ended up ruining the good atmosphere, right? Because they asked about it [the loss]. [...] And then there was... absolute silence. For a moment. But they were good at handling it. So, they just asked about it all, and then we talked about it for a while, and when we’d done so for ten minutes or so, the conversation moved on to something else. So, it went well. We came out of it in a good way. We moved on and got the mood up again.”

What Maja describes here is how the loss itself poses a threat to the good atmosphere, and also how they take joint efforts to restore it and “come out of it in a good way.” To the extent that Maja is a killjoy here, it’s not a position she has chosen or embraces. However, this is not always the case. We’ll return to Maja in a moment, but first I want to address what may happen when the mourner and his or her social surroundings are unable or unwilling to cooperate in restoring the good atmosphere. First, let’s take a look at how one grieving killjoy, Karin, describes her altered way of being in the world after the loss of two children (a stillborn baby and a handicapped son who died at 11),

“I feel like there is always this... black cloud. I always- I don’t have that spontaneous joy and- I used to be - I used to be someone who laughed a lot and made jokes. And I am not that person anymore, because it is always with me.”

Karin moves on to describe how her altered way of being in the world following these profound losses have put her at odds with her surroundings,

“When [...] it is New Year’s Eve or summer party or whatever, then I’m not invited, because I’m the killjoy. I’m the one who ruins the party. [...] And it’s kind of unfair, right. It’s just because I’m not at the same... I’m just not ‘there’. And it’s not... I’d *like* to be there. And I’m actually having a good time. But I obviously bother the others. But I’ve thought about it; then I feel like they’re just not the right people. So, now I don’t see them anymore. [Because] I think, it’s got something to do with not accepting how I feel. It’s not like I sit and cry, right. I behave as if everything is fine, but I don’t sit and yell or laugh and drink and, ‘ha ha, did you see what he did?’, and such.”

In other words, Karin’s presence represents such a huge threat to the festive atmosphere that it results in exclusion and social withdrawal. She is alienated and excluded from the good company because she is a killjoy. Although she tries to behave as if everything is fine, she is a killjoy, because she is unable to contribute to the joint efforts of creating and maintaining a happy atmosphere.

These demands align with an expectation to “deal with” grief in certain ways in order to regain happiness, functionality and health. Such expectations may be more or less explicitly expressed by the mourners’ social network, as well as being internalized ways of making sense of one’s own struggles of learning to live with the loss (see also Kofod, 2015). As for the latter, Lene gives the following account of her futile attempts to “solve” grief in the time following her son’s death,

“To begin with, I went to a crisis psychologist, a psychiatrist, a [regular] psychologist, and a psychologist with my daughter... I got massages and healing and... finally, I just had to face... it doesn’t help. He’s gone. He’s

dead. No matter what I do. It was as if I were trying to fix it. And I just couldn't."

Other times, the demand to "fix it" is not internalized, but rather perceived as an expectation from the mourner's surroundings. Mikkel, a man whose first child died in stillbirth, expresses it in the following way,

"What has been most frustrating, I believe, is that you get the sense that, although it's not straight forwardly expressed, that you are avoiding the cure for it... I mean, like 'How can you just go about in your state when there is a *cure*... when you could just go and talk to a psychologist and be cured?' Because I *cannot* be cured. (...) It goes on for the rest of your life."

Reclaiming the killjoy

For the most part, I believe it is fear to claim that being a killjoy is no fun, and understandably, mourners – often in collaboration with those around them – try to find ways to mitigate the damages caused by grief's entry at the table of happiness. However, this constant work of smoothing over and trying to fit in does not come without a price. Tina, for instance, describes how her attempts to involve her story of loss into everyday conversation at her workplace fails, and hints at the detrimental consequences this has for her,

"If children were the topic of the conversation, which it was practically all the time, I could say 'Jasmin loved such and such too', and then it became totally quiet, and I was like... I mean, I couldn't mention- or, for instance, they may ask, 'what did you do this weekend', and then I said, 'I've been to this grief arrangement and it was wonderful!' You know, and then they became totally... 'Listen, it was fantastic. For *me*. Because I've actually shared something that's a huge part of my life with somebody who know what it's all about.' But it kind of stopped there. And that meant that I eventually stopped mentioning Jasmin very much. Which is terrible for me, actually. It was an evaluation I made because I found it *so* stressful to deal with. Because it created this weird atmosphere,

and then I felt that I ought to say ‘well, it’s not *that* bad.’ But it is, though.

So it was a hopeless situation to be in.”

Notice how the atmosphere is not brought down by Tina’s expressed mood, but rather by the loss itself, which then brings Tina in a position where she is urged to reassure her colleagues that it’s “not that bad”, which of course it is.

Taken together, acting as if everything is fine, watching out and wrapping up, presenting an unbearable truth in a manner that doesn’t make your dinner partner break down crying, as Christian expresses it at one point – adds up to a sense of alienation vis-à-vis the joint project of maintaining a happy atmosphere.

The sense of alienation puts the mourner in a difficult dilemma: By trying to meet the implicit feeling rules of the social situations, the sense of alienation and emotional distance between the mourner and her social world increases. On the other hand, breaking the rules also comes with a cost, which Karin’s case clearly illustrates.

And then what do you do? Often you just stay away – or are kept out, like in Karin’s case. Especially from the parties, where the expectations of cheerfulness bordering on silliness is highest. Sometimes, however, a willingness to take on the position as killjoy arises: to ‘reclaim’ it, so to speak, to allow oneself to challenge and disturb the good atmosphere by directing the attention towards what there is to be unhappy about. Instead of trying to conform, the killjoy may begin to actively resist the social expectations of contributing to the shared pursuit of happiness. Let us return to Maja, whom I quoted earlier for “not wanting to steal the picture or ruining it all”. Later in our conversation, Maja explains how she has changed her mind regarding whether she ought to protect other people (primarily people in her the periphery of her social network) from being confronted with her loss and grief. When her husband, Christian, says that he doesn’t “think it is fair to put people in a position where they are confronted with it”, Maja responds,

“I’ve been thinking the same for a while, but I have actually changed my mind. Because I think it is necessary for the society that we get better at

talking about things. I don't think it helps anything that we go about and wrap it up. I believe it's good that people sometimes are confronted with it. [...] Not because it is our duty to educate people like that, but I think... we've come a bit too far away from reality in some ways. People do actually die."

Maja moves on to describe how she – especially in the first months after the loss of their son – were unable and unwilling to meet the expectations of recovery she perceived from others,

"I think people are used to a kind of politeness... they ask how you are, and then, even though you're in deep mourning, you may say 'I can manage' or something like that. Then it's kind of closed, so we can move on. But in the first many months, I was not ready to close it, so if people asked, they got an answer. And then I could say, 'I feel awful,' or 'It's really difficult, I am miserable.' And then they had no idea what to say."

Such violations of the feeling rules contribute to shed light on the rules we normally take for granted, and thus do not pay attention to. Hereby, the breaches also open up a space for resistance and cultural critique. As Arlie Hochschild (1979) points out,

"One can defy an ideological stance not simply by maintaining an alternative frame of a situation but by maintaining an alternative set of feeling rights and obligations. One can defy an ideological stance by inappropriate affect and by refusing to perform the emotion management necessary to feel what, according to the official frame, it would seem fitting to feel" (p. 567).

Although I have primarily focused on the collisions between the sadness of grief and the contemporary happiness imperative, I do not claim the existence of a general prohibition against grief's sadness. Indeed, the clinical lore of contemporary Western grief cultures seems to encourage expressions of sadness as a necessary path towards the resolution of grief (Walter, 1999). In other words, sadness is indeed welcomed, albeit confined to certain "appropriate" expressions

and settings. Mikkel, for instance, explains how his network has reacted to his anger after the loss of his son,

“I’ve felt influenced – *pushed*, I’d rather say – by Nina [his partner] to talk about it more. And to seek help. And I think that’s because I’ve... I’ve expressed anger. But I haven’t taken it out on anyone, although, of course, it’s not nice for her that I’m angry. She gets upset by my anger, but I’m not mad at her. I don’t direct it to anyone who’s innocent. (...) And I haven’t had a problem with it myself. I mean, I’ve felt very clearly that it’s a reaction I am entitled to have.”

Like sadness, anger too challenges the normative understandings of grief, insofar as it – perhaps even more than the sadness – poses a threat to the cultural pursuit of happiness.

Breaking the feeling rules can be experienced as a more or less volitional act, or as more or less reflectively enacted. Karin, for instance, describes how she simply “*can’t* laugh at what [other people] are laughing at.” On the other hand, the extent to which she intentionally challenges the feeling rules by being a killjoy seems to be imbued with reflexivity,

“ I use energy not to start lecturing about the importance of life. I could easily become the one who constantly says, ‘we shouldn’t use our time on these things.’ I can sense this ‘oh, here she goes again’, right. So you must constantly... You must contain yourself all the time.”

When asked whether there are situations where she allows herself to express her sense of alienation, she answers affirmatively: “Yes, sometimes. Not always. It depends on how much energy I’ve got.”

Tina too expresses a conflict between an urge to challenge the good atmosphere and to protect herself from such confrontations. On the one hand, she feels prompted to confront others with the recognitions her loss has given her,

“When you’ve tried to lose someone, it’s like, ‘listen, you don’t know what will happen tomorrow. Would you please appreciate that you’re really lucky,’ right? When you haven’t tried to lose someone, then you might sometimes take things for granted. And that provokes me. This seriousness, right, that follows you for the rest of your life. When you’ve tried this, you know something, right?”

On the other hand, she states that she usually remains quiet in order to protect herself from the costs of challenging the feeling rules. However, her acquaintance with other bereaved persons gives her courage and inspiration to express her critique more openly.

Being a killjoy is undoubtedly a lonely struggle, and therefore, it is not surprising that finding others in the same position can be empowering. Hence, reclaiming the killjoy may also include finding joy in connecting and identifying with other killjoys. Indeed, the critical potential of Ahmed’s killjoy figure is inherently connected to political and collective practices of consciousness-raising (Ahmed, 2010b, p. 53). While the grieving killjoy depicted in the present analysis is portrayed as an alienated and rather solitary figure, the sharing of killjoy experiences opens a space for such consciousness-raising. If we were to explore in further detail the critical potential of the grieving killjoy, communities of mourners would probably be a place to start (for analyses of how such communities may be sites of resistance against dominant cultural norms of grieving, see e.g. Kofod, 2019). Just like feminist killjoys may collectively refuse to “[erase] the signs of labor under the sign of happiness” (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 573), communities of grieving killjoys can refuse to erase the signs of grief’s labor under the signs of happiness and grief’s resolution. Although this may take more than a grieving friend or partner, the very awareness of a community of other grieving killjoys may create a space for identification and agency. The significance of such identification is illustrated in the following transcript from my interview with Karin, where I ask her to describe how her friendship with another bereaved mother differs from other friendships,

“It’s very, very different. Because she’s also the one I laugh the most with, actually. And black humour too, that other people probably wouldn’t understand. I mean- I believe she’s one of the most important persons to me today. Besides my children, of course. (...) If I say to her, ‘Today... I just can’t. I simply can’t go on anymore,’ then she says, ‘no, of course you can’t’, right? While others say ‘why not? You just need to get back in the saddle again.’ (...) People really *want to* do something – so that you can go to work tomorrow, so that you don’t go to bed and cry... But that’s just how it *is*: you *do* go to bed crying sometimes. And that’s how it *should* be. I think. For me. And she gets that.”

Through the mutual recognition of each other’s suffering, killjoys may find the courage to reclaim their right to grieve. Paradoxically, finding a place where the inconsolable nature of suffering is recognized, may actually be consoling and relieving (Klass, 2013; Kofod, 2019). Finally, there is a space for laughter.

Final remarks

To wrap up, how shall we interpret these findings in light of the current cultural conditions for grieving? To be clear, what I am suggesting here is not that grief being a difficult emotion to deal with socially is a new phenomenon as such. Indeed, grief and mourning have always been subjected to normative rules and regulations aimed at preserving societal order, and integrating the dead as well as those bereft by death into society (Walter, 1999). What is new, I believe, is how the promise (and imperative) of happiness permeates everyday life through a vast array of practices aimed at improving, treating, managing, and transforming the pain of grief. Consequently, grieving individuals are no longer merely seen as someone who by virtue of their loss and sadness may be unpleasant or difficult to be around. Instead, they are increasingly met with an expectation that this is something they could and should deal with, if necessary, through professional help. What is new then, I believe, is a cultural ethos founded on an equal share of concern for the wellbeing of individuals, and an omnipotent belief in our ability to cure human ailments and guide people onto the path of happiness, regardless of their life circumstances. The grieving killjoy is a killjoy not only by virtue of her sadness and misery, but also by her distrust in the promise of happiness. The distrust in the

promise of happiness should not be confused with a straight-out rejection of happiness per se. Rather, I propose, profound loss challenges the notion that happiness is granted by *choice*. Happiness, like sadness, grief and loss, is something that may – or may not – happen. Finding a space for letting it happen requires that we give space for unhappiness *as well* as happiness at the social table. When mourners and other sufferers take on the position of killjoys, they may eventually contribute to create such a space for others to join. I will let Sara Ahmed have the final words,

”There is solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness, even if we do not inhabit the same place (and we do not). There can be joy in killing joy. And kill joy we must, and we do. In sharing our alienation from happiness, we might also claim the freedom to be unhappy. We might even claim a certain wretchedness” (Ahmed, 2010a, p. 592).

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