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Continuing bonds from a discourse analytic perspective

Abstract: *The aim of the article is to contribute to the existing literature on continuing bonds with a deceased relative by exploration of discursive dimensions of the bonds through which the survivors construct their relationship with the person who died. The data come from five interviews with family members who survived the suicidal death of their relative. We argue that a focus upon the form and content of the survivors' stories offers a complicated and heterogeneous picture of 'bonding actions'. And so, assuming a constructionist view of discourse, we show two kinds of bonds. First, it is a bond related to social expectations of bereaved families. Second, it is a personal bond, part of which is a bond with a reverse direction, established and maintained by the deceased person.*

Key words: *bereavement; continuing bonds; discourse analysis; qualitative study*

Introduction

Continuing bond is usually understood as a presence of an on-going inner relationship with the deceased person by the bereaved survivor (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Field, Gal-Oz & Bonanno, 2003; Schut, Stroebe, Boelen & Zijerveld, 2006; Stroebe, Schut & Boerner, 2010). It originates in 1990s (see: Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996; Stroebe, 1992) as an alternative to models of grief which assumed that the purpose of grieving was to relinquish ties to the deceased in order to make new attachments. The concept of continuing the bond with the deceased was based on the observation of bereaved people made by Klass and his associates (1996; see also Stroebe, 1992). They observed that the bereaved not only continually seek to gain an understanding of death, but also maintain a connection with the deceased. Thus, they argued, the bond does not have to be broken in order to 'complete' the process of grieving.

Over the past years the model has been systematically developed. Stroebe and Schut (1999) integrated the Continuing Bond Theory with coping with bereavement and proposed the Dual Process Model, which in turn was developed by Gerhardt in the context of death of a child (Gerhardt, 2003). The continuing bond was studied also in the contexts of parental loss (Christ, 2000; Christ, Siegel & Christ, 2002; Silverman, Nickman & Worden, 1992;

Silverman & Worden, 1992), spouse loss (Field et al., 2003) and sibling loss (Packman, Horsley, Davies & Kramer, 2006). There are quantitative scales (Field et al., 2003; Neimeyer, Baldwin & Gillies, 2006; Field & Friedrichs, 2004) which are used to explore various strategies and types of bonds used by the bereaved in continuing the connection with the deceased as well as to study its associations with different conditions (Field & Filanosky, 2010; Boelen, Stroebe, Schut & Zijerveld, 2006).

It has also been stressed that continuing the bond may be maladaptive under certain conditions (Field, 2008; Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe, 2005; Fraley & Shaver, 1999). And so, some researchers link (mal)adaptiveness to the form of the bond. For example, Field and co-authors (1999) argued that maintaining a bond via deceased person's belongings usually entails avoidant forms of coping, while those who maintain the bond via memories showed greater acceptance of death (Field, Nichols, Holen & Horowitz, 1999; see also: Field, 2008). Other studies refer to individual differences, usually the attachment style. Stroebe, Schut and Boerner (2010) argued that an insecure attachment style is linked with unhealthier bonds and poor adaptation to loss. Field and Filanosky (2010), on the other hand, explored externalised continuing bond expression that involves illusions and hallucinations about the deceased and they showed its positive association with complicated grief symptoms and poor adaptation to bereavement.

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Another type of continuing bond expression involves mental representation of the deceased as an internalised secure base and as such is positively related to personal growth (Field & Filanosky, 2010). Neimeyer and co-authors (2006) were also interested in individual variables, but they relate them to the ability to make a sense of a loss. Finally, there are studies focused on external environment like the circumstances of the death (unexpected or expected loss), which shows that unexpectedness of loss is usually linked to complicated grief and poorer bereavement outcomes (Barry, Kasl & Prigerson, 2002; Stroebe, Abakoumkin, Stroebe & Schut, 2012).

What is crucial from our point of view is that all the studies mentioned above understand the continuing bond as an intrapsychic state, located in the mind of the bereaved person (see: Klass et al., 1996; Schut et al., 2006; Valentine, 2008), using traditional quantitative psychological instruments. In our research we follow Klass' (1996) statement about the need to include community, cultural and political narratives in our understanding of continuing bond and we want to look more at the social dimension of the continuing bond by analysing the narratives about the bonds through which the survivors construct their relationship with the deceased, using qualitative discourse analysis.

Aims and assumptions

In this article we are interested in contributing to the theory of continuing bonds by drawing attention to their discursive dimension. We want to find out whether the continuing bond is a homogeneous category or whether the narratives suggest its more nuanced picture. In what follows, we explore how the bonds with a deceased relative are discursively constructed by the surviving family members. We focus in particular on the agentivity in the narratives. That is to say, we are interested both in the kind of 'bonding actions' that are represented in the stories as well as the extent to which the narrators construct themselves responsible for the actions. First, we discuss stories in which the speakers refer to either an individual or a group of people, and not the narrator her/himself. Second, we show those stories in which the speakers talk about themselves. These two kinds of stories offer a complicated and heterogeneous picture of 'bonding actions'. We end with a discussion of the bond constructed through the agency of the deceased relative.

Methodologically, our analysis is rooted in the constructionist view of discourse and is a version of the Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993; Barker & Galasiński, 2001). We assume that social reality is constructed through and within language and that every language use designed to represent reality necessarily entails decisions as to which aspects of that reality to include, as well as decisions as to how to arrange them. Each of these selections carries its share of implicit assumptions, so that the reality represented is ideologically constructed (Hodge & Kress, 1993, p. 5). It is also through discourse (i.e. practices of representation) that language

users constitute social realities: their knowledge of social situations, the roles they play, their identities and relations with other social groups (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). No text, spoken or written, represents reality in a neutral or objective way, representation is never of reality 'as it really is', rather reality is always viewed through the tinted lens of ideological assumptions (Fairclough, 1992; Barker & Galasiński, 2001).

We adopt Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as we are primarily interested in practices of representation in the discourses they use. In contrast to other strands of discourse analysis (such as Conversation Analysis or narrative analysis), CDA is capable of accounting not only for lexical choices but also for grammatical forms, as well as larger syntactic and textual patterns, thereby becoming a tool in understanding how people construct their experience and their identities, and relate them to the social reality in which they live. In such a way we shall be able to demonstrate how continuing bonds with the deceased are constructed in the accounts of their relatives.

We focus here upon the form of stretches of discourse identified for analysis (see below), with an interest both in the semantics and syntax of an utterance, as well as the functions of what is said within the local context. The analysis draws upon Halliday's functional linguistics where the lexico-grammatical form of utterances is foregrounded as a resource for constructing meaning (Halliday, 1994, p. 15). Here we explore the ideational function of what the informants said, i.e. we are predominantly interested in how they represent extralinguistic reality. But we also focus on the content of what is said, relating it to the larger socio-institutional context in which it is used, using a hermeneutic-like interpretation of discourses in terms of the context in which they were submerged (see Titscher, Meyer, Wodak & Vetter, 2000). In such a way we attempt to reach the ideological underpinnings of the participants' experiences.

In this article we are interested in the discourses (practices of representation) our informants drew on when they spoke to us. We want to discover "discourses of continuing bonds", the ways in which the concept is made social through the process of narrating a relationship with a relative who killed her/himself. In such a way we set aside the issue of the representativeness of the data. We are not trying to make a claim as to the extent the research is representative of the narratives and relationships people narrate. Rather, we are interested in uncovering the discourses underpinning stories of such relationships. Making an assumption that people's discursive actions are rooted in social practices, we are uncovering the practices that people use when talking about their deceased relatives. Even though we cannot answer the question of how dominant these practices of representation are (that could be done in further, quantitative, research), the data we collected, however, is to be seen as pointing to a particular social phenomenon that has hitherto not been discovered.

The study

The article is based on five interviews with the family members who survived the suicidal death of their relative. The participants were: three daughters (aged 51, 53, 54), a son-in-law (aged 55) and a granddaughter (aged 24), all with secondary education. The interviews were recorded between September 2010 and May 2011 in a town in the south west of Poland, five years after the suicide. The conversations were focused on the day of the suicide, the deceased relative before his suicide and the informants' lives afterwards, including the relationship with the deceased after his death.

All participants gave informed consent to the interview being recorded and analysed discursively with anonymised fragments of the interviews used in academic publications¹. All informants were given at least 24 hours to consider participation in the study. The procedure was as follows. The informants were approached with an initial request to take part in the study (which was described as focusing on experiences of families whose member had committed suicide) and given the time to consider participation. Subsequently, they were contacted again and, if agreeable, an appointment for an interview was arranged. The procedure resulted in five members of the family declining to take part in the research.

The mean duration of the recorded interviews was approx. 43 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting approx. 24 minutes, and the longest – approx. 62. They were digitally recorded and transcribed. All personal and other information which could lead to revealing the identity of the informants was removed in the transcription. The analytic procedure was as follows. After the transcription the data were thematically coded with the use of qualitative data coding software (MaxQDA). In the process fragments that constructed a relationship between the informants and the deceased relative were chosen for further analysis. The analysis focused upon grammatical, lexical as well as narrative patterns in the data. The analyses were carried out by the authors independently and this article is a result of agreed results of these analyses. Importantly, the analyses were based on the Polish data, however, for the purpose of this publication the analysed data were translated into English.

For space in the article we present only the translations of the fragments. We realise of course that by doing so, we deprive the data of the richness of much fuller transcription that was carried out. It is impossible to map the paralinguistic features of the Polish originals onto their English rendering. However, we would like to offer those readers who are interested the opportunity to access the original data. They are available from the authors. We aimed for translations which are as close as possible in structure and format to the Polish originals, at the same time, trying to render the 'flavour' of what was said. This sometimes results in 'bad' or 'disjointed' English. Indeed, sometimes the translations may be ambiguous and thus barely understandable. This is a reflection of the Polish texts.

Displaying our bonds

Let us start the analytical part with a discussion of stories in which the informants either referred to a group they were part of (with the use of the pronoun 'we') or they spoke of another person. But there were two kinds of stories of the sort. In the first group (Extracts 1–3) the fragments contain what Halliday calls material processes, that is to say verbs referring to stereotypical actions, such as making, changing, happening, or, simply, doing (discussions of representation of processes can be found in Halliday, 1978, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In the other group (Extracts 4–6) the speakers use verbal processes – those that refer to broadly understood actions of speaking or communicating. First, consider the fragments in which the informants spoke of doing things:

- (1) My mother-in-law is constantly going to the cemetery. She puts up the lights. So that is ok. Thank God, she remembers to do it.
- (2) They were going to visit the grave every day.
- (3) I take my mum to the cemetery, so she sits by my father's grave.

Alternatively, in the extracts below, the informants talk about speaking:

- (4) Often. Often. We remember him. We talk about him. We say a lot about what he used to do. What he was like. And what for example he would have done at a particular moment or for example we say there is a problem, we talk about this problem. And one child or another said that the granddad would probably have said this or that.
- (5) We often talk, very often about it. Very often my daughter dreams about him. She for example analyses the dream. Very often she remembers him. And even such a stupid case. He had his patron's day, so my daughter called, mum, when you are at the cemetery, please give granddad my love. It is a little funny, but he is still present in our life.
- (6) We often also remember granddad with my mum and my brother during, when we do, tears and despair appear somehow.

There are two points we would like to make with regard to these stories. First, surprisingly, the speakers do not use any mental processes, that is to say when speaking of a group or a third party, our informants made no reference to thinking or feeling. The speakers never spoke of groups' emotions. Even in extract 6, closest to describing the family's emotions, the speaker chooses first to speak of talking, and then he only speaks 'tears appearing', once again avoiding to speak of emotional states by using a material process. In fact, we have only

found one single instant in which the informant chose to say that members of the family ‘think’ about the deceased person.

The flip side of this, second, is that the actions that these narratives represent are, so to say, safe. Going to visit the grave, talking, putting up lights are all actions which are to be expected of the bereaved family. They might also be seen as an indication of potential emotional anguish the family members might be in.

We see two potential sources of such stories. As we mentioned referring to social conventions related to bereavement – they focus on external signs of bereavement: visiting or talking. Speaking of emotions directly might be face-threatening, possibly too personal. The stories might therefore be testimonials of the bereavement duties the family performs. After all, apart from dramatic situations, perhaps, no one can actually see whether you grieve or not. But talking of visiting the grave, sitting by it, or even just talking about the deceased member of the family, our informants might be providing ‘evidence’ of the bond. Their stories might well be stories of fulfilling social duties towards the deceased (e.g. Aries, 1985). Let us end this part of the discussion with two fragments.

- (7) They think a lot about granddad. I also think and as much as possible I go to the cemetery, when the time allows.
- (8) and my sisters also go. From time to time they change flowers. They change the lights. It’s the father, after all.

Extract 7 is the only example of referring to the thinking of a group, which we mentioned above. What is interesting is that the thinking on its own seems not to be enough. It must be supported by a ‘real’, palpable action, one of visiting the grave. The other extract, (8), shows well the socialness of the commitment. The statement – “It’s the father, after all” shows the social demand to take care of the grave. One does not leave the father’s resting place without attendance.

Now, we have also found two stories in which our informants talked about lack of such actions as described above:

- (9) about the father –in-law, at least when I am at my mother-in-law’s, one does not speak about the father-in-law.
- (10) But generally, nobody mentions, at least when I am there, nobody talks about it.

The most interesting aspect of these extracts is that in contrast to the ascription of agency in the narratives we discussed earlier, in these stories the speakers chose not to ascribe agency, and used the impersonal form of the verb. It must be noted that although we rendered the form using the English ‘one’, the Polish original does not have

the linguistic subject. Instead, the verbs are in the reflexive voice (absent in English), which dilutes agency – we do not know who does not talk, and, moreover, it constructs the lack of action as a sort of social rule.

And so, while positive actions of bereavement are unambiguously ascribed to those who perform them, lack of care, commitment, or bond are not ascribed to anyone. No one is responsible for not talking, it is just the way things are. Our argument here is that the linguistic representations of the commitment to the deceased person can be also be seen as a social obligation, for example, to tend to the grave. As much as our informants offered us stories of the ‘continuing bond’ with their father or grandfather, they also offered us evidence that all that is supposed to be done, is done.

My bond

Now, things are very different when the stories focus on the speaker themselves. Here we heard confessions of a significant involvement with the relative who had died. Consider first a longer story:

- (11) now when my father died I bought gold earrings for myself. And the earrings were like a symbol which simply, I decided that they simply would be a memento of my father. And I always put them on, these earrings and when for example I feel sad, or something, I don’t know, I talk to my father for example, perhaps it’s a bit, but the earrings are a huge symbol for me how I feel bad, when I feel kind of, so I always put them on, this is a memento and at this moment I feel better, I mean good in the sense that I don’t know, for example, it seems to me that I establish a spiritual contact with him, that I simply talk to him, maybe I talk to myself but I think I talk to him.

There are three significant aspects of this story. First, the story of the earrings cannot be seen as ‘evidence’ of the bond outside the context of the story. The speaker described a sort of ‘private’ action that, unless one is informed about it, cannot be construed as remembering her father. The speaker talks about putting on the earrings as a means of keeping in touch with her deceased father. It is her own way of maintaining the relationship. It is reinforced, second, by the use of verbal processes – also here the speaker shows herself as actively communicating with her father. In contrast to the stories of groups where people talked about the deceased relative, here the speaker talks to him. In such a way, she explicitly establishes contact with him. Finally, the informant introduces references to her mental and emotional states. Although it is quite marginal in the story, in our view it is significant as also here she represents them in agentive terms. In such a way she ‘establishes spiritual contact’.

This story shows the ‘continuing bond’ not so much as something that happens, but, rather, it is a relationship which is actively managed by the surviving relative. Notably, this was typical in the stories we collected:

- (12) I prefer, as I say, to talk to him and to look in the sky and to talk to him. I don't have to be at the cemetery. Because for me he is everywhere, I simply feel safe by him, I feel that if I have a problem or something like that, I talk to him.
- (13) So I go to the cemetery and I talk to him. I sit by the grave. I put up the light. I cry sometimes.
- (14) I mean it's less so at the moment, to be frank. I very much like going to the cemetery to sit by the grave. somehow to analyse previous issues.
- (15) I like to think and to analyse such things alone and to be with my father on my own. And I don't want to and I don't talk about this.

These extracts are similar in form and content to the one we have just discussed. They are dominated by verbal processes with the speaker positioned as the agent, taking responsibility for the conversation. What is significant in these extracts is that both the behavioural process (weeping) and the mental processes (thinking, analysing, feeling, preferring) all also have the speaker as the doer. So, when our informants focused on themselves and their individual relationship with their deceased relative in their stories, they chose to construct themselves as responsible for the relationship. These are stories of establishing, continuing and, to an extent, managing the relationship with the relative who died. The relationship is constructed in terms of verbal and mental processes, all of which have the speaker as the one performing the verbal and mental actions. The mirror image of this personal bond is one constructed from the point of view of the deceased relative.

His bond

In this section we would like to show two stories in which the relationship with the deceased person is constructed from the point of view of the person who died. Here are the fragments we have found:

- (15) I think that I talk to him and it's like he watches over me. All the time. I go somewhere for a trip, we go, I put on the earrings, because I know he is always with me. I look in the sky, a star shines, because we always set off in the evening and I have a feeling that my father is by me and he simply watches over me all the time.
- (16) Such a conversation helps me, in every respect it helps me, I think he warns me about things. This is how I take it.

The experiences of the relatives from the above extracts can be described as Post Death Contact (PDC) (Kalish & Reynolds, 1976) or sense-of presence experience (Bennet & Bennet, 2000; Martwit & Datson, 1997). It is a feeling of the bereaved that a deceased person is reaching

out to contact them. As such it is connected with the continuing bond as a way to maintain the connection with the deceased. Researchers approach this phenomenon from a different point of view and, for example, they study its manifestations (e.g. Klugman, 2006; Field & Friedrichs, 2004), circumstances (e.g. Conant, 1996) prevalence (e.g. Rees, 2001) or feelings related to it (e.g. LaGrand, 1997).

As we focus only on the linguistic form of the stories, what is significant for us is that in these two extracts the bond of thinking, feeling, talking to the person who died is constructed as reciprocated. As might be expected, the statements about the person are qualified and spoken with a certain hesitation. The speakers stress that things seem to them or perceive things in a particular way. Regardless of the culturally required caution, the deceased person is constructed to be an agent in a number of processes such as watching, warning, or being there (we realise that we stretch the analysis somewhat by ascribing agentivity to what appears to be a relational process, yet, given the intentionality connoted by 'being by me', we think that it is plausible). In such a way the bond with the deceased is constructed as a two-way relationship. What must be stressed, however, is that this relationship pertains firmly to the sphere of the 'personal bond'. We have found no evidence thereof in the stories of families or other groups of people.

Discussion

In this article we aim to contribute to the existing literature on 'continuing bonds', that is to say a bond between the surviving relatives and friends of a deceased person. By employing a qualitative discourse analysis, we suggest that the category of 'continuing bonds' be considered not so much as a homogeneous category, but, rather, as a more complicated set of relationships which should also be seen in terms of the social and cultural context in which they operate. Moreover, we suggest that focusing upon the stories, both their form and content, can be informative in unpicking 'continuing bonds'.

Basing on discourse analyses of stories of relationships with deceased relatives, the main argument we have developed here is that our informants construct two kinds of bonds. First, it is a bond related to social expectations of bereaved families. We see these expectations particularly in terms of social displays of mourning (e.g. Taylor, 2009; Neimeyer, Prigerson & Davies, 2002). Even though on the decrease (Bauman, 1998), in today's Poland, there are continuing expectations as to what families should and should not in bereavement. Public displays of mourning such as black clothing or black ribbons are still common, as are expectations of visiting and tending the deceased relative's grave.

The stories which we have analysed at the beginning of this article are, in our view, a reflection of such expectations. The bond the informants construct is more a result of the society's expectation of the bereaved family to mourn and remember. These are stories of what we would call a 'social bond'. This bond is different from

that we discussed on the basis of stories which construct the informant as emotionally involved with the person who died. These stories are different not only at the level of content, but, crucially, at the level of linguistic form. In contrast to the construction of a remembering group, the informants talk about themselves, taking their own subjective position. This is a construction of a personal bond. Part of it is a bond with a reverse direction, showing the bond as established and maintained by the deceased person.

However, we want to make a reservation. The interviews were conducted with family members who experienced the suicide death of their relative. Although we assumed that suicide bereavement does not differ from bereavement by other causes of death (Barrett & Scott, 1990; Muller & Thompson, 2003), we are mindful of studies which suggest that suicide bereavement is related to the feelings of shame, blame, guilt and stigma (e.g. Jordan, 2001). Our results may therefore be seen as resulting from the kind of bereavement our data were based upon. Potentially loaded with such emotions, the family members may well have decided to display appropriate mourning practices. However, without further studies we can offer no further comment. So, although the study highlights an overlooked aspect in continuing bond literature, it opens space for further studies, both quantitative and further discourse analytic in-depth exploration of the stories of the bond with a deceased relative.

Our study aims to offer a new perspective on continuing bonds, one which is based on a micro discourse analysis, focusing upon ways in which relationships with a deceased person are constructed in a narrative. Moreover, we also propose narrative and its workings as a significant source of data on the continuing bond. As we assume that it is the person's story that mediates and constructs the experience of bereavement, it also allows insight into the ways in which bereavement is negotiated. Discourse analysis allows a more significant insight into such narratives. We therefore postulate more text-based discourse analytic research into stories of bereavement, a significant, in our view, paucity in the existing literature on continuing bonds.

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