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The Self and Significant Others. Toward a Sociology of Loss

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Abstract

Losses are part of the human condition. And these losses are multifaceted – as diverse as human bonds can be. In this paper I review and analyze the diversity of loss experiences and the notion of loss of self. A sociology of loss illuminates the universes of meaning that refer to person/person, person/animal, or person/object relations and involve different kinds of losses that can be grieved. It also broaches the issue of the social regulation of losses and specific loss norms. Finally, I will present a general model that integrates the various perspectives on loss.

Key Words

Bereavement, loss, self, grief, identity, symbolic interactionism

1. Introduction

Loss is an elementary human experience and refers to the transitory nature of human existence, an existence to which parting is immanent. Valediction is not an act pertaining to death only. In our lifetimes, we also have to sever from places, attitudes, love, health, thoughts, home, pets, or dreams. A sociology of loss has to take this diversity of strong attachments into account. Loss and society are closely connected. Migration or war, for instance, include losses such as deaths or disappearances (Mellibovsky, 1997), or losses of culture and language. The insights to be gained by looking at loss, however, are not limited to such exceptional circumstances. Losses occurring during “normal” life have the power to illuminate the great variety of human ties and the diversity of the bonds between the self and others (Lofland, 1985, p.181). Sociology can also sensitize awareness to how society shapes private loss experiences with regard to definitions, framing processes, and the social norms governing special categories of losses. Different kinds of losses involve different social understandings of what is considered a “legitimate loss” (Fowlkes, 1990), thus evoking different “grievability” (Butler, 2009). The acknowledgement of a loss depends on the prior acknowledgement of life or existence. Not all losses can be mourned equally (Butler, 2009). Losses that are not acknowledged have been called disenfranchised losses (Doka, 2002), demoralized or illegitimate losses (Fowlkes, 1990). These include, for example, the loss of pets, ending of homosexual relationships, or deaths by suicide.

A sociology of loss is closely connected with a sociology of emotions and a sociology of the self (Callero, 2003). Emotions of loss include separation distress (Archer, 1999), sadness (Horwitz and Wakefield, 2007), or nostalgia (Davis, 1979). Nonetheless, grief after the death of a loved one is the emotional response defined as the prototypical loss reaction (Horwitz and Wakefield, 2007). According to Cochran and Claspell (1987), grief can be understood as a “story of loss”. Interestingly, the emotion of grief – as a general concept – can be applied to various losses, not only to the death of humans (Marris, 1986). There is evidence to suggest

that the severing of any relationship of some significance may result in a “grief-like response” (Lofland, 1985, p.182) because the experience of loss is always related to identity (Charmaz, 1980, p.282). Change and transitions (Marris, 1986; Nisbet, 1970) indicate loss. Both events are associated with crisis. This crisis is based on the inability of humans to continue any longer in the accustomed way in the face of such an event (Nisbet, 1970, p.317). Therefore change implies a loss of control and threat to the continuity of everyday life and the self (Marris, 1986, p.3; Nisbet, 1970, p.317). As Charmaz (1980, p.282) argues, “the experience of loss is related to personal identity”. Any significant loss can cause a “crisis of the self” (Charmaz, 1997, p.232). Another field of research addresses critical life events, such as divorce, the death of a loved one, or the loss of one’s job, as exogenous shocks (Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, and Verbrugge, 1999).

The paper is based on the previous work of Charmaz (1980, 1983, 1997), Lofland (1982, 1985), Marris (1986), and Hahn (1968), who explored the relationship between death and identity. My aim is to deepen the notion of *loss of self* (Charmaz, 1980; Marris, 1986) based on a diversified conception of significant others to account for the “broader context of loss”, as proposed by Lofland (1985, p.182). I will draw on symbolic interactionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1965 [1934]) to highlight the role of significant others for the self. The main purpose is to demonstrate the diversity of losses based on the role of various “others” in self-construction, self-maintenance, and self-continuity. Therefore the concept of loss of self and the accompanying emotion of grief can be a result of the loss of persons, animals, as well as material or immaterial objects. Section 2 provides an overview of different categories of loss. The role of these diverse “others” for self-construction and self-maintenance will be discussed in section 3. Intimate and social bonds, as Fowlkes (1990, p.636) is correct to point out, are more widespread and complex than conventionally imagined. Special emphasis is placed on the role of human/animal bonds (e.g. Irvine, 2004a, 2004b; Sanders, 1990) and the meaning of objects for self-identity (e.g. Belk, 1988, 2013;

Rochberg-Halton, 1984; Silver, 1996). As a consequence, these various losses can result in a loss of self, including grief reactions (section 4). Similarities and differences of psychological notions of loss and self will be discussed in section 5. Finally, I will develop a general model to integrate the various perspectives of loss (section 6). The article concludes by summarizing the main aspects and by providing an outline of a sociology of loss (section 7).

2. Categories of Loss

Blumer's first fundamental principle of symbolic interactionism, "Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (Blumer, 1969, p.2), provides the theoretical starting point of the following considerations. A multiplicity of "things" has significance and meaning for individuals. Lofland (1982, p.219) defines a loss experience as "the involuntary severance (...) of a relationship defined by the actor as 'significant' or 'meaningful'". The concept of bereavement generally refers to "social loss, of person, relationship, status, and way of being" (Wallace, 1973, p.231). Loss experiences are not restricted to the death of a loved one only – they can imply a lost "something" as well (Walter, 1999, p.x). Yet, most of the bereavement literature focuses on death because it represents the most severe loss and a radical disruption of life, relationships, and the self (Horwitz and Wakefield, 2007; Marris, 1986). According to Berger and Luckmann (1966, p.119), death "posits the most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life". Consequently, death is characterized as the "marginal situation par excellence for the individual" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.118-119). From a sociological standpoint, however, we must acknowledge the heterogeneity of losses. Table 1 summarizes major categories and types of loss.

Insert Table 1 here

Losses can be classified along two dimensions: personhood/artifact and materiality/immateriality. This allows sorting loss experiences into three general categories: 1) *relationship loss* (person, animal), 2) *status loss* (way of being, such as health, culture, or job), and 3) *(im)material object loss* (e.g. artifacts, places, ideals). Modes of relationship loss include death or the end of a relationship, such as divorce or separation. The bereavement literature primarily addresses the death of a nuclear family member and dependent relationships, especially of a spouse or child. Yet, intimate bonds are not limited to the nuclear family only but may also include friends, colleagues, kin, or companion animals (Fowlkes, 1990). A unique form of loss is associated with abortion and miscarriage (Frost, Bradley, Levitas, Smith, and Garcia, 2007).

Different kinds of losses can be classified according to a series of opposites: choice vs. force, interchangeability vs. uniqueness, voluntariness vs. involuntariness and finality vs. openness. For example, the death of a loved one (personhood) can be characterized as forced, involuntary, and final, whereas the loss of a job or home in some cases can be described as chosen, interchangeable, and voluntary (for example, if I decide to quit my job for a better offer and this leads me to leave my hometown). There are also different types of losses referred to as primary, secondary, and tertiary loss (e.g. Stroebe and Schut, 1999). Whereas primary losses refer to the loss of an attachment figure, secondary and tertiary losses include losses of one's home or financial losses as consequences of the death of a significant other (Stroebe and Schut, 1999, p.210).

3. The Self and Significant Others

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the social construction of the self and the role of significant others in self-definition and reality maintenance (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1965 [1934]). It is the dominant theoretical approach to the self

(Callero, 2003, p.116) and provides the basic understanding of the notion of “loss of self” in case of the loss experiences that will be discussed in the next section.ⁱ

Cooley (1983 [1902], p.179) defines the self as a *looking-glass self* drawn from the communicative and general life that is deeply connected with the thought of other persons. The self is realized in relationships to others (Mead, 1965 [1934], p.204). The “me” is constituted by social relationships; it reflects the attitudes of the others (Mead, 1965 [1934], p.176). The mechanism of role taking and the language process (interaction and communication) are important for the development of the self. The self is described as a “reflected entity, reflecting the attitudes first taken by significant others towards it; the individual becomes what he is addressed as by his significant others” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.152). However, Berger and Luckmann (1966, p.152) emphasize that this is not a “one-sided, mechanistic process” because it “entails a dialectic between identification by others and self-identification”. *Significant others* play an important role for self-definition and reality maintenance. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966, p.170), they are “important for the ongoing confirmation of that crucial element of reality we call identity”. They are labeled as “principal agents” for the maintenance of reality to which “less significant others serve as a sort of chorus” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.170). The self is constituted through interaction with the *generalized other* in which the attitudes of groups or the society as a whole become internalized as part of the self (Mead, 1965 [1934], p.154). In the words of Charmaz (1983, p.170), the self-concept is the “organization of attributes that have become consistent over time”. This requires empirical validation in everyday life and in social interaction with significant others. Due to the social nature of the self, socialization is a lifelong process which results in changes in the self-concept throughout the life cycle (Charmaz, 1983, p.170). Self-identity – a term used by Silver (1996, p.3) – pertains to the individual’s subjective sense of the continuous and coherent nature of his or her biography.

Accordingly, a significant loss can induce a “crisis of self” (Charmaz, 1997) by disrupting this continuity.

In addition to the traditional Meadian account of the social foundation of the self, I would like to elaborate the idea of animals as significant others and the concept of possessions as elements of an *extended self*. This important amendment provides the theoretical foundation for the understanding of loss of self in cases of losing a pet or a significant object. Companion animals – a term preferred by some to “pet” (Irvine, 2004a) – act as significant and subjective others for the owner; owner and animal both form an “acting unit” (Irvine, 2004a, p.3; Sanders, 1990, p.664). Although this kind of social bond can also be significant, it has been generally underrated or even pathologized (Walsh, 2009b). The bond between human and animal provides important social experiences that can serve for purposes of self-definition (Sanders, 1990, p.664). In particular, there are two functions of companion animals. First, they are “social facilitators” for extended social involvements (Sanders, 1990, p.663). Animals extend the interaction situations in which the owner acquires information about how she or he is defined by others (Sanders, 1990, p.662). And second, companion animals have “personhood” and act as surrogates for human others, family members, or close friends (e.g. Archer, 1996; Walsh, 2009a). For Meyers (2002, p.252), pet ownership is indeed not just a substitute for human relations. It stands on its own, characterized by multiple threads of connections. Animals are significant others and grant rewards such as companionship and affection and serve as a source of security (Sanders, 1990; Archer, 1996). Moreover, studies provide empirical evidence of the value of animals for psychological and physical health and well-being (e.g. Archer, 1996; Beck and Katcher, 2003; Wells, 2009). In Irvine’s terms (2004a, p.87), living with animals “evokes new potential ways of being”, such as emotions or ways of life. Companion animals are “actors capable of a biography” (Bergmann, 1988) and have communicative resources. We experience them as “beings” that develop a character of their own, a personality with special likes and dislikes, successes and failures. As a

consequence, they are addressed as “conscious, purposeful partners” in social interaction (Irvine, 2004b, p.4). Especially dogs show affection, loyalty, attentiveness, and attachment to their owners (Archer, 1996, p.251). We live and grow older with them; we share meaning and emotions and develop daily routines that define the relationship (Bergmann, 1988; Irvine, 2004a). Companion animals are not interchangeable (Irvine, 2004a, p.87). Animals and humans share feelings, intentions, and thoughts. The bond can be characterized as an “experience of self with other” (Irvine, 2004a, p.146). For example, animals can verify who we are while we interact with them or confirm our self and our own history (Irvine, 2004a, p.16, p.127). Animals have the features of agency, coherence, affectivity, and history that constitute a sort of selfhood (for a more detailed account, see Irvine 2004a, 2004b, 2007). Consequently, animals are seen as resources for self-construction and participants in the process of self-formation of humans (Irvine, 2004a, p.162).

Furthermore, the importance of meaningful material objects for self-definition and self-continuity is acknowledged (Belk, 1988, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Rochberg-Halton, 1984; Silver, 1996). For Rochberg-Halton (1984, p.335), valued material possessions act as “signs” and representations of the self, “because they can tell us, who we are, what we do, and who and what we might become” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p.29-38; Rochberg-Halton, 1984, p.339). Objects involve meaning and memories; they can be part of our biography (Belk, 1988, p.142). They are “tools” for self-definition (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p.92) and objectify the self (Rochberg-Halton, 1984, p.337). Interestingly and of importance for these arguments, Rochberg-Halton (1984, p.338-339) reminds us of a statement by Mead (1965 [1934]) concerning the role of inanimate objects (and animals) serving as elements of the *generalized other*:

It is possible for inanimate objects, no less than for other human organisms, to form parts of the generalized and organized – the completely socialized – other for any given human individual, in so far as

he responds to such objects socially or in a social fashion (by means of the mechanism of thought, the internalized conversation of gestures). Any thing – any object or set of objects, whether animate or inanimate, human or animal, or merely physical – toward which he acts, or to which he responds, socially, is an element in what for him is the generalized other; by taking the attitudes of which toward himself he becomes conscious of himself as an object or individual, and thus develops a self or personality. (p.154, footnote 7)

In this context, Belk (1988) identifies several links between the self and inanimate objects. First, possessions serve as a sort of self-extension that occurs through control and mastery of an object (Belk, 1988, p.139). In this case, possessions are incorporated into the self-concept (Belk, 1988, p.140). They constitute the “extended self” because material objects are “symbolic representations of the self to others (...) whereby actors construct and bolster their self-concept” (Sanders, 1990, p.662). Artifacts such as stuffed animals, books, or collections can serve as an “anchor” of identity designating early stages of a biography or as “markers” denoting transitional objects between different life stages (Silver, 1996, p.6). Especially stuffed animals can be emotional objects signifying friendship, comfort, or nurturance (Rochberg-Halton, 1984, p.356). Second, the role of possessions in creating or maintaining a sense of the past is emphasized. In the event of death, the meaning of personal reminders for the survivors is highlighted (e.g., photographs, personal possessions of the deceased) (Rosenblatt, 2006). Possessions of the deceased symbolize identities and become objects of commemoration (Unruh, 1983, p.344). In general, possessions help to achieve a sense of continuity by creating and maintaining an awareness of the past through storing memories and feelings attached to the past (Belk, 1988, p.139). From this point of view, belongings represent a “source of meaning” (Rosenblatt, 2006). They are *more* than just memories because they define feelings and personalize the significant other and the relationship between survivor and the deceased (Rosenblatt, 2006, p.103). They serve as “identity anchors”

(Charmaz and Milligan, 2006) or “linking objects” (Meyers, 2002) to keep alive the bond with the dead.

In a recent update to his initial article (Belk, 1988), Belk (2013) additionally discusses the role of digital possessions and modifies his arguments to accommodate the construction of a digital self. Taking account of technological change, Belk identifies several changes in the nature of possessions. He notes that people develop a similar attachment to virtual possessions as they do to their physical counterparts; losses of the former are mourned accordingly. Yet digital goods often come with greater uncertainty in matters of control and ownership, and the experience of less authentic and valuable digital possessions makes them a less efficacious means for self-extension (Belk, 2013). The importance of sensual experience and developing a relationship with the object is implied. These considerations notwithstanding, physical and virtual possessions both remain important for the extended self.

4. The Loss of Self

In the center of the symbolic-interactionist perspective on bereavement, we find the concept of loss of self (Charmaz, 1980; Marris, 1986). This concept is predominantly applied to a particular loss, the death of a significant (human) other. It is interesting to note, however, that it is also used as a broader concept that demonstrates the diversity of loss experiences.

When the “other” dies, the social nature of the self becomes painfully obvious. It is not only the loss of a loved human, animal, or object but also of the self that was constructed through the relationship with the other (Bradbury, 1999, p.175; Valentine, 2008, p.97). A loss generally destroys significant dimensions of the self of the survivor: “The fundamental crisis of bereavement arises, not from the loss of others, but the loss of self” (Marris, 1986, p.32f.). The loss of self refers to the social identity of individuals. In the Meadian tradition, we can describe this loss as a loss of the social me(s). Every “me,” in Abels’ words (2010, p.270), stems from the memory of others, their reactions toward us and their actual presence,

expectations, and identification. Especially family members play a crucial role in developing the self and maintaining reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The loss of a group member has fundamental consequences for the survivor's mental representation of the world. Losses cause a "disintegration of identity" (Marris, 1986, p.38). The concept of loss of self is supported by counselors who describe grieving as "falling apart" or "falling to pieces" during bereavement (Àrnason, 2007). Charmaz (1980) refers to the intensity of loss feelings and the definition of a significant loss. A significant loss occurs when one's life or aspects of one's life and self are tied in with the person, animal, or object that is gone. Therefore, it is of particular importance to analyze the individual framing and subjective meaning of the lost object for the self. Otherwise we will not be able to understand the emotional reaction to and consequences of a loss. As Charmaz (1980) argues, "the extent of loss depends upon how immersed the identity of the bereaved is in the circumstances within which the loss is felt" (p.282).

The sociological concept of threads of connectedness (Lofland, 1982, 1985) best describes the multi-dimensional connections that are disrupted by relationship loss. Lofland (1982, p.222-231) highlights the following links between the self and others: role partner, mundane assistance, linkages to others, the creation and maintenance of self, support for comforting myths, reality maintenance, and maintenance of possible futures. One source of emptiness, depression, sadness, or disorientation that occurs after the death of a loved one is the loss of social context or a loss of foundation in dealing with the loss (Cochran and Claspell, 1987, p.77; Rosenblatt, 2006, p.102). With regard to specific categories of loss, miscarriage, for instance, is associated with the "loss of possibility" (Frost et al., 2007) and "loss of promise" (Ironside, 1996). It refers to the perceived identity as a mother, as a potential self, and a loss of dreams or expectations (Frost et al., 2007). In the literature, we find further expressions and metaphors, for example, the concept of *griefs* (Ironside, 1996, p.69), which refers to the lost

past and future, companionship, or one's own hopes and dreams. In the most extreme case, the death of a loved one can reflect a "death of the self" (Charmaz, 1980, p.282).

The concept of loss of self is also applied to different relationships in which the self is affected. These losses include animals (relationship loss), possessions (object loss), and health (status loss) as elaborated in section 2. Companion animals are significant others to their owners (Belk, 1988; Irvine, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Sanders, 1990). Losing a pet is very similar to losing a human relationship (e.g. Archer, 1999; Archer and Winchester, 1994; Field, Orsini, Gavish, and Packman, 2009; Walsh, 2009a). A death of a pet can induce feelings of grief, sadness, and even a loss of self comparable to a loss of a human relationship (Sanders, 1990, p.662). In addition, physical object loss is linked to the self, because "if possessions are viewed as part of the self, it follows that an unintentional loss of possessions should be regarded as a loss or lessening of self" (Belk, 1988, p.142). This is particularly true in the case of burglary or natural disasters, where grief reactions can be observed (for a review, see Belk, 1988). In a critical evaluation of Belk (1988), Cohen (1989) indicates the importance of the meaning of lost objects and the consequences of loss. The experience of loss of self in the event of object loss depends on the subjective significance of the object and how easily it can be replaced.

Finally, illness, especially chronic diseases or disability, affects self-identity and is associated with a loss of self (Charmaz, 1983, 1991; Cohen and Eisdorfer, 2001). This is particularly so in the case of Alzheimer's disease or dementia. Both involve the dissolution of the self (memory, identity, personality) or a complete loss of self (Cohen and Eisdorfer, 2001, p.22). Illness establishes a past and a present self based on a lost way of being (Charmaz, 1991, p.229). The suffering of patients with chronic diseases, such as multiple sclerosis, includes losses of control and agency, losses of former self-images, living a restricted life, and social isolation or experiences of self-discreditation (Charmaz, 1983, p.172). In general, illness creates situations in which the person learns new definitions of self and often relinquishes old

ones (Charmaz, 1983, p.170). All these experiences are associated with the loss of former meanings or attributes of self-images that have been destroyed by illness. Charmaz (1983, p.191) sums up the nexus between severe illness and self by pointing out that the language of suffering is a “language of loss”.

Furthermore, grief can follow from losing one’s job (e.g. Archer and Rhodes, 1993, 1995), losing one’s home (e.g. Marris, 1986), leaving home (Silver, 1996), or losing touch with one’s language (Bostock, 1997). Interestingly, an adult education seminar based on the experiences of grief counseling has even been offered to individuals who have experienced the closedown of schools in a German city. The course, open to the public, applies the grieving process as a mode of understanding the feelings of staff who have faced the closure of a public school – a fact that emphasizes the generalization of grief to different kinds of losses, including the loss of places or organizational death (Bell and Taylor, 2011).ⁱⁱ

5. Psychological Notions of Loss and Self: Similarities and Differences

I would like to outline psychological notions of loss and self and do so by focusing on similarities and differences to the “sociological self” (Callero, 2003, p.121). We can identify similarities between the sociological arguments presented above and psychological perceptions of the self/identity and loss. One prominent model in psychology is that of *psychosocial transition* (Parkes, 1972) after the death of a significant other. It refers to identity change. Habits and thoughts, expectations and roles have to be altered and modified due to the “discrepancies between our internal world and the world that now exists for us” (Parkes and Prigerson, 2011, p.102). Although it uses a different terminology, this concept at its core bears some similarity to Lofland’s threads of connectedness (Lofland, 1985). There is also some correspondence with the notion of reconstruction of meaning, as proposed by Neimeyer (2001), Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies (2002), or Gillies and Neimeyer (2006), which refers to the process in which a survivor reevaluates, renews, and reconstructs the

system of pre-loss meaning, for example, perceptions of self, outlook on the future, or view of the world, toward a system of post-loss meaning (Gillies and Neimeyer, 2006, p.54).

In line with this reasoning, recent psychological models of grieving take into account the loss of self through bereavement as implied in symbolic interactionism (Jakoby, 2012). The two-process theory of grief emphasizes two different responses to loss experiences (Archer, 1999; Hofer, 1984; Stroebe and Schut, 1999). First, grief involves a reaction to a specific loss in terms of an active response to separation distress (e.g., searching, yearning). Second, grief refers to the deprivation of latent functions of the lost relationship. These latent functions of a given relationship are similar to the ones Lofland (1982, 1985) describes as threads of connectedness. Accordingly, the dual process model of coping (Stroebe and Schut, 1999) specifies two different stressors after the loss: a) loss-oriented stressors and b) restoration-oriented stressors. The first refers to the loss experience itself with respect to the deceased. It focuses on the relationship with the deceased and circumstances around the person's death. Restoration-oriented stressors refer to a changed world after the loss. Secondary consequences of loss apply to financial stressors, the reorganization of daily life, social isolation, or the development of a new identity (Stroebe and Schut, 1999, p.212). This aspect of loss focuses on the reintegration of the self and adjustment to a changed world, so-called secondary losses. Oscillation between both types of loss experiences is the common modus (Stroebe and Schut, 1999, p.214-215). The model can be applied to different types of bereavement and is not restricted to death.

Nevertheless and in spite of the similarity of arguments, there are two major differences. In psychological and psychiatric bereavement literature, we find negative connotations associated with the loss of self. It is contrasted with the ideal of an autonomous and independent individual. As Parkes and Prigerson (2011) point out,

[...] the loss of self is often referred to as a 'gap,' 'it's a great emptiness,' [...]. These words illustrate how the people we love seem to become part of our self, a view that is often held by poets but one that

others may find hard to accept – perhaps because it makes us so much more vulnerable. It is more comfortable to think of the self as a separate, independent, and therefore safe, entity [...]. (p.111)

This quotation reveals the individualistic conception of the self, contrary to the self-concept in the Meadian tradition. It unmasks the individualistic framing of the self.

Additionally, we can identify a medical frame. The reconstruction of meaning after a loss is regarded as part of grief work (Parkes and Prigerson, 2011). The “inability to reconstruct a meaningful personal reality” represents a symptom of complicated grief in cases where reconstruction cannot be achieved (Neimeyer et al., 2002). Further, coping with internal loss (self), external loss (social roles), or spiritual loss (attitudes, beliefs, etc.) is included in the “tasks of grief” model described by Worden (2009). It is an interesting observation that the loss of self is part of a psychiatric diagnosis. A loss of self is considered part of the symptoms of the prolonged grief disorder (PGD). Persistence of symptoms, such as the feeling that a part of oneself has died, for more than six months after the death is pathologized (see Parkes and Prigerson, 2011, p.125-126). In sum, we can identify a medicalization of the loss of self. It is labeled negatively and serves as a sign of vulnerability, contrary to the ideal of autonomy and independence of the psychological self. Such pathologization is in conflict with the sociological self and the naturally appearing and inevitable disruption or loss of self due to the sociality of humans and the multiplicity of significant self/other bonds.

6. A General Model of Loss

After reviewing the concept of loss of self in the wake of bereavement, this section is devoted to presenting a general model of loss. An incorporation of the different categories of loss into a single model can serve as a starting point for a sociology of loss as a distinct field of study rooted in the sociology of self and the sociology of emotions. Figure 1 integrates the previous aspects of loss, including the different categories of loss (relationship, status, object) and their dimensions, the individual framing of loss based on the meaning of the self/other bond, both

of which provide the basis for understanding the significance of loss. In this way the model brings together important conclusions of previous theoretical arguments and empirical findings in the field of the sociology of loss (Charmaz, 1980, 1997; Lofland, 1982, 1985; Marris, 1986). The general framework integrates the notions of significant others, a disruption or loss of self, as well as the necessary reorganization of the self or techniques for self-continuity, respectively.

The individual framing of the self/other bond is of great importance. This internal process is based on the subjective meaning and threads of connectedness (Lofland, 1982, 1985) that link the self and the other. It makes the loss a significant loss. Only a significant loss can disrupt continuity and meaning in life. The disruption or loss of self can only be understood against the background of the self/other bond. In this regard, the actual nature of the “other” is irrelevant – the other can be a human, an animal, or a material or immaterial object. The feelings of loss for the self are “reflected by this attachment” (Charmaz and Milligan, 2006, p.533). Empirical evidence of the significance of the human/other bond is needed to apply the concept of loss of self. This argument addresses the critical remarks by Cohen (1989, p.127), who fears that the concept of “loss of self (and similar extended self-notions) may be used too glibly as a catchall explanation, thus forestalling more careful analysis”. Moreover, there are loss norms with regard to the social valuation of different relationships as intimate (Fowlkes, 1990). This aspect constitutes one of the strengths of the symbolic interactionist account of loss: it creates awareness of the role of society in framing a loss. Losses have to be recognized as a loss, individually but also collectively.

Insert Figure 1 here

Furthermore, the model accounts for the so-called reorganization of self (Charmaz, 1980; Marris, 1986). Losses lead to discontinuities of the self (Davis, 1979, p.32) and create a need

for the continuity and integration of the self (Charmaz, 1980, p.304). After loss experiences, a new post-loss self evolves, which can be understood as a “story of personal transformation” (Cochran and Claspell, 1987, p.91). Charmaz and Milligan (2006, p.533) point out that the process of identity change remains unclear; it represents a “gradual change”. Coping with loss requires the change or transformation of the self, the revision of prior attitudes, and the development of new meanings, attitudes, and a reorganization of life (Charmaz, 1980, p.298; Hahn, 1968, p.130).

More specifically, different techniques for self-continuity as well as self-reconstruction can be identified. They are interconnected. Generally, the emotions of grief and nostalgia serve as modes of continuity in cases of loss and transition. Nostalgia supports the continuity of identity because of its capacity to relate the past to the present and future. It is a “means” or “psychological lens” individuals use in constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing their identity (Davis, 1979: 31). Callero (2003) highlights the general role of narratives in the process of self-construction: “When disruption is perceived it must be explained, and narratives provide a framework” (Callero, 2003, p.124). Grief is a “communicative code” (Winkel, 2001) that allows the grieving person to reconstruct his or her biography and engage in self-reflection by talking about the dead. There are four manifestations of continuing bonds with the deceased that provide continuity with the past: sensing the presence of the dead, talking with the dead, conceiving of the dead as moral guides, and talking about the dead (Klass and Walter, 2007; see also Unruh, 1983). In this context, memories play a crucial role because they “allow continued – if entirely internal – interaction” (Lofland, 1982, p.227). Without memory, continuity in life does not exist (Mellibowsky, 1997, p.xv). In the event of the death of loved ones, possessions of the deceased can uphold a sense of continuity with the past (Belk, 1988; Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Rosenblatt, 2006; Unruh, 1983). More generally, individuals can use material objects to construct their identity as coherent and continuous in the case of life transitions (Silver, 1996). However, Lofland (1982, p.227) points out that the

achievement of continuity of the self may only be temporal and limited; a reorganization of the self is inevitable. In the event of significant object loss, the substitution and replacement of that which was lost might be more easily possible compared to the loss of a human relationship (Cohen, 1989).

7. Conclusions

Losses are part of the human condition. And these losses are multifaceted – as diverse as human bonds can be. Losses are an experience not limited to human relationships only. The analysis of loss reveals the sociability of humans and the importance of “others” for self-construction and self-continuity during a lifetime. In this paper, I have systematically reviewed and analyzed the diversity of loss experiences and the notion of loss of self in the case of bereavement. In particular, the impact of animals and objects for the development and maintenance of the self is highlighted. A sociology of loss has the potential to illuminate the universes of meaning and connectedness of the self and other, including person/person, person/animal, or person/object relations, both material and immaterial. They are important for the construction and continuity of the self in their own right. The structure of self is affected by various types of losses.

My outline of a sociology of loss is predominately rooted at the micro level and closely tied to the sociology of self and the sociology of emotions. The macro level is accounted for in terms of the social and cultural framing of loss, as pointed out by Hochschild (1979) or Butler (2009). Nevertheless, further elaboration on the ability of society to cope with and commemorate collective losses is needed. Thus, a sociology of loss broaches the issue of the social regulation of loss experiences and specific *loss norms* – identified by Fowlkes (1990, p. 637) as the “morality of loss”. Judith Butler’s (2009) idea of a “grievable life” highlights the role of society in the acknowledgement of a loss. Hierarchies of loss and the consequences for the recognition of the grieving individual have to be evaluated critically. Therefore, a

sociology of loss calls attention to the normative labeling of extended family relationships or pets as “less important or trivial losses”, as Marris (1986, p.27) points out. Society has to provide means for feeling and expressing grief regardless of the kinds of losses involved. Obviously not all losses are significant and disrupt the self (Cohen, 1989). Therefore, the individual framing of the loss and the subjective meaning of the self/other bond is essential. The identification of a loss of self can only be understood against this background.

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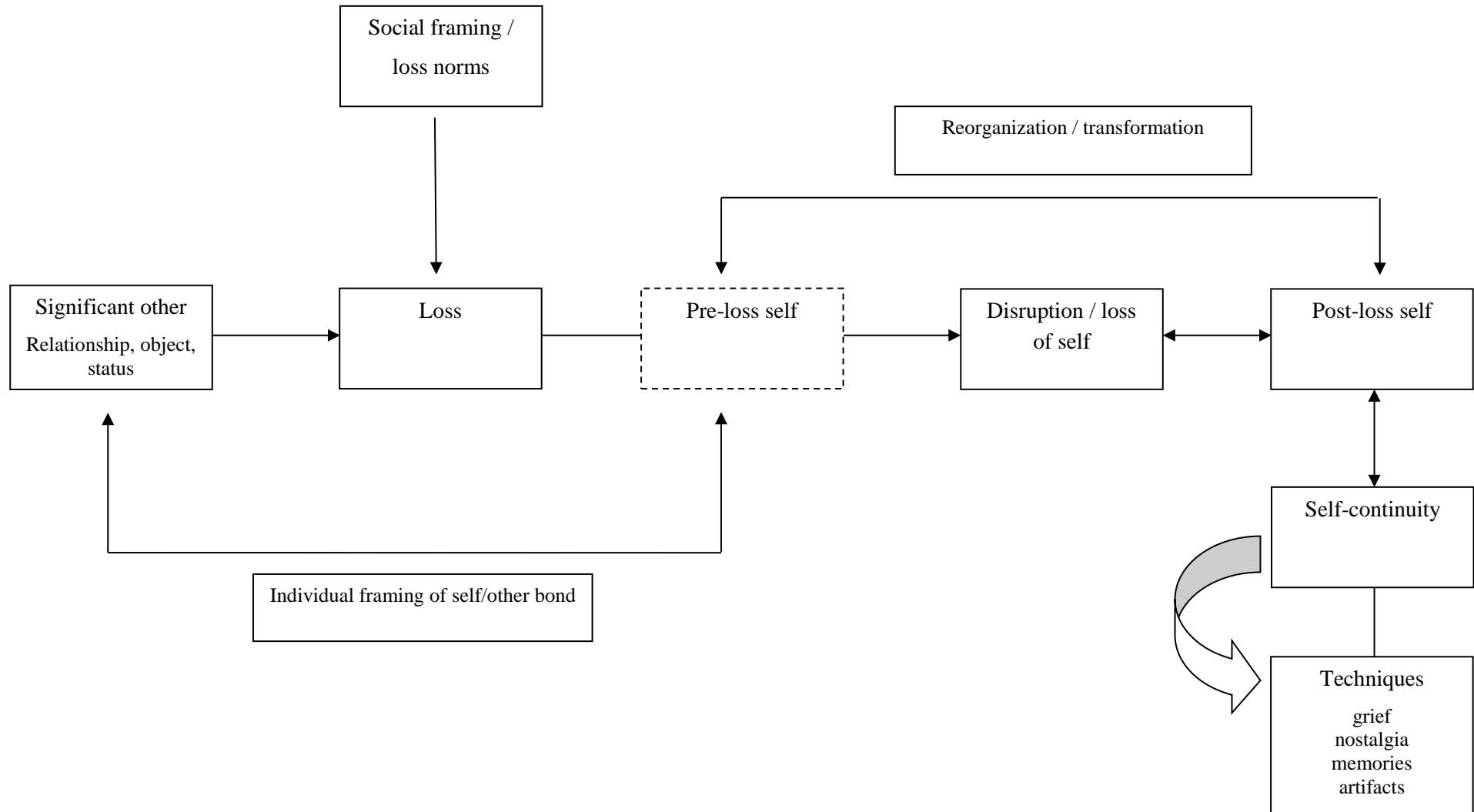
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TABLE 1
Categories of loss

Author(s)	Losses
Engel (1960)	loved person cherished possession job status home country ideal part of the body
Wallace (1973)	object relationship status way of being
Marris (1986)	personal relationship predictable social context interpretable world
Charmaz (1980)	person freedom physical function social status reputation
Charmaz and Milligan (2006)	animate objects (persons or animals) inanimate objects (artifacts and places) nonphysical objects (language, culture, ideals)
Horwitz and Wakefield (2007)	attachment status meaning

Note: Own illustration.

FIGURE 1:
A General Model of Loss (own illustration)



ⁱ An identity represents a distinct part of the self (Callero, 2003, p.125). Identity theory (Burke, 1980; Stryker, 1980; Stryker and Burke, 2000) defines the self as the sum of multiple identities. The term identity refers to internalized meanings and expectations according to the individual's social roles (role identity) and network positions. These internalized meanings and expectations represent "sub-units of the global concept of self" (Burke, 1980, p.18). This extension takes into account that individuals engage in specific social networks and perform multiple roles according to these relationships (Stryker and Burke, 2000). In this paper, it is not possible to outline the discourse about different types of identity in any detail, provide further analytical distinctions of the self, and elaborate more deeply the structural tradition of symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980). This pertains also to the discussion of the "personal" or "core" versus the "social" self (e.g. Gubrium and Holstein, 2000).

ⁱⁱ See <http://bildungswerkaachen.de/index.php/bildung/kursliste/2/9/243>, accessed September 17, 2013.