SOUVENIRS AND TRAVEL GUIDES: THE COGNITIVE SOCIOLOGY OF GRIEVING PUBLIC FIGURES


Committee: Sarah Quinn (Chair), Julie Brines, Sara Curran.

The deaths of public figures can produce a variety of emotional reactions. While bereavement research has explored mourning family or close friends, this literature does little to address the experience of grief for public figures. Similarly, research on how people relate to public figures provides an incomplete picture of the symbolic associations people can form with those figures. This study relies on interviews with individuals who had a memorable reaction to the death of a public figure to explore how these individuals related to that figure. Results suggest two ideal type reactions: Grief, characterized by disruption and sharp pain, and Melancholy, characterized by distraction and dull ache. Respondents reported symbolic associations between the figure and some meaning they had incorporated into their cognitive framework. I argue that emotional reactions to the death of a public figure are an affective signal of disruption to the individual's cognitive functioning caused by the loss of meaning maintained by the figure. The key difference in kind and intensity of reaction is related to the cognitive salience of the lost meaning. This research highlights how individuals use internalized cultural objects in their sense-making process. More broadly, by revealing symbolically meaningful relationships that shape cognitive frameworks, this analysis offers cognitive sociological insights into research about the function of role models, collective memories, and other cultural objects on the individual's understanding of their world.

People Involved: Daniel Nolan
Adviser(s): Sarah Quinn, Julie Brines, Sara Curran
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