LSE Covid 19 Blog: Britain avoids talking about COVID-19 deaths. That's a mistake

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How has the UK government acknowledged and talked about COVID-19 deaths? In an extract from their new report, **Katharine M Millar, Yuna Han, Katharina Kuhn, Martin Bayly** *and* **Irene Morlino (LSE)** *warn that the current focus on 'recovery' and 'inevitable' deaths risks alienating sections of society, and suggest how it can do better.*

Pandemics present a distinct challenge to social order. The sheer scale of the loss of life and its differential impact upon particular communities threatens social cohesion, and challenges national and local government agencies.

Grief, loss and remembrance – even when conducted in private – are deeply political processes that shape a new normal. Elites have a role to play in this process, in terms of how they narrate the particular crisis, how they relate to the impact of grief, loss and death, and how they respond to its effects. A reluctance to talk about death, particularly in the UK, makes this particularly important.

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We studied how the UK, Italy, Germany and South Korea responded to COVID-19 deaths in 2020, as well as the UK's reaction to the 1918-19 flu pandemic. We focused not on the policy responses, but on the discourses surrounding the way that the pandemic has been narrated, how losses have been reported, how grief has been discussed, and how memorialisation has (or has not) been carried out.

Death and social order

Sociological and anthropological literature finds that death poses a potential threat to social order. Most societies have developed grieving practices that enable loss to be processed and, eventually, 'normal' life resumed. State institutions and elites play a significant role in managing both the material aspects of death and collective processes of grief and mourning.

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How deaths are addressed, or not addressed, by elites can have unintended consequences in enabling or constraining future policy choices by entrenching dominant policies, marginalising alternatives, and making some policy changes difficult by establishing taboos in public discourse. Scholarship on nationalism and militarism demonstrates how 'good deaths' – such as those of volunteer soldiers in a legitimate conflict – are socially interpreted as understandable, tragic but acceptable, and recognised in a precise, meaningful time and place. These deaths follow recognisable social scripts. They can be forged into affirming narratives that produce positive visions of national identity and promote belonging.

'Bad deaths', in contrast, which are not easily placed into existing narratives – such as sudden deaths, enforced disappearances, or mass catastrophe – reveal the limitations upon state institutions and elites' ability to provide security. They have the potential to undermine public trust in institutions, feelings of belonging, and social cohesion.

Existing research on security and conflict policymaking has demonstrated how a crisis is narrated—as an identifiable story outlining what the challenge is and who the players are —can play a critical role in constructing political behaviour. Crisis narratives can mobilise political action, promote certain collective values, and encourage solidarity among the public. Conversely, too much distance between the lived reality of much of the public, who are grieving the loss of their loved ones, and the government's account of the crisis (including emphasis on recovery efforts), which makes such loss less visible or even an acceptable form of sacrifice, can lead to increased public discontent.

The scale and abruptness of COVID-19 deaths, unprecedented nature of the pandemic, and well-documented disruptions to private and public mourning give COVID-19 fatalities an ambiguous social meaning. Unrecognised and mismanaged, COVID-19 fatalities pose a threat to social order and cohesion. But inclusive, locally embedded reckoning with loss and grief may support solidarity and recovery.

The risks of the UK's approach to COVID-19 fatalities

The UK suffered a relatively high rate of COVID19 fatalities. It is therefore significant that official UK COVID-19 discourses place a great deal of emphasis upon death as a) inevitable and b) an important indicator of pandemic recovery/success, rather than a mass experience of loss and grief. There are benefits to this approach, in attempting to cultivate hope, solidarity, and individual sacrifice/inconvenience for the protection of others. It has also, however, resulted in an official and publicly-circulating narrative of the COVID-19 pandemic as first a crisis, and now a challenge, to the NHS – and, perhaps most centrally – the economy. The resumption of 'normal' life, rather than recognising the loss of 40,000 to 60,000 people (and potentially more, in future waves), has become the focal point of the UK crisis narrative.

There is a risk, in either avoiding discussions of loss or treating it indirectly in the context of recovery, that official narratives and policy become disconnected from popular experiences of COVID-19 death and grief. The failure to centre death in COVID-19 narratives may facilitate a social and political forgetting that undermines public health planning (including for future 'waves' of COVID-19). The recent shift from excluding care home deaths from Public Health England fatality reporting, which served to socially normalise the risks of COVID-19 to the elderly, to recent campaigns warning young people not to 'kill [their] Granny' exemplifies this problem.

Moreover, UK citizens' experiences of COVID-19 grief, loss, and risk varies substantially. Failing to recognise the differential vulnerability to, and experience of, death by particular communities and groups within the UK may therefore inadvertently produce the opposite effect to that intended by 'recovery' oriented narratives. For example, Islamophobic rhetoric has accompanied local lockdowns in the North of England, as Muslim communities and families are wrongly blamed for rising cases, while the disproportionate toll of COVID-19 on minoritised racial, ethnic, and religious groups, as well as poorer people, is under-acknowledged.

There is also a risk that working 'around' death in official narratives and policies results in the formation of a simplistic collective memory of the pandemic that excludes marginalised and minoritised communities and perpetuates social divisions (of race, class, region, citizenship status, etc). The UK's management and narrativisation of the pandemic thus far strongly risks undermining social solidarity and the production of an inclusive social order.

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What government should do

- Provide a clear separation between different types of communication: factual, political, and emotional
- Address grief experienced by the public explicitly, empathetically, and consistently in emotive terms
- Emphasise that the deaths of elderly people and/or people with underlying conditions are not inevitable
- Acknowledge differential patterns of death and grief/loss experienced by different communities in official communications
- Designate a national day of mourning, marked by a day off work and programming at national and local levels by religious and government officials and community members
- Commission a nationally funded, locally- embedded four-nations collective history project to collect remembrances of the deceased and experiences of loss in communities
- Establish a fund to support commemoration and memorialisation to which local/regional/national groups and communities may apply to support projects and activities
- Develop a set of best practices to ensure diversity, inclusivity, accessibility, and representation in commissioning and implementing commemorative practices, events and monuments
- Differentiate clearly between commemoration (recognition of an important event/ social contribution) and memorialisation (honouring of the deceased) in public recognition of health, care, and key workers.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. It is an edited extract from the report [Confronting the COVID-19 Pandemic: Grief, Loss and Social Order](#) (Department of International Relations, LSE). For full citation details and further information, please refer to the report.