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Emotional and Linguistic Expressions for Grief in American and Hispanic Cultures

A common feeling that is experienced by most people, to some degree, is losing a loved one. Across different cultures and languages, the depth, expression, and process of grief varies. Nonetheless, the feeling of personal loss is felt by most people, and its processing is vital toward leading a healthy life. It is understood that emotional expression is affected by cultural expectations. Additionally, a culture can impact its language by creating words and phrases to pinpoint a particular feeling. Coming from a Hispanic culture, and acquiring Spanish as my native language, I can compare its grieving patterns with American culture and the English language. The distinctions between different cultures and their grief is especially interesting because it emphasizes that each culture processes emotions distinctly. This essay explores the nuances of emotional expression, celebrations, and language expression in grieving among Hispanic and American cultures.

First and foremost, it is vital to understand how a culture can cultivate its language to suit its commonly felt emotions. In *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures*, Wierzbicka (1999) states that "whether or not two feelings are interpreted as two different instances of, essentially, 'the same emotion' or as instances of 'two different emotions' depends largely on the language through the prism of which these feelings are interpreted; and that prism depends on culture" (26). In other words, two languages can express a feeling in different ways and mold them into two separate entities depending on how they process the emotion. Largely, the manner in which

an emotion is processed is based on the culture as Wierzbicka emphasizes. This is important because it supports the concept that different languages such as English and Spanish will have distinctions in how they grieve. In addition, Wierzbicka writes, “The way people interpret their own emotions depends, to some extent at least, on the lexical grid provided by their native language” (26). The lexical grid, also described as the array of existing words, is the way that people structure sentences in order to form verbal expression of their feelings. In each language there are unique lexical grids, so naturally their emotional expression will vary from that of someone speaking a different language. Culture scripts are also valuable in understanding the ways in which a culture details what someone can feel, when they can feel, and what they can verbalize and how they can behave (Wierzbicka, 34). In sum, the cultural norms and expectations of a group of people can affect the way they express and feel their emotions.

Furthermore, the terminology that exists to describe grief in the Spanish language is distinct from English. The English word that is used most to express the feeling of losing someone to death is “grief” or “grieving”; however, in Spanish the most common expression of the feeling of losing someone who has died is “dolor” (“How to say”). In Spanish, “Dolor” means pain, and it can be used in many ways such as to describe physical pain, but also emotional grieving. Notably, in Spanish there is not a word that directly and solely refers to the loss of a loved one or grieving. Instead, the Spanish language uses existing words that are synonymous with physical agony. Similarly, there is a phrase that is utilized to express the grief from losing a loved one called “el duelo” (“How to say”). The direct English translation of “el duelo” is “the duel” (“How to say”). The phrase “el duelo” has been used in Spanish so often in regards to feeling a deep sadness from the death of someone that its direct translation does not encompass its full range of definition in Spanish. In English, the definition of the expressive

word “grief” is a “heavy sadness and great sorrow and is what the heart accedes to when someone has experienced a loss”(Abdelkarim and Alhaj, 2023). The context in which the grieving terms are used in both languages are similar, but the terms themselves are distinct. In English there is a designated word used only for the feeling of losing a loved one whereas in Spanish there is a commonly used phrase that can refer to the loss of someone important.

Moreover, the words used in a language to frame the new reality after the death of a person affects how they interpret their feeling of grief, as cited by Wierzbicka previously. Therefore, the analysis of the language utilized to address the death of a loved one is important to understand how the culture interprets their loss. In Western culture, “death is still a delicate and sensitive subject” (Crespo, 2023). In American culture, it is unusual to talk about death, so the culture “resort to euphemism as a safe way to talk about human mortality and related matters” (Crespo, 2023). Euphemisms are politer and more positive phrases used in place of a word that carries a negative emotion and connotation. Crespo highlights that euphemisms are used to avoid being “rude or insensitive” when speaking about death (2023). Not only are euphemisms highly used in Western cultures when speaking of death, but “death still remains one of the greatest taboos in our contemporary Western societies (2023). It is essential to note that metaphors are essentially used to organize an “understanding of reality through the correspondence between the linguistic content of metaphors…and what they describe” (Crespo, 2023). As metaphors are contributing to the emotional processing of grief, it is important to understand what metaphors are used to describe the feeling in different languages. The most used tombstone quotes to express grief are “rest… peace… new life… journey… loss… and separation” (Crespo, 2023). In a similar way, the “corresponding verbs meaning “rest” in Spanish [are] *descansar* and *reposar*” (Crespo, 2023). The intercultural overlap between English and Spanish in metaphoric phrases

describing the grief and the death of someone to peace and rest is illustrated through the tombstone's inscriptions in the study. As it appears, the inscriptions relate to rest and new life which could be due to a shared belief in religious afterlife or grieving by believing that the person is resting.

In Hispanic and American culture, religion impacts the processing of grieving a death and how people conceptualize death. For instance, Harvard Health Publishing writes, "the belief that a loved one is enjoying the spiritual riches of heaven or preparing for the next turn of the wheel through reincarnation can be comforting" ("Easing," 2015). American and Hispanic cultures share the common references to resting and afterlife in many of the inscriptions on tombstones. Religion has been linked to a new way of thinking, and possibly feeling, after a loved one dies. The reframing of the thought process about death according to a religion can affect grieving by making one believe their "loved one" is going to reunite with them later and helps them "feel connected with the person" who has died ("Easing," 2015). The linguistic options and expressions of grief in Hispanic and American cultures share similar words and ideas which may be rooted from their influence by religion. Religion aside, in American culture the use of the phrase "rest in peace" is used even if the speaker does not believe in the afterlife. "Rest in peace" has become a staple and respectful reference to someone who has died in both Spanish and English. Both cultures use euphemisms such as "rest in peace" to feel comforted and accompanied by the person who has died. Hispanic culture has been found to be highly concentrated in Catholic religious practices after a death ("Culture"). As Catholicism is the dominant religion in Hispanic culture, it makes sense that their language uses words such as "rest" and "journey." All in all, religion and the words alluding to the afterlife have assisted people in American and Hispanic culture process the death of a loved one.

Foremost, Hispanic culture is distinct from American culture in their interpretation of death and their celebrations that take place after the death of a loved one. In Hispanic culture, there is great diversity in traditional post-death celebrations among different Latin countries. To begin, Mexico is well known for their Dia de Los Muertos yearly celebration around Halloween. Ritually, Dia de Los Muertos is a celebration of a loved one, remembering their life, and connecting with community and family ("Culture," 2021). In Hispanic culture, in response to a death, it is common to come together and remember the life of the loved one. Additionally, families build altars, cook meals for the person who has died, and share food to honor the person who has died ("Culture," 2021). Food is a large part of celebrating a person's death in Hispanic culture. Altars in Mexico usually include the loved ones favorite foods, fruits, favorite breads, flowers, religious candles and symbols, and pictures of the person who has died. The way most people remember Dia de Los Muertos is according to the "[h]umorous portrayals of skeletons and death [that] remind the living to make the most of their precious time together" ("Culture," 2021). In Hispanic cultures, the observances of those who have died are based on respect, honor, community, and afterlife. Most importantly, what makes Mexican grieving unique is that their "funeral customs blend indigenous and Catholic traditions" ("Culture," 2021). On a similar note, "[i]n Spain it is common for deaths to occur at home" as "[t]his allows the family to prepare for the death of their loved" ("Culture," 2021). After a loved one has died, "a rosario is held nine days after the death…typically involving flowers, candles, prayers, and the sharing of memories. This practice is also held on the anniversary of their loved one's death" ("Culture," 2021). As one can see, there is a heavy influence on religion and traditions that people from the Hispanic culture use when grieving.

It is common for funerals themselves to be different in Hispanic culture than American. For example, Honduras holds "a large drum party to honor the deceased one year and one day after his or her death. Drumming continues as long as the food, drink, and money last, which can be for days. This celebration is to help elevate their loved one's spirit so spiritual evolution can take place" ("Culture," 2021). In American culture, it is rare to notice these celebrations occurring during funerals or at anniversaries of a loved one's death. The distinct traditions of Hispanic culture when responding to grief are more communal and religion-based. In Spain, death is allowed to and commonly occurs in the home which gives the family time to prepare for the death ("Culture," 2021). In American Culture, the diversity of people and religious beliefs makes it difficult to reach a consensus on which tradition is used when responding to death. According to Diana A., funerals take place approximately 3 days after the death in order to give people time to arrange plans to attend. It is common for funerals to take place after a person dies in American culture. It is also common for the burial to be attended after the funeral ceremony. Karen Heller (2022), a journalist from the Washington Post, wrote that in America, it is becoming more common to cremate than bury and that cremation rates have increased by twofold in the last two decades. Heller (2022) also states, "For some, it's drive-through death. For others, cremation offers the opportunity to control and personalize life's final ritual." Interestingly, death is denied in America and "swept under the rug" (Hess, 2018). Hess writes, "Denial is a strong defense mechanism and serves a great purpose, however, it has the ability to be harmful, and rob friends and families of special moments at end of life." It is clear that the processing of grief can be affected by the communication and events that occur before, during, and after a loved one's death. In comparison to Hispanic culture, death tends to be less openly spoken about and celebrated differently in America than in Latin countries.

However different the Hispanic and American cultures are, they share the expectation that men and women should express grief differently. In Hispanic culture, “Public expressions of grief are accepted, especially among women. Men, however, are less likely to grieve openly due to the culture of ‘machismo,’ though it is not unacceptable for men to weep” (“Culture,” 2021). Men are usually never seen crying and are expected to remain stoic and strong. In Hispanic cultures, there is a gender-based expectation on grief and who needs to step up after someone dies. For example, in Honduras, a Hispanic country, “[w]omen, especially immediate family members, are expected to wail and perform the ritual prayers during wakes. Men are excluded from public rituals of mourning the deaths of their peers and are left to internalize their grief through stoicism or the consumption of alcohol” (Wolseth, 2008). Families usually have women cooking for and organizing the novenas, which are the 9 daily rosaries prayed by the family in honor of the person who has died. Traditionally, men are less involved in grieving than women in Hispanic Culture. Furthermore, the gendered expectations in grief in American culture is described by Jodi Kanter (2022): “[there is a] tendency for men to be more action-oriented in crises, perhaps at the expense of performing the emotional work of grieving. If feminine grief has historically been represented as hysterical, masculine grief has scarcely been represented at all.” It appears that in both cultures openly grieving is less accepted in men, and therefore experienced by men than women. The gendered standards for expressing grief in Hispanic and American culture can lead to mental health repercussions: “ Those whose grief is disenfranchised may have their feelings discredited or overlooked, not be provided socio-emotional support, or may feel pressure to confine their grief to solidarity” (Barney and Yoshimura, 2020). In turn, it is important to understand how cultures exert collective expectations on different groups in their population to truly understand how grief is felt in Hispanic and American cultures.

Overall, the analysis and comprehension of grief processing is beneficial because it allows for a well rounded idea of how different cultures feel loss differently. It may be initially hard to wrap one's head around the idea that English "grief" is not the same as grief in Hispanic cultures. Spanish and English are different and thereby lend themselves to be curated into a distinct lexical grid by their culture group. The distinct traditions are a component that help people understand death and feel their grief. All in all, Hispanic and American cultures share common traits in phrases to express grief and gendered expectations, but feel grief differently based on their celebrations, traditions, and language patterns. All to say, that the American way of feeling is not universal and that every culture has its own way of feeling.

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