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**Abstract**

Souvenirs and Travel Guides: The Cognitive Sociology of Grieving Public Figures

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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.

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## INTRODUCTION

*My boss was looking through her phone and suddenly she gasped and said “David Bowie is dead.” And I just I, I couldn’t believe it, I was completely in denial, I was like “this is not true, it cannot be true.” And I frantically look at my phone and there was a news report of it. And like I looked at my Facebook feed and other people had talked about it. And it just hit me like a thunderbolt. Like it was – I just couldn’t accept or believe that David Bowie could not be here. Umm...so I was completely, I was a mess. Umm, I think it was because I was in such a state of shock that I couldn’t even really react and then after that all of the interviews – I couldn’t take in anything more. I was like, my body was in shut down. Umm, and I think what made it really hard also was how my other boss completely, like, trivialized this whole experience, whereas the colleague who had told me, like, she was very sympathetic. Umm, but it was like nowhere close to how I was feeling about it and so it was extraordinarily hard. And trying to maintain sort of like “I’m still at work” and still trying to figure that out was really difficult. And I think it surprised me too that I felt that strongly about it, umm, I think David Bowie had like, as a figure, had bonded in my life in such a way that like it felt like a part of my self had died.*

*~Samantha*

When David Bowie died in January of 2016, fans flocked to Brixton, England where he was born. Bereaved fans left flowers, held vigils, and paid tribute to the iconic musician. They gathered together to remember him and sing his work, mourning his death by celebrating his life. A few months later, in April, Prince died, and his Minnesota home, Paisley Park, became a sacred ground, as tearful fans attached balloons, cards, stuffed animals, and anything purple to the fence around the property. In June, when Mohamed Ali died, devastated fans gathered outside the Mohamed Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky, paying their respects by laying flowers, signed boxing gloves, and other memorabilia at a make-shift memorial. And when Carrie Fischer died in December, those who cherished her grabbed their lightsabers, wrapped their hair into buns (when possible), and gathered together to pay tribute to someone who broke stereotypes and entertained millions. What’s extraordinary about the grief these people felt is, ironically, how ordinary this reaction actually is. 2016 may have seen a particularly high number of public figure deaths, but the phenomenon of grieving these figures is nothing new. For example, people grieved Malcom X in

1965, FDR in 1945, and even Rudolph Valentino in 1926 (Deaths 2018). And yet, despite the fact that this unique kind of grief is not new, there has been little scholarly attention devoted to explaining it. This study analyzes grief for public figures to understand how public figures can play a role in mundane life.

Existing research on grief in both sociology and psychology focuses on how people mourn and what factors contribute to the ease of that transition. However, these studies generally do not address the question of why people experience grief because nearly all of this research is based on deaths for which grief is the common-sense expectation: deaths of people for whom there is a personal relationship, like a family member or friend. The few studies that have examined grief for public figures have focused primarily on collective mourning practices, what people do in the wake of a public figure's death, but have not adequately examined the kinds of emotions people associate with the death of a public figure. Accordingly, this study's first asks how do people experience "grief" for a public figure?

Grief is an emotional reaction that is closely related to how people construct meaning out of their experiences. Research on bereavement suggests that grief represents the disruption of meaning in the wake of a significant others' death. Existing sociological theories provide explanations for how people incorporate interactive and cultural elements of their social environment into their cognitive frameworks, which shapes how people make sense out of their experiences. However, it is not clear what kinds of associations are present when it is a public figure that has been symbolically internalized. Therefore, the second research question of this study is: what meanings do people who "grieve" public figures associate with those figures?

This analysis first provides an overview of the relevant literature, beginning with bereavement research to define the concept of "grief," and to demonstrate what the phenomenon

represents in the social sciences. Next, the literature review examines research in cognitive social sciences to present a model of the cognitive frameworks people develop to navigate the complex social world. This background section concludes with a review of the research examining the social and cultural influences that form associations and shape perceptions during this process of cognitive socialization. The second section of this paper provides an overview of the methods I use to answer this study's questions about the nature of grieving public figures. This study is based on semi-structured interviews with twenty-three individual who reported a variety of reactions and a variety of connections to public figures.

The third section of this paper presents the findings of this study. The evidence from the interviews demonstrate two ideal type reactions, one characterized by benign sadness, and another characterized by disruptive affective pain. Further, the evidence indicates these reactions are closely associated with a pattern of perceiving the public figure as a symbol representing either important memories or cognitive insights. The fourth section of this paper provides a discussion of these findings, and argues that these emotional reactions to the death of a public figure represents a loss of meaning maintained by that figure-as-symbol, disrupting the individual's cognitive framework.

The final section of this paper discusses the implications this research has for work on bereavement, the roles of public figures, and the relationship between culture and cognition. By revealing meaningful, cognitively functional relationships between public figures and the public, this analysis offers insights into the way cultural objects can be used to augment and maintain the individual's construction of their past, present, and future.

## I. BACKGROUND

### Bereavement and Public Figures.

Bereavement, defined as “the state of having lost someone we care about or love through death” (Attig 2004;343), has received scholarly attention from researchers in psychology, sociology, geriatrics, and various medical fields. Derived primarily from studies of close, personal deaths,<sup>1</sup> this research clarifies the nature of bereavement and the relationship between mourning and grief, which represent complementary elements of bereavement. Mourning is the behavioral response to the death of a significant other (Brennan 2001; Attig 2004; Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis 2014). Through mourning, individuals reconstruct their understanding of the world and their life in it without the presence of that significant other (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies 2002; Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse 2004; Neimeyer, Baldiwn, & Gillies 2006; Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner 2010; Root & Exline 2014; Boyraz, Horne, & Waits 2015).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, grief refers to the internal, affective response to the death of a significant other (Lofland 1985; Attig 2004). Grief is generally characterized by a sharp, painful spike in depression that persists, but decreases over time (Lofland 1985; Attig 2004; Bonanno et al. 2002; Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse 2004). This reaction occurs because the death of a significant other disrupts the individual’s ability to make sense out of their world (Bonanno et al. 2002; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies 2002; Attig 2004; Bennett 2010). While both mourning and grief are influenced by social factors and vary across context (*see* Lofland 1985; Brennan 2001; Attig 2004; Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis 2014)), the process they reflect inheres within the nature of human attachment (DeGarmo & Kitson 1996; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies 2002; Holland & Neimeyer 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> *See, e.g.*, Bonano et al. 2002 (family members and friends); Bennett 2010 (husbands).

<sup>2</sup> “[B]ereavement therefore prompts us to ‘relearn the self’ and ‘relearn the world’ in the wake of loss,” (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies 2002:239).

Despite these insights, it remains unclear why some people might grieve the deaths of public figures. This bereavement research connects the deaths of significant others to disruptions in meaning, but generally neither questions why grief occurred, nor extends its scope to examine the loss of purely symbolic relationships. Celebrity worship and parasocial relationships, the primary theories of the connections people form with public figures provide little help in closing this gap. Celebrity worship involves an individual becoming absorbed or engrossed in a celebrity, and explains such bonds through a delusional belief about the nature the individual's relationship to the celebrity. (McCutcheon et al. 2002; McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran 2002; McCutcheon et al. 2003; North et al. 2007; Sheridan et al 2007; McCutcheon et al. 2016). In contrast, parasocial relationships are characterized by an illusory perception of personal intimacy with a media persona (Giles 2002, Cohen & Hoffner 2016). These relationships develop through repeated parasocial "interactions" in which the persona engages in behaviors that give the impression of directly interacting with the viewer, such as making comments directly to the audience, adopting a personal or informal style of communication, or disclosing details of their personal lives (Horton & Wohl 1956; Rubin & McHugh 1987; Hartmann & Goldhoorn 2011; Branch et al. 2013; Dibble et al. 2016). While both provide some potential explanations for how people bond to public figures, neither address how that bond represents a material component in how the individual finds meaning in their world. A cognitive sociological approach is necessary to understand how public figures might influence this meaning-making process. Accordingly, this review turns to the cognitive social sciences.

## Synthesizing Cognitive Social Sciences: The Ontology of Cognitive Frameworks.

According to research on bereavement, the sine qua non of grief is that the death of someone important in an individual's life interrupts their ability to find meaning in their world:

Bereavement shakes our 'assumptive world' far more deeply than simply causing us to question beliefs we have long held or to rethink plans of action. Rather, bereavement uproots our souls: It takes us away from the shape of life where we have come to experience ourselves at home, and it makes us aware of how much we have taken for granted. Bereavement shakes our spirits: it disrupts the life patterns within which we have found meaning. . . . Bereavement undermines what we have learned about how to be and act in the world. (Attig 2004:350)

This conceptualization of grief aligns elegantly with leading theories in sociology about the nature of how individuals learn about their world:

Just as an individual's nomos is constructed and sustained in conversation with significant others, so is the individual plunged toward anomy when such conversation is radically disrupted. . . . [T]he fundamental order in terms of which the individual can 'make sense' of his life and recognize his own identity will be in the process of disintegration. . . . [H]e will become uncertain about his cognitive bearings []. The world begins to shake in the very instant that its sustaining conversation begins to falter. (Berger [1967] 1990:21-2)

"Nomos" refers to a meaningful order or an organizing of experience (Berger [1967] 1990:19). Just as society imposes a nomos on human activity, individuals build their subjective nomos by integrating ongoing experiences into a single, meaningful order (Berger [1967] 1990). This working model of the meanings that structure their world provides a sense of security or comfort, and enables people to navigate their daily lives (Berger [1967] 1990).<sup>3</sup> Many sociologists have used terms other than "nomos" to refer to a similar concept of a combined network of meanings people develop about the nature of their world.<sup>4</sup> I use "cognitive framework" to emphasize that

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<sup>3</sup> "Every nomos confronts the individual as a meaningful reality that comprehends him and all of his experiences. It bestows sense on his life. . . . [T]his is the decisive reason for the establishment of nomoi in the first place. The nomos locates the individual's life in an all-embracing fabric of meanings that, by its very nature, transcends that life." ([1969] 1990:54.).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Erving Goffman's framework or Pierre Bourdieu's habitus.

people use this accumulated system of associations to “build” their understanding of their social world. Cognitive frameworks are simultaneously retrospective and prospective,<sup>5</sup> enabling the individual (1) to remember by reconstructing the past using this network of meanings,<sup>6</sup> (2) to act in the present by recognizing the social setting and activating the necessary knowledge and skills (Goffman 1974; Heise 2007), and (3) to plan futures by providing a measure of predictability about the likely course of events (Goffman 1974, Swidler 1986). In other words, cognitive frameworks are the mental structures through which people impose a meaningful order onto experiential chaos.

Research has demonstrated, however, that the nature of cognition is more complex than a simple, conscious rational process that is easily articulated. For example, it is well-established that people give varying and inconsistent explanations for otherwise consistent lines of behavior (Vaisey 2009). Recently, sociologists have begun to incorporate insights from cognitive psychology to improve theory about the nature of cognition. Chief among these is the dual process nature of cognition. The Dual-Process Model refers to the fact that people process information at both conscious and subconscious levels (Vaisey 2009; Lizardo 2017). Conscious cognition is a deliberate, articulate kind of information processing, and has been variously labeled deliberative cognition (DiMaggio 1997), justifications (Vaisey 2009), and declarative (personal) culture (Lizardo 2017). I use the term “narrative cognition” to emphasize the relational, story-based format generally used to sustain conscious mental models (*e.g.* Scott & Lyman 1968; Brekhus 2015). In contrast, subconscious cognition is implicit, immediate information processing and has been referred to as common sense (Swidler 1986), nondeclarative (personal) culture (Lizardo 2017), or

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<sup>5</sup> Consistent with the constructivist account of memory, which proposes that the primary function of memory about the past is to construct lines of action in the present and anticipate future events. *See* Guenther 2002.

<sup>6</sup> While memory has traditionally been understood using a filing system metaphor, more recent memory research supports the constructivist account of memory, which suggests that it is a system of connections about ourselves and the social world in the present that individuals use to reconstruct past events. *See* Guenther 2002.

automatic cognition (DiMaggio 1997). I use the term “embodied cognition”<sup>7</sup> to emphasize that this kind of cognition occurs outside of conscious mental deliberation, and to play on the colloquialism of “gut” instinct.

Embodied cognition places only minimal burdens on the human mind’s inherently limited cognitive resources because it operates in an automatic, effortless mode (Collins 1994; Goldstein 2011).<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, most cognition occurs at the embodied level (DiMaggio 1997; Vaisey 2009). Embodied cognition operates when the individual recognizes features of a social setting with which that individual has formed prior relevant associations, and uses those meanings to build their perception of the situation and their subsequent behavior therein (DiMaggio 1997; Lizardo 2017).<sup>9</sup> In general, people seek social settings that align with and support their embodied cognitive framework to avoid having to abandon their habitual strategies of action (Swidler 1986). However, social stimuli for which there is no habitual or automatic response or association represent anomalies<sup>10</sup> that produce negative affect, such as anxiety, sadness, frustration, or uncertainty (Heise 2007). To resolve these anomalies and the affective state they produce, the individual utilizes their narrative cognitive toolkit<sup>11</sup> either to reinterpret that stimuli and bring in into agreement with their cognitive framework or, if such redefinition fails, to adapt their cognitive framework to accommodate that experience (Heise 2007).

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<sup>7</sup> This phrase was inspired by Winchester (2016).

<sup>8</sup> For example, sociologists point to “bounded rationality” when critiquing rational choice theory (Collins 1994). Cognitive psychologists encounter this limitation far more often, for example by recognizing cognitive resources and cognitive load, divided attention, and working memory capacity (Goldstein 2011).

<sup>9</sup> This is conceptually similar to the relationship between Bourdieu’s habitus and field. *See* Vaisey 2009 (pp1682-7) for discussion.

<sup>10</sup> Anomaly should be interpreted literally to mean social stimuli that are beyond the scope of the individual’s nomos, or cognitive framework, such as perceiving contradictory meanings, observing unexpected actions, or encountering unfamiliar situations (Swidler 1986; DiMaggio 1997; Heise 2007; Lizardo 2017). Anomalies can also occur in a more intentional manner, such as when an individual’s attention is directed at a problem or when they are motivated to change their habitual behavior (DiMaggio 1997; Granberg 2006; Harris 2011).

<sup>11</sup> As used herein, the term “cognitive toolkit” refers to the systems of narrative meaning an individual uses to address the anomalies they encounter. This term is inspired by Swidler (1986), but applies to the individual. In this conceptualization, “culture” is more a cognitive hardware store from which individuals obtain their cognitive tools.

## Community, Culture, and Cognition: The Construction of Cognitive Frameworks.

The meanings that populate cognitive frameworks are generated through cognitive socialization, or the continuous process through which people internalize the cognitive norms and social structures of their social environment and the broader cultural context in which this process takes place (Swidler 1986; Zerubavel 1997; Vaisey 2009; Lizardo 2017).<sup>12</sup> While there is still debate about the nature or mechanisms of internalization, the fundamental premise is that exposure to meanings associated with social stimuli alters the network of associations in the individual's cognitive framework (Lizardo 2017). Cognitive socialization occurs through observation and pragmatic experimentation within the social environment (i.e. interactional trial and error with behaviors, skills, and perceptions) under structures of accountability (Zerubavel 1997; Lizardo 2017). When individuals cannot account for some feature of their social world, like unfamiliar experiences or ideas, they must augment their cognitive frameworks or live in the discomfort and uncertainty introduced by that anomaly (Heise 2007). Cognitive socialization establishes a shared system of meaning between the individual and those others in their environment with whom they interact, a prerequisite to successful social action (Zerubavel 1997).<sup>13</sup>

These local social environments, or “thought communities,” establish their cognitive intersubjectivity by providing individuals with cognitive norms they internalize to structure their own cognitive processing (Zerubavel 1997; Zerubavel & Smith 2010; Brekhus 2015). The details of a social environment detected by motor senses are filtered through interpretive frameworks established as legitimate within each thought community (Zerubavel 1997; Brekhus 2007). These

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<sup>12</sup> While there are still significant debates in cultural sociology about what “culture” is and exactly how it influences cognition, that debate need not be settle to address the narrow question of this study.

<sup>13</sup> This process “is the basis, first, for an understanding of one’s fellowmen and, second, for the apprehension of the world as a meaningful and social reality,” (Berger & Luckmann 1966:130).

frameworks determine which features of their environment require their attention, how to perceive what they see, and how to classify social objects based on those perceptions (Zerubavel 1997; Cerulo 2002; Brekhus 2015). Furthermore, because people generally inhabit multiple thought communities (such as professions, social networks, or demographic groups), each of which requires a framework customized for that social environment,<sup>14</sup> joining a new thought community requires internalizing how to think like a member of that community (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Goffman 1974; Zerubavel 1997; Brekhus 2007). This means that people belonging to different thought communities are likely to see the same things differently. For example, street racers, car collectors, and auto dealers are likely to perceive the same car in dramatically different ways. While all would examine the condition of the car, the racer is likely to focus on power and speed, collectors on original parts and history of use, and the dealer on the market for cars of similar quality; however, it's unlikely any of them would pay attention to the number of cupholders. In other words, because different thought communities emphasize slightly different ways of thinking about the world, the meanings individual members derive from their experiences will vary between communities (Zerubavel 1997; Cerulo 2002; Brekhus 2015).

In addition to interaction within one's thought communities, individuals also use cognitive resources beyond their literal lived experience to augment their cognitive framework, like socially supported visions of the future (Granberg 2006; Harris 2011), analogy (Thibodeau & Boroditsky 2011; Landau, Keefer, & Rothschild 2017), or distant events that are part of that community's collective consciousness (DiMaggio 1997; Zerubavel 1997; Lizardo 2017).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, individuals can internalize a variety of symbolic associations established by their cultural context.

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<sup>14</sup> A phenomenon called "cognitive pluralism," (Zerubavel 1997).

<sup>15</sup> For example, most American adults know why September 11, 2001 is important and know how JFK died, despite not being physically present for either.

Symbols, the mental association that connects one idea or object (the signifier) to some other idea or object (the signified) (Zerubavel 1997), are key social influences on individual cognitive frameworks because of their extreme flexibility. Through cognitive socialization, individuals learn what meaning to associate with things like colors, objects, or even styles of self-presentation (Zerubavel 1997). These meanings are not a natural consequence of the nature of either the signifier or the signified, but instead are the product of a shared consensus within the individual's social environment about what things mean (Zerubavel 1997). Symbols have the ability to store more than just meaning, but also emotional energy and even feelings of belonging (Collins 2004). Accordingly, while our personal cognitive framework appears idiosyncratic and unique, it is fundamentally a product of multiple, overlapping social processes, at both the community and cultural level, that enable successful navigation of the social world.

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Together, these literatures demonstrate what the experience of grief represents in the lives of the bereaved, on one hand, and the process through which cultural objects are internalized, on the other, and how both relate to the construction and maintenance of meaning. However, this research does not explain what meanings are internalized when cultural objects are public figures, why internalization of that meaning would lead to an emotional reaction to their death, or even whether emotional reactions to deaths of public figures represent “grief” at all. To answer these questions, and provide greater insight into the sociological basis of cognition, this study examines the emotional and symbolic experience of grieving public figures.

## II. METHODS

Answering these questions about how people react to the deaths of public figures requires data about the emotions and meanings people associate with their public figure. Accordingly, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews to explore how the individual made sense out of their reaction to the figure's death and their connection to that figure. While research in cultural sociology has provided clear reasons the utility of this kind of data is limited for analyzing behavior, interview data provides reliable insights into the narrative organization people use to construct meaning out of their experiences, including how they feel about those experiences (Pugh 2013; Jerolmack & Khan 2014). Because this study is interested in respondents' sense-making process, and makes no claims about how these cultural meanings were internalized, this analysis avoids this methodological critique (Jerolmack & Khan 2014).

Respondents needed to meet two eligibility criteria for participation: (1) they must be at least 18-years-old, and (2) they must report some kind of meaningful reaction to the death of a public figure. A comparison among those who had some kind of reaction provides the best insight into the variety of emotional experiences and meanings associated with public figures. While this excludes those who had no reactions, the research questions that motivate this study seek to examine the nature of the emotions and meanings that are present, rather than to examine the symbolic threshold for reaction to death. My recruiting materials kept the definition of "public figure" vague; I do not provide a definition, but instead include a list of examples of potential public figures (e.g. Maya Angelou, Vera Rubin, David Bowie, Carrie Fisher, etc.). Given this diffuse target population, I chose to conduct convenience sampling using three methods: posting physical recruitment flyers and distributing electronic recruitment flyers both on social media websites and through my personal social network. Recruitment flyers provided basic details about

the research and directed any interested individuals to contact me. I sent follow-up emails to all individuals who contacted me about participating in an interview. These emails provided more detailed information about the nature of the study and the topics I intended to discuss. If the individual was still interested in participating, we arranged an interview. I did not decline to interview anyone who appeared to be eligible and expressed an interest in being interviewed. In total, I conducted 15 interviews in 2017, and an additional 9 interviews in 2018. Most interviews were conducted in-person, but 3 were conducted using an online video chat service. One interview was deleted from the data,<sup>16</sup> resulting in a total sample of 23 interviews, with an average length between 1-1.5 hours.

The sample population varies widely in terms of a number of demographic characteristics.<sup>17</sup> The average age of respondents is 38, but they ranged in age from 18-70, with a standard deviation of 15 years. Similarly, while a little more than half the sample (14) identified as white, the 23 respondents identified 17 different places of birth, including 4 born outside of the United States. All of the respondents reported completing high school, with varying degrees of undergraduate and graduate education. The diversity of this sample suggests that the findings detailed below are not limited to a particular population.

The interviews were semi-structured, following a protocol that addressed four broad topics: personal questions about respondents, pre-death associations with the public figure, individual's reaction to the public figure's death, and broad, interpretive questions about the public figure. The personal questions sought to develop a thick description of the individual's emotional experiences, including open-ended questions about the individual (e.g. "How would you describe yourself?")

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<sup>16</sup> This respondent did not report any discernable emotional reaction to the chosen public figure's death, making his data ineligible for the study.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix A for full Sample Demographics.

and about the major influences on their life (e.g. life growing up, role models, and formative experiences). Next, respondents were asked which public figure they'd like to discuss. 17 respondents confidently identified a single public figure, while the remaining 6 reported having memorable reactions to multiple figures. I prompted these respondents to select the figure with whom they have the strongest associations, "the one that had the biggest impact on you," to focus the interviewee on the most salient meanings and emotions they developed toward a public figure. All respondents were able to answer that prompt with minimal hesitation.

The protocol then proceeds chronologically, asking questions about how the individual was introduced to the public figure, how they continued to relate to the public figure, and their favorite memories from when the public figure was alive. The third topic, designed to explore and contextualize the individual's experience of their public figure's death, used open-ended ("How did you react?") and specific ("Walk me through the moment of discovery.") prompts about the individual's reaction to the death and how they've reacted to other deaths in their life. The interviews conclude with a series of broad, interpretive questions designed to get a deeper understanding about the meanings the individual associates with the public figure, including questions about how to describe the figure to convey their importance, why the figure was personally important, and what to say to eulogize the figure. The protocol received several revisions early in the project to respond to issues encountered during interviews (e.g. confusing questions, questions producing no useful data ) and to add a few questions to elicit better the most relevant data (e.g. specific memories of the public figure, hypotheticals). However, these revisions were relatively minor; the topics covered by the protocol were unchanged,<sup>18</sup> and the vast majority of the specific prompts remained consistent throughout the study.

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<sup>18</sup> There were 2 interviews in which the order of the topics was changed, but there was no evidence to suggest the altered organization had any influence on their data.

To analyze the data, I used a primarily inductive approach, modeled after grounded theory, to allow themes to emerge from the data. I transcribed each audio recording, taking interpretive notes to include in transcript charts. These charts collect all the data for an interview in a single document, including memos written before and after each interview, transcript, interpretive notes, and emerging codes or themes. The transcript charts were manually coded using an iterative process. First, I coded the data into 5 broad topics most relevant to the research questions motivating this study: Reaction to Death, Public Figure and Meaning, Context of Reaction, Pre-Death Experience, and Respondent Data. I then conducted initial coding, generating a series of descriptive codes that identify the material components of each individual's reaction. Finally, I conducted focused coding that organized the descriptive codes under thematic codes that elucidate the meanings respondent associated with the public figure, and the emotions associated with that figure's death.

### **III. FINDINGS: COGNITIVE SOCIALIZATION & THE MEANING OF PUBLIC FIGURES**

The respondents in this study discussed 14 different public figures who passed away as early as December 1980 and as late as December 2017. A majority of these were musicians: Prince, John Lennon, Whitney Houston, Kurt Cobain, Michael Jackson, David Bowie, Kim Jong-Hyun, and Elliott Smith. In addition, there were 3 actors (Robin Williams, Carrie Fisher, and Anton Yelchin), 2 political figures (Princess Diana and Elie Wiesel), and 1 writer (Eduardo Galeano). Several respondents chose public figures that were also chosen by other respondents. For example, both David Bowie and Prince were identified by 4 respondents, while Princess Diana, John Lennon, and Kim Jong-Hyun each were identified by 2 respondents. The remaining public figures garnered only singular responses. However, that multiple respondents identified the same figure does not mean that they have the same symbolic associations, which highlights these figures' flexibility to act as symbols.

The findings that follow proceed in two parts. The first section presents a phenomenology of the reactions to public figures' death reported by the respondents. While half the sample described a relatively benign sadness, the other half described something that felt like traditional grief. The second section connects these patterns of reactions to patterns in the way individuals incorporated public figures into their lives as symbols. The data demonstrate that people who had a memorable reaction to the death of a public figure had learned to perceive them as a symbol that helped maintain their memories of the past or their plans for the future.

### *Post-Death Effects*

As a threshold matter, however, a small minority of respondents did not attach any significance to the death of the public figure itself, but rather to events that occurred after the death. Sarah, Maggie, and Sophia each described some minor exposure to the public figure before they died, but did not report any clear memories associated with that pre-death period. Their accounts were characterized by 2 primary features. First, salient exposures to the figure were only associated with the post-death period. As Sophia described it, the public figures didn't feel important until "after his death." Instead, in Sarah's words, their emotional associations "grew with the aftermath of his death." Similarly, the only time during her interview that Maggie became energetic, made consistent eye contact, or spoke at length without prompting was discussing exposures to Anton Yelchin after he died.<sup>19</sup> Second, these respondents did not associate strong or clear emotions with the news of death. These individuals perceived the news of the figure's death as a mere piece of information. Maggie described Yelchin's death as something "that also happened, so I guess I'll just go about my life," while Sarah recognized the impact of Michael Jackson's death, but didn't really feel it herself: "I wasn't sad, actually. I was just, like, 'Woah, that's a big deal.'" The heightened emotions that characterize these reactions, defined herein as "Post-Death Effects," are associated with the figure's increased salience in the cultural environment as a result of their death. These Post-Death Effect reactions represent only a small portion of the data provided by the sample population. Accordingly, because my research questions seek to examine the meanings present among those whose emotional reactions are associated with the news of the figure's death itself, this analysis focuses on the remaining sample.

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<sup>19</sup> This kind of "visceral" data is a key strength of interview data. *See* Pugh 2013.

A. *A PHENOMENOLOGY OF REACTIONS TO THE DEATH OF A PUBLIC FIGURE.*

The reactions to the deaths of public figures described by the sample population varied in description, degree, and significance. These data suggest two ideal types of reactions. About half of the sample reported a memorable, but low-intensity, reaction characterized by a transient sadness. These reactions were perceived as a different kind of reaction than the personal losses they had experienced in the past. In contrast, there was also a class of respondents that described reactions that were much more intense. These reactions were characterized as traumatic and painful, producing some kind of disruption in the individual's life. Those who experienced these high intensity reactions directly compared their response to the public figure's death to the death of a family member or friend, albeit with a difference in degree. This section analyzes how study participants understood their reactions along the five elements that characterize the meaningful differences between these reactions: shock, perception of injury, level of intrusion, responses to loss, and relation to prior losses.

*Shock vs "Shock"*

Every participant in this study described the death of the public figure as a "shock." The key distinction, however, between the high and low intensity reactions is what the "shock" of their figure's death means. On the lower end of the spectrum, "shock" takes its colloquial definition, meaning a strong surprise produced by an unexpected event. These individuals focused on this idea of an event they didn't foresee, which they understood as they got more information. For example, Lauren, Tina, Steven, and Gina all specifically mentioned an initial feeling of not understanding and then a desire to learn more about what happened. Zeke qualified his "shock" with "amazement" at John Lennon's death to emphasize the sudden and unexpected nature of his

death. Similarly, Andrew heard about Whitney Houston's death while preparing for a night out. He immediately sought as much television and internet coverage as he could, which delayed, but did not prevent, his preparations for the evening. For Andrew, "shock" referred to the surprise of hearing about Whitney's death and the "setting in, the reality of it" as he learned more in the immediate moments after he found out.

In contrast, for more intense reactions, "shock" represented an immobilizing stress reaction. For example, Cara described her initial reaction as "that literal shock, the denial of, sort of like, literally not taking it in...[I]t was not real, not real, not real. Just not really digesting it." Steven echoed Cara: "I wanted to drop to my knees . . . like, what the fuck's going on, you know? I felt lost...I didn't know how to convey to my boss in the field – I was just overstricken with grief." Lisa, too, reported that her "first feeling immediately was shock. I didn't even know what to think." Yvonne was in such a state of shock that she consciously rejected the news several times before her son finally convinced her that Prince really had died. Similarly, Samantha described "such a state of shock that I couldn't even really react. . . . I couldn't take in anything more. My body was in shut down." The individuals who described a high intensity reaction described their "shock" as an experience that caused an acute cognitive disruption.

#### *Perception of Injury: Aches and Pains.*

The primary reactions reported by the sample population also differ in how they characterized the nature of injury caused by the public figure's death. Respondents described high intensity reactions in terms of trauma and physical pain. Steven reported feeling "distraught, just really distraught," at the news of Elliot Smith's death and specifically "remember[ed] feeling heart pains," while Samantha reported that David Bowie's death "hit me like a thunderbolt...it's that

feeling like you've been hit in the chest." Alice, also discussing Bowie, explained she "definitely felt a really stinging regret, and definitely felt like there was a stone in the pit of my stomach." These reactions represented more than just pain, but also trauma. Cara reported "an overwhelming sort of grief just hearing this friend's voice" that prevented her from listening to Prince initially. Similarly, Yvonne said "it was like, I can't even listen to it, I'll just start crying," a statement echoed by Jackson. Yvonne's reaction still felt so traumatic that tears welled in her eyes and her voice trembled while recounting the moment she found out that Prince died. Samantha specifically articulated this trauma: "I couldn't bring myself to cry.... Generally, in my life, when deeply traumatic things have happened, I can't cry." These respondents experienced the death of their public figure as an event that caused acute, traumatic pain.

Respondents who reported low intensity responses described their reactions in much more benign ways, more like a dull ache characterized by varying degrees of sadness. While Ben described relatively significant reaction for this group, even he focused his description on sadness: "I have being sad, I have being disappointed . . . but I cannot express, like, crying or stopping my day," after David Bowie died. Similarly, Lauren reported feeling sad, but, "I didn't have, like, real deep feelings of sadness" about Prince's death, and Andrew described "a little sadness" upon hearing of Whitney Houston's death. In fact, the night Andrew found out, he talked with friends about Whitney while listening to her music, but he didn't remember it being "an extremely emotional sort of discussion." Zeke described John Lennon's death as "a very sad thing, pretty heavy," and Tina explained, "John's [death] has always been this even keel of sadness." Tina's words are particularly representative of the reactions of the Low Intensity group: "sadness is the dominant emotion."

Level of Intrusion: Obstacle vs. Distraction.

Respondents who described a low intensity reaction explained that, while meaningful, those reactions did not make a significant impact in their life. Most of these respondents described their reactions as momentary experiences from which they easily detached. Lauren and Katie remembered going about their day as normal because, as Lauren explained, “It just didn’t change much for me.” While some of the low intensity respondents reported that the public figure’s death clouded their immediate experience with a “quiet sadness,” according to Tina, their lives weren’t really affected. Tina reported that she “compartmentalized it,” and went to work as normal the next day. Andrew described his reaction as something he “could step away from and it would be gone.” While Whitney Houston’s death dominated conversation for the evening, “eventually, the night was done and we went home and, you know, life went back to normal.” Tom described a sadness that stayed with him, but “didn’t last [] long.” Nicky and Ben both reported thinking about David Bowie a lot after his death, but characterized this as a distraction. In Nicky’s words: “I call them the hamsters in your brain. They go around on their little wheel and just have the thoughts. So it was just, like, the same cycle of thoughts, like, I can’t believe that he died.” For these individuals, their public figure’s death represented a transient distraction.

In contrast, high intensity reactions were described as a disruption in the individual’s ability to think and act normally. For some, this cognitive obstacle initially manifested as denial, while others felt unable to think or work as normal. Steven and Alice both used the word “hopeless” to describe how they felt, while Mike described Robin Williams’ death as “the day the laughter died.” Samantha described the aftermath of David Bowie’s death as “definitely a time of being vulnerable because somebody who I sort of saw as this bastion of creativity and fearlessness and power in his own sense is now gone.” These higher intensity reactions were more than disruptive, but also

intrusive, lingering for varying degrees of time. Steven was not specific, but he “let those emotions wash over me for a while,” while Lisa explained that her emotional reaction persisted for “at least a month.” Samantha elaborated how she felt that initial traumatic pain transform into something that stayed with her:

That sting and the initial punch in the chest feeling became this, like, deep, weighted grief, like you’re carrying, you know, huge rocks inside of you and it’s weighing you down. And, you just can’t shake it...It’s like this mild depression.

Yvonne’s reaction is a particularly clear example of this dynamic; the intensity of her emotions was patently clear during our interview, more than a year after Prince’s death. Yvonne’s eyes filled with tears and she struggled to maintain her composure while talking about what it felt like when Prince died. In other words, these respondents associated the death of the public figure with a persistent disruption to their ability to live their life.

### *Responses to Loss: Embracing the Past or Facing the Future*

While responses to death are influenced by myriad factors, there appears to be two distinct logics that structure how the respondents described their responses to their figure’s death. Those who described low intensity reactions reported responses that centered on reaffirming the connections to their past the public figure represented, like immediately returning to the public figure’s work or reminiscing about fond memories. Zeke explained that reading interviews with John Lennon felt helpful in dealing with the sadness of his death. Both Nicky and Ben perceived listening to David Bowie’s music as something that soothed their sadness at his death, something Ben described as “therapeutic.” Similarly, Tom reported watching Star Wars to address his reaction to the loss of Carrie Fisher. Andrew, Zeke, Katie, and Lauren all described talking or thinking about the figure’s importance in the past generally. Ben emphasized that revisiting

specific memories felt soothing because they could “take me to my moment[s] with Bowie...and really reflect” on how much he loved the music. Ultimately, those who described low intensity reactions associated revisiting the past with resolving their reaction to the public figure’s death.

In contrast, those who described more intense reactions reported behaviors that focused on recognizing their changed reality as a result of the loss, including working to accept their figure’s death, talking to people who understood the meaningful relationship, and reaffirming the figure’s legacy in their life going forward. Yvonne traveled to Paisley Park after Prince’s death which she felt helped her accept “he’s really gone. He’s really not here.” Samantha visited a local music store that had a Bowie shrine, Karen was glued to Princess Diana’s funeral, and Jackson “tried to isolate myself, sort of, first, be real with myself that this happened.” Vicky explained this was “like any other death, where you have sadness, you have to come to that acceptance that, you know, this person is gone.” Mike, Jackson, and Karen also described talking to people who understood the meaningful importance of that public figure as constructive, particularly when those other were similarly affected by the death. As Jackson explained, “It’s comforting that other people, sort of, get the same kinds of things out of Prince that I did.” Most importantly, every respondent that described a high intensity reaction specifically discussed recognizing their figure’s continuing legacy. For Samantha, this meant “finding new ways to draw upon the legacy that [Bowie]’s left behind and the work that he’s created,” while Lisa used Eduardo Galeano’s own writing about death to work through his passing. Cara described listening to a radio show that was “in that spirit of a celebration of life,” as something that helped her “deepen[] the understanding of the ways that Prince had impacted people’s lives.” Alice made this reaffirmation point most directly in describing a specific discussion with a fellow Bowie fan:

We talked for a while, you know, this whole grieving process. And then, I was, like, I’m going to start doing more creative things. I’ve pigeon-holed myself into

like this empirical life, and I'm going to start doing more creative things. I'm going to embrace my weirdness. I have to. I have to, like, give that legacy some weight in my life.

Ultimately, while those who described low intensity reactions reported reconnecting with the past, those who described a high intensity reaction reported responses that focused on accepting the reality of loss in the present and reaffirming commitment to the figure's legacy in their future.

*Relation to Prior Loss: Difference in Degree vs Difference of Kind.*

Respondents who described a high intensity reaction to the death of a public figure recognized that their reactions were clearly different from other deaths they'd experienced, but characterized that difference in terms of intensity. For example, Lisa described the "sadness and despair" as less powerful than for her grandmothers, while Steven, Alice, and Yvonne all used phrases like "much harder" and "more intense." Karen made this point bluntly: "Obviously, the level of grief was way worse with my dad than it was with Princess Diana." Nevertheless, these respondents emphasized the similarities to prior losses over the differences, discussing the public figure's death as personal. For example, Steven recalled that when he found out about Elliot Smith's death at work, he explained his distress using the phrase "one of my friends," because he wanted "to convey that someone very close to me had just killed himself." Similarly, Samantha explained that Bowie's death "was like somebody who's really, really close to me passed away." Cara focused on the "utter absence" and the loss of future experiences as the primary similarity between her reaction to Prince's death and her grandfather's death. Alice talked about her grandmother, functionally the family matriarch, and compared the impact her death had on the family to the impact that David Bowie's death had on her:

[W]hen she died, there was a real sense in my family of, like, this has something to do with our, all of our, identities. . . . [S]he was the glue that held us together, and that, somehow, affected how I go about my business. And I feel very similarly about Bowie . . . . [B]oth of these have had some influence on how I think about legacy and how legacy should influence me as, like, people in my life, but then, also, what kind of legacy I'll leave behind. So, I guess it's actually a pretty clean analogy.”

In sum, each respondent who described a high intensity reaction related their experience to how they felt after the deaths of family or friends.

Respondents who described low intensity reactions also reported some similarities to other deaths they had experienced. For example, Zeke felt a familiar “sense of mild shock and absence” after John Lennon died, and Andrew pointed to sadness while watching Whitney Houston’s funeral that was similar to his grandmother’s funeral. However, these respondents emphasized the differences. When asked to compare her reaction to Prince’s death to other personal deaths she’d experienced, Lauren said her reactions were “very different, like, a sea of difference.” Similarly, Tina focused on the “quiet sadness” of John Lennon’s death as distinct from the complex combination of emotions she felt after her father’s death. The majority of these low intensity respondents made this contrast with “personal” deaths explicit. Zeke said, “there was no real personal sense of loss,” Andrew explained, “I didn’t know her personally,” and Ben put this point most directly: “If I compare to other deaths – look, it’s not personal.” While every respondent drew some parallels between their reaction to the public figure’s death and other losses they had experienced, low intensity reactions felt fundamentally different than the personal “grief” they had experienced.

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The first research question of this study asked how do people perceive their emotional reactions to the death of a public figure. These data suggest two ideal types of reactions

described by the sample population. High intensity reactions are characterized by disruption and sharp emotional pain. Given the parallels between these reactions and traditional grief, these reactions are defined as “Grief”. In contrast, low intensity reactions are characterized by a dull ache that presents a temporary distraction in the individual’s life. These reactions are defined as “Melancholy”. Table 1 below provides a direct comparison of the two responses.

Table 1 – Grief vs. Melancholy Reactions

|                        | GRIEF   | MELANCHOLY  |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Shock                  | <p>Immobilizing stress reaction</p> <p><i>“I was in such a state of shock, I couldn’t even really react...I couldn’t take in anything more. My body was in shut down.”</i><br/>~Samantha</p>  | <p>A strong, unpleasant surprise produced by an unexpected event</p> <p><i>“I think it was shock and, you know, it was all just sort of setting in, the reality of it.”</i><br/>~Andrew</p>             |
| Aches & Pain           | <p>Sharp affective pain analogized to physical injury</p> <p><i>“I remember feeling heart pains.”</i><br/>~Steven</p>   | <p>Dull sadness</p> <p><i>“I was sad. I was really sad.”</i><br/>~Ben</p>   |
| Level of Intrusion     | <p>Persistent affective state that gradually resolves over time; obstacle to overcome.</p> <p><i>“For the next few days, I wasn’t fully myself.”</i><br/>~Samantha</p>  | <p>Transient, non-disruptive mood; mere distraction.</p> <p><i>“It just didn’t change much for me, you know? My day went on.”</i><br/>~Lauren</p>   |
| Response to Loss       | <p>Recognizing changed reality in wake of death and reaffirming meaning public figure embodied.</p> <p><i>“I’m going to start doing more creative things. I’m going to embrace my weirdness. I have to give that legacy some weight in my life.”</i><br/>~Alice</p> | <p>Revisiting connection to past public figure embodied</p> <p><i>“I could go back to fond memories. I could speak to my friend and we could reminisce again for the thousandth time.”</i><br/>~Ben</p> |
| Relation to Prior Loss | <p>Major similarities, but with a difference in degree to prior losses</p> <p><i>“The only time I’ve felt that way has been when it has been somebody that I’ve actually, physically known.”</i><br/>~Cara</p>  | <p>Minor similarities, with a difference of kind to prior losses</p> <p><i>“There was no real personal sense of loss, like when my parents or grandparents died.”</i><br/>~Zeke</p>                     |

The second research question of this study, however, seeks to examine whether different kinds of meaning associated with public figures leads to these different reactions. As is true for every social category, the characteristics that separate the experiences of Grief and Melancholy are fuzzy at the margins, with cases on either side challenging these boundaries. For example, Ben's emotions to the death of David Bowie were quite strong but didn't significantly disrupt his life. Nevertheless, there was one deciding factor that clearly separated those who described Grief and those who described Melancholy: Relation to Prior Loss. The justification for this analytical choice lies in the nature of the data itself. By definition, interview data speak to the meanings people consciously articulate about their experiences. Accordingly, these data indicate the individual's perception of pain or disruption, which admits the possibility of differing perceptions of the same experience. However, comparing their reactions to the deaths of family or friends forces them to categorize their reaction to the public figure as either fundamentally similar to or different from traditional grief reactions they had experienced in the past. In making classificatory decisions for close cases based on interview data, this analysis examines how the respondents themselves classify their perception of their reaction based on their perception of traditional grief. In marginal cases where an individual's reaction did not obviously fit either ideal type, the deciding factor was whether they made sense of their reaction as personal or not. Table 2 below shows the groups into which each individual was sorted, as well as the public figure they discussed.

Table 2 – Respondent Groups, by Reaction

| POST-DEATH EFFECTS |                 | MELANCHOLY           |                 | GRIEF    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|
| Subject            | Public Figure   | Subject              | Public Figure   | Subject  | Public Figure   |
| Maggie             | Anton Yelchin   | Lauren               | Prince          | Steven   | Elliott Smith   |
| Sarah              | Michael Jackson | Tina                 | John Lennon     | Lisa     | Eduardo Galeano |
| Sophia             | Kim Jong-Hyun   | Zeke                 | John Lennon     | Alice    | David Bowie     |
|                    |                 | Andrew               | Whitney Houston | Samantha | David Bowie     |
|                    |                 | Gina <sup>20</sup>   | Elie Wiesel     | Cara     | Prince          |
|                    |                 | Alexes <sup>21</sup> | Kurt Cobain     | Yvonne   | Prince          |
|                    |                 | Ben                  | David Bowie     | Mike     | Robin Williams  |
|                    |                 | Tom                  | Carrie Fisher   | Vicky    | Princess Diana  |
|                    |                 | Nikky                | David Bowie     | Jackson  | Prince          |
|                    |                 | Katie                | Kim Jong-Hyun   | Karen    | Princess Diana  |

These findings next examine the patterns of symbolic relations between public figures and the respondents assigned to the Grief and Melancholy groups to understand what factors contribute to the difference in reactions. For most of the sample population, public figures were associated with memorable details in the individual’s life and provided a connection to their past. For some, however, their public figure embodied meaning these individuals used to navigate their present and perceive their future.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Special Circumstances. See fn.23.

<sup>21</sup> Special Circumstances. See fn.23.

<sup>22</sup> These patterns are unrelated to any observed patterns in the demographic characteristics of the sample population.

## B. PUBLIC FIGURES AND COGNITIVE FRAMEWORKS: SYMBOLIC RELATIONS WITH CULTURAL OBJECTS.

The clear majority of respondents reported perceiving their public figure as representing something more than themselves. However, the nature of what the figures represented and the emotions associated therewith varies between those who described Melancholy and those who described Grief. Public figures had become *mnemonic symbols* for the former, reminders of significant details of their autobiographical narrative, and *hermeneutic symbols* for the latter, guidance for how to interpret their experiences and to find their way in the world. The easiest way to understand the difference between this symbolism by analogy to the difference between souvenirs and travel guides. While souvenirs help you revisit cherish trips from your past, travel guides help you find your way in the trips you've yet to take.

### *Souvenirs & Melancholy: Symbolic Resources for Memory Reconstruction*

*“Her music made me excited and happy....[H]earing those songs will always put me in that era.” ~Andrew*

For those who reported Melancholy reactions, their public figures symbolic representations of some significant part of their past. When not talking about the figure's death, these respondent's primary emotional associations were happiness and excitement. In describing what their figure meant to them, these individuals reported some kind of meaningful association between the public figure and with either an era in their life or specific formative memories and experiences.<sup>23</sup> In other words, for the members of the Melancholy group, their public figure were souvenirs, mnemonic symbols that helped make their self-narrative easier to tell.

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<sup>23</sup> Gina and Alexes are exceptions to this statement, whose patterns of associations diverge from the Melancholy group. Instead, their associations more closely resemble the patterns of the Grief group, save for one necessary element. Their Special Circumstances cases will be discussed in greater detail *infra*.

Emotions: Happiness and Excitement.

*“Bowie’s music made me feel happy. And, a lot of times, even the songs that are not happy songs – I don’t know, just happy. ~Nicky*

For members of the Melancholy Group, their public figure made them feel good, and these respondents focused on emotional experiences characterized by simple, positive emotions. While the precise emotions described varied, these individuals all talked about different kinds of happiness, including excited, ecstatic, or even thrilled when the circumstances were right. For example, Lauren focused on the “pleasure from [Prince’s] music,” which made her feel “happy” and “like wanting to dance,” while Katie explained that listening to Kim Jong-Hyun made her feel “just ecstatic! So happy!” While Tina and Zeke recognized that they’re reaction to John Lennon’s music depended on the specific song, they both described excitement and intense curiosity whenever they encountered news about Lennon himself. Tom, Andrew, Nicky, and Ben also used “exciting” to describe their emotional experience. Nicky, Ben, and Katie, each of whom saw their figure live in concert, emphasized that these emotions were particularly intense when thinking about live performances. Respondents who reported a Melancholy reaction described emotions that varied by context and over time, but the predominant emotional associated with their public figure was warm feelings of happiness and excitement,

Construction of Public Figure as Mnemonic Symbols:

*“I remember certain times in my life according to when Prince songs came out.” ~Lauren*

For most of the members of the Melancholy Group, they came to perceive their public figures as a *mnemonic symbol*, or a symbolic association that aids in memory reconstruction by connecting some signifier with salient details from the individual’s life narrative. In other words, individuals who described a Melancholy reaction perceived the public figure as a kind of souvenir, a symbol

that help reconnect them to the story of their life. These respondents described two different kinds of mnemonic symbols, *situational cues* that are generally reminiscent of the experience, and *experiential cues* that were an intrinsic part of the experience.

Some souvenirs are things like snow globes, shot glasses, or anything you'd buy in a gift shop: they generally connect to a period of time that you want to be able to remember. The respondents who described a public figure as a situational cue talked about how their figure was a noticeable feature in the background of their life. For example, Lauren said: "I remember certain times in my life according to when Prince songs came out....It's about other people or a time in my life that this kind of music solidified for me." Lauren explained that she enjoyed Prince's music, but "the good feelings I have about Prince is . . . more who the people were in my life," than they are about Prince himself. Similarly, for Tina, the Beatles burst into cultural consciousness when she was "right at that 12-13, coming-into-fullness stage," and she learned to see John Lennon as an individual over time. The music he contributed over time, as part of the Beatles and on his own, "allows us to touch who we are, moments in time and to reflect on where we lived, how we supported ourselves, who was in our lives."

Even in cases in which public figures were foregrounded much more clearly, these respondents still described situational cues because the figures were broadly associated with a long period of time. For example, Nicky talked about how "when, like, someone says who's your favorite musician, it's always Bowie. It's always been Bowie." This connection between Bowie's music and her life was unique: "There's no, very few people or artists, that, you know, that, I don't know, that have been part of my life for so long." Similarly, for Andrew, his love of Whitney Houston's music was a defining feature of his adolescence. He explained he had always been a huge fan of Whitney and that "she was always a staple part of my life, as far back as 6. For Andrew, Whitney

Houston's "music was important for a time in my life," and thus became a significant component of how "you build your experience of who you are" in his memory. When public figures are perceived as situational cues, they are generally reminiscent of important or formative periods in respondents' lives.

In contrast, other souvenirs are things like a pearl you found while scuba diving, a movie ticket from your first date with your spouse, or a matching bottle of wine from a memorable dinner: these souvenirs were an intrinsic part of those meaningful experiences. The respondents who described a public figure as an experiential cue talked about how their figure was a key component of the significant experience. For example, Katie was a fan of the group Shinee in high school, but her most salient associations with Shinee singer Kim Jong-Hyun were tied to when she studied abroad in South Korea, an immersive experience she described as "totally transformative." In South Korea, Shinee's music was "present all the time," and Katie reported a particularly fond memory of "figur[ing] how...to get into a Korean music show," to see Shinee with friends. However, Katie's symbolic associations were not really about Kim Jong-Hyun himself, but about his presence in the group that created music that contextualized this time in her life. Similarly, Zeke associated John Lennon with a cultural era that had major influence on how he thought, separate from his role in the Beatles. Zeke explained that Lennon was important for "how open he was as a public figure who was seeking the truth about what it means to be a human being." While this might suggest that Lennon was the meaningful influence himself, Zeke explained that Lennon "wasn't the only one. I really like Dylan. I mean, I've come to realize in relatively recent years . . . how much that whole counter-culture of the time [became] the foundation for how I think and what I believe." In metaphoric language, how Zeke understood his connection to Lennon is like keeping a textbook from college, an era that deeply changed who he was and how he thought.

Lennon was associated with that counter-cultural philosophy, but, by definition, that influence was much bigger than just John Lennon.

For other Melancholy respondents, their figure had characteristics of both a situational cue and an experiential cue. For Tom, Carrie Fisher was primarily a situational cue that took on some functions of an experiential cue. While Tom talked a bit about Fisher generally, “it was Princess Leia that my emotions were really invested in,” and who came to represent the franchise as a whole. Tom explained “[s]he was just somebody that had always been present...I barely remember not having Star Wars around.” Tom emphasized that the long-term plans for franchise became a life-long expectation: “I can’t stress enough how the 9-movie thing has been, uh, in my life, having them.” However, Star Wars, and therefore Princess Leia, also had experiential cue qualities. Tom talked about how watching Star Wars on the way to being deployed in Desert Storm, “gave me comfort.” He also reported that “when my kids were born, I took the VCR and hooked it up to the TV, and my kids watched Star Wars with me before we left the hospital”. In other words, Tom reported deep symbolic associations between Carrie Fisher and both the cultural context of his life and particular salient moments. Similarly, for Ben, David Bowie was primarily an experiential cue that also served the function of a situational cue because Bowie symbolized a very thick connection to his past. Ben’s love for David Bowie was about the music that had been a part of his life for so long. Bowie was also intimately connected to one of the most important people in Ben’s life, his friend Ethan, because they bonded over their shared passion for Bowie in high school. Later on, when Ben and Ethan were traveling in Amsterdam as adults, they stumbled upon an “unbelievable” opportunity to see David Bowie in concert with one small problem: it was nearly 600 miles away in Lyon, France. Ben told the story, unprompted, with energetic animation about their fanatical plan to rent a car and drive all the way there the day of the concert, despite

the cost and despite the distance. As Ben told the story, the high expectations were blown away by the experience: “He did a set of like 2.5 hours with every single hit that we wanted to hear! . . . We were like, ‘Ok, take us now. We’re ready to die, like, we’re fine. It was unbelievable. Really, it was.” Ultimately, David Bowie represented an important bundle of connections to Ben’s past acting as both an experiential and situational cue in symbolizing his life narrative, a particularly salient relationship, and one of his favorite memories of both.

Ultimately, respondents who described a Melancholy reaction also described their public figure as mnemonic symbols, something that helped them revisit important parts of their life narrative. Souvenirs serve a cognitive function because, as symbols, they can store both the emotions and the memories we reconstruct when we’re thinking about the past. In contrast, travel guides perform the important cognitive function of helping us orient ourselves in places we don’t automatically know how to navigate.

### *Travel Guides and Grief: Symbolic Resources for Experiential (Re)Interpretation*

*“When I started listening to his lyrics and looking at how he viewed life and didn’t care what people thought, then I’m like, ‘Wow, that can be me. I can be that way.’ So I did.” ~Yvonne*

In this context, a “travel guide” is a guidebook that provides general suggestions and advice for how to navigate unfamiliar locales or to orient yourself when you feel lost regardless of location. While souvenirs are firmly oriented toward the past, travel guides seek to help you make sense out of the present and plan the future. This metaphor captures the essence of the symbolic meanings members of the Grief group associated with their public figure. These respondents’ primary emotional associations included happiness, but also courage and comfort. In talking about the semiotic associations with their public figure, these individuals described symbols of some kind of cognitive insight from which they sought regular guidance.

Emotions: Validation & Emotional Energy:

*“Prince made me feel comfortable. He made me feel like things were ok.” ~Jackson*

There were some similarities in the emotional experiences of the Grief and Melancholy groups. Specifically, respondents who reported a Grief reaction also associated positive, happy emotions with their public figure, with an emphasis on excitement. Steven, Karen, Vicky, and Mike all used “happy” to describe their primary emotional association. Cara and Yvonne both talked about how listening to Prince’s music was fun and joyful, while Lisa focused on how Galeano’s writing was “amazing” in its beauty. Many of these respondents were also explicit in how strong their association was between their public figure and feeling excited. Mike, Cara, Alice, and Karen all specifically mentioned that seeing or hearing about their figure in the media was exciting. Alice explained that this intense excitement about David Bowie started when she was a kid: “Every day, I would come home and I would put in my VHS of the Labyrinth, and I was so excited every time I watched it that I would stand.” While this exciting happiness is common throughout all respondents’ narratives, but there are clear characteristics that distinguish the emotional associations of the respondents of the Grief and Melancholy groups.

The key difference between the respondent groups is that those who reported a Grief reaction emphasized that the positive affective associations extend beyond happiness to include feelings of solidarity, comfort, and safety. For example, Steven that some of Elliot Smith’s music overall made him feel happy, even though his music is “incredibly tragic and sad. I don’t know if happiness – it made me feel not alone. It made me feel like things were going to be ok.” The concept of emotional energy (Collins 2004) is particularly useful to understand the emotional experiences of the members of the Grief group. These respondents associated more than just happiness with their public figure, but confidence, courage, and strength in taking action. Like

Steven, Karen explained that Princess Diana affirmed her “making me realize that I’m not totally alone” in struggling with emotional issues. Similarly, Jackson talked about how he associated Prince with making him “more comfortable with talking about feelings.” Other Grief respondents focused on a more external sense of confidence, describing their public figure as someone that affirmed or validated them as they engaged in action. Samantha explained that “my creativity and my imagination were very much affirmed by David Bowie,” who provided her with “a sense of liberation.” Vicky associated Princess Diana with the courage to speak her mind on important social issues, while Lisa associated Eduardo Galeano with the wisdom and courage to leave her home country to pursue her education. Yvonne put this dynamic clearly in discussing Prince: “He is someone who showed me that’s how I could be.” While they may have differed in how they articulated their emotional associations, each respondent who reported a Grief reaction associated their public figure with more than just happy excitement, but also with affirmation, validation, or some kind of “life-giving and generative”<sup>24</sup> emotional energy.

### *Construction of Public Figure as Hermeneutic Symbol*

*“I felt like who he was, as a person, was always somebody who I can count on to be a North Star for that sort of embodiment.” ~Samantha*

Respondents who reported a Grief reaction explained that they perceived their public figure as a *hermeneutic symbol*, which aids in negotiating the social world and is characterized by two key associations: (1) between the signifier and cognitive insight about how to interpret experience, and (2) between the signifier and long-term utility. In other words, for the members of the Grief group, their public figure felt like personal travel guide they regularly used for useful advice about how

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<sup>24</sup> As phrased by Samantha.

to find their way when traveling. These individuals described two different uses for their hermeneutic symbols, orientational, and navigational, but in each case, they perceived their public figure as the living embodiment of a cognitive tool that added clarity to their lives.

The primary difference between the two kinds of hermeneutic symbols is whether the public figure was associated with meanings that address something about the respondent themselves or about the nature of the social world around them. *Oriental hermeneutic symbols* are those whose meanings are associated with some reflexive insight into the individual. Metaphorically, this is the travel guide's advice on what to look for when you feel lost, like common features of a city that indicate location or the position of the sun and the stars in the wilderness. For example, Steven, Jackson, and Karen all talked about how their public figure made them feel "not alone." Steven felt socially isolated most of his life, something that left him with "no guidance, no purpose, no direction." Steven learned to associate Elliot Smith's music with finally feeling like somebody "could identify where I was at." Smith's music became something that "gave me words to how I felt about things" and "made me feel like I had a place." Jackson made a similar point about how he associated Prince with learning to understand and accept himself: "I didn't really have the framework for feeling strong emotions before, but I think Prince's music made me, sort of, conceptualize those more," particularly in the context of being "a black man who's feminine and still heterosexual." Karen also associated Princess Diana with greater emotional literacy, explaining that Diana's candor about her personal struggles made her feel more accepting of her own. Both women experienced young love turn into problematic marriages and messy divorces, but Karen perceived Diana as a model for accepting your personal and emotional issues as a part of life:

She was so open and honest. . . . You know, you try to be perfect and you don't want to show your flaws, but I think she did. And seeing hers made me realize that,

everybody has some flaws, has some emotional issues. . . . She really changed my life in making me realize that I'm not totally alone.

Karen “looked up to her” because Diana showed that struggling with emotional issues was no disqualification for leading a fulfilling life. The associations described by these respondents represent orientational hermeneutic symbols because their figures embodied meanings that improved their pragmatic ability to understand themselves and their place in the world.

In contrast, *navigational hermeneutic symbols* are those whose meanings are associated with some ontological insight into the world. Metaphorically, this is the travel guide's advice on how to negotiate unfamiliar environments, like pragmatic guidance about how to figure out local rules or customs or attentional guidance about what's important to consider when you're exploring new places. Mike, Lisa, and Cara discussed this kind of pragmatic guidance in explaining who their public figure was to them. Cara's strongest associations with Prince was that he was a “boundary pusher,” who had “this way of pushing that brought things into my consciousness that hadn't been there before,” like identity politics or the realization “that institutions might be using and abusing people.” More generally, Cara perceived Prince as someone committed to “social good and [] social change,” which she described as a central tenet in her cognitive framework. Mike reported that he grew up in a social environment characterized by depression and isolation, but associated Robin Williams with the ability “to take a bad situation and make it better for everyone around him.” Mike explained that he felt Williams had a strong influence on his own coping mechanisms: “My ability to find humor in certain situations was definitely shaped by him. . . . It lets me find joy.” Finally, in describing Eduardo Galeano, Lisa said, “us[ing] only one word, I would say wisdom.” Lisa associated Galeano's work with a different way of interpreting her experiences: “the most influence that I had from him was how I think, how I view the world, how I see certain things. . . . Galeano gave me words to talk about it.” Lisa described Galeano's writing as important

source of wisdom to reinterpret her experiences in a way that made her life easier to lead. For these respondents, their public figure was a symbol that was associated with pragmatic guidance about the nature of their world and how to navigate through it.

While also describing navigational hermeneutic symbols, Vicky, Alice, Samantha, and Yvonne associated their public figures more with attentional guidance, or meanings about how to reinterpret social pressures. Specifically, each of these respondents associated their public figure with the strength to reject some oppressive social influence they felt. For example, Vicky focused on Diana's brazen willingness to speak out for what she thought was right, regardless of the expectations placed on her:

She's got some moxie! Obviously, she had it in her and never was allowed to let it out, but as she got older, boy, I'll tell you, she had no fear! When it came to something that was important to her, she had absolutely no fear to just take it on.

Vicky explained she had always felt strongly about social issues, particularly those affecting vulnerable populations, "but I never felt like I should go out and say anything." In Vicky's narrative, Diana symbolized a model for how to follow your social conscience and "be that person who brings uncomfortable things to people's little Betty Crocker worlds." Alice described a similar dynamic between David Bowie and a rejection of normative pressures. Alice, who had "not consistently accepted the weirder parts of her life," was introduced to David Bowie through *The Labyrinth* at a time when she was obsessively developing a number of interests, particularly "fantasy and fantasy worlds." Naturally, watching *Labyrinth* became a daily activity that lasted for years. In discussing her role models, Alice struggled to identify figures that embodied the multidimensionality and embrace of "weird" that she wanted for her life, but she perceived Bowie as a model for "creativity and the flexibility to be weird." Alice perceived David Bowie as someone

who was obsessively self-experimental and unapologetically weird – both of which are values Alice has worked into her cognitive framework despite normative pressure.

Samantha reported a similar attentional guidance associated with David Bowie, but focused more on associations between Bowie’s confidence in the value of his art and the way she has struggled to perceive her own creative works as legitimate or worthwhile. Samantha’s primary cognitive socialization was heavily informed by social norms of “a patriarchal society” particularly about the legitimacy of artistic work: “I got into a lot of trouble as a kid because I was creative and I was daydreaming and imaginative and, you know, you get told that you’re not focusing on the right things.” Samantha grew up with no role models for “a sense of power and the ability to determine their own futures” despite others’ expectations. In sharp contrast, for Samantha, Bowie “has always shown this attitude of, sort of, ‘These are your views and I don’t have to adhere to them.’” Samantha strongly associated David Bowie with the ability to find deep value in your work and a sense of emancipation from the fear of judgment from others

David Bowie belonged to – because he’s about fearlessness, right – he belongs to a very vulnerable part of my heart where I feel that fear. . . . David Bowie, for me, is very much wrapped up in my love of myself and my need to love myself, my need to feel that sense of courage.

Samantha described David Bowie as “a shining beacon” for fearlessness in creativity, someone she would turn to when she “need[ed] to feel brave,” particularly when she feared judgment from others, and associated Bowie with validation for her professional choices.

Yvonne’s narrative provides a uniquely clear example of the navigational hermeneutic symbols, as well as the overall symbolic dynamics presented by the Grief group. Yvonne was raised in a Jehovah’s Witness community, which forced her to follow an extensive network of rules about how to understand the world and to live your life. She described this life as “restrictive,” preventing her from celebrating holidays with friends, joining sports teams with

friends, or even calling them “friends” at all. She also talked about the strict rules for dating and relationships that left her in an unhappy and controlling marriage at 18. These experiences “made me realize what I don’t want in life.” Three years later, she divorced her husband, was Disfellowshipped from the church, and left alone without any community or any support. Yvonne associated her introduction to Prince’s music with this intensely anomic period in her life. As Yvonne described it, Prince “didn’t care what people thought of him, how he dressed, how he talked, and I think that made a lot of people come out of their closets and be who they wanted to be.” She perceived Prince as someone who “gave me a different perspective” and “changed the way I thought about life, the way I viewed myself, probably. That it didn’t matter what people thought.” To Yvonne, Prince unmistakably represented freedom and a way to live life outside the boundaries of excessive restriction: “if he can be free and be himself, I want to be that way....He is someone that showed me that’s how I could be.” Yvonne, like the other respondents who described navigational hermeneutic symbols, associated Prince with an insight about how to reinterpret her experience to reject what felt like oppressive social influences.

While orientational and navigational symbols differ in terms of whether they provide insight into the individual or the world around them, all hermeneutic symbols share the quality that they are associated with long-term utility. In other words, respondents who described Grief reactions perceived their public figure as a continual source of guidance over time. Some respondents used terms that generally indicate a perception of long-term utility. For example, Lisa said that Galeano felt “like someone who had done that journey with me and had been with me through difficult times,” and Karen explained that “Through all the ups and downs or whatever, I felt like [Diana] was an escape, always. It always made me so happy to think about her and to read about her.” Steven described Elliot Smith’s music as “really powerful in my life, and got me through a lot of

times....I don't know if he changed me, but he definitely was there for me." Similarly, Jackson described an extended relationship with Prince's music: "My relationship with him was predicated on me being not all right and then him making me feel all right." With Alice, she described her symbolic relationship with David Bowie as something that fluctuated over time, but was a consistent presence. Other respondents were more direct in conveying this long-term utility. Both Mike and Samantha described their public figure as a regular source of guidance in uncertain moments. Samantha explained: "Especially when I was younger, umm, I was a lot more afraid of what other people thought of me. I mean, I still am. It's like a daily anxiety, but it's constantly going back to 'What would David Bowie do in this situation?'" In a similar vein, Lisa described Eduardo Galeano as a resource for "any time that I feel either conflicted or scared or anything that I feel like I need a little bit of wisdom." Regardless of whether implied or directly stated, the members of the Grief group each associated their public figure with a perception of reliance over time.

This association between the public figure and long-term utility is a defining feature of the narratives of the Grief group. In fact, this element also helps to explain the special circumstances in the narratives of Alexes and Gina. Both respondents spoke about their public figures in a way that indicate some kind of cognitive guidance, but nevertheless reported a Melancholy reaction. Gina explained that reading Elie Wiesel's Night "rekindled that feeling of persistence and determination...for the sake of inspiring others." In talking about Kurt Cobain, Alexes's explanation also included an element of cognitive guidance: "having his music, knowing how he felt got me through dark times," because, "it was comforting that I wasn't the only one that had thoughts like these." Despite these statements, neither Gina nor Alexes associated long-term utility with the cognitive symbolism embodied by their figure. Alexes explained that she was

immediately obsessed with Cobain's music and artwork upon discovering him, so naturally, she discovered his death within, "like, 10 minutes." Even though "the way he defined himself as a person is part of the way I define myself as a person, to this day," the fact that Cobain was dead was an inherent part of the symbol Alexes constructed from the very beginning. While Gina read Wiesel's work while he was still alive, she had no access to any of his other works until after he died. Gina may have derived some cognitive utility from Wiesel's guidance, but there was no association between that guidance and long-term utility.

In sum, respondents who described a Grief reaction also described their public figures as hermeneutic symbols, something that suggested a new way of interpreting experience they felt improved their ability to navigate the world. These respondents associated their figures with insights that augmented either their self-knowledge or knowledge of the world around them. In other words, public figures as travel guides help these respondents orient themselves when they feel lost or find their way when exploring.

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

The way people react to the death of a public figure varies greatly in degree. Among the participants in this study, each of whom report having some kind of emotional response, about half reported a reaction characterized by benign sadness, one that briefly casts a depressive cloud over the individual's life. This reaction, defined as Melancholy, provides a transient emotional distraction, but does not disrupt the individual's ability to live their life as normal. For those who described Melancholy, their reactions were sad, but were a very different kind of reaction than other, more personal grief they had experienced in the past. However, there were a group of participants that reported something much more significant. This reaction, defined as Grief, was painful and disruptive to their life, and felt materially similar to the deaths of friends or family members, with the difference being one of degree. In other words, in answer to the first research question, this study demonstrates that at least some people experience the death of a public figure in a way that matches traditional understandings of grief. I argue that different ways of relating to public figures produces this variety in reactions to their deaths.

While there was a small group of respondents who did not associate any meaningful emotion with the discovery of their public figure's death, defined as Post-Death Effects, the vast majority of respondents associated meaningful emotional reactions with the news of the figure's death itself. These individuals perceived the public figure as symbolizing something beyond themselves or the work they produced. The distinguishing characteristic between these symbolic relations is whether the public figure was associated primarily with past experiences or the ability to find meaning in daily life. For those who reported a Melancholy reaction, the public figure was a souvenir, associated with some salient detail of the individual's life-narrative, like significant memories or a formative influence. For those who reported Grief, however, the public figure represented a travel

guide, embodying meaning that influenced how the individual thought about and navigated their social world. In other words, in answer to the second research question, this study demonstrates that at least some people internalize public figures as cultural objects by constructing those figures into symbols that help sustain their cognitive frameworks.

Grief and Melancholy are different kinds of reactions, representing the loss of different kinds of meaning maintained by that figure as a symbol. The key to understanding the variation in these patterns is the concept of *cognitive salience*, which refers to the likelihood a particular association would be applied across a variety of social settings to process information and construct meaning about the social world.<sup>25</sup> Both the variation between groups and within groups can be explained using cognitive salience: the severity of disruption caused by the death is positively associated with the cognitive salience of the meanings represented. Grief represents a more disruptive emotional reaction because meanings about how to interpret the present or plan the future are more likely to be applied than are meanings about how to reconstruct the past, which are associated with the less disruptive Melancholy reactions. Compare the disruption described by Tom, representing the Melancholy group, who explained “it’s *not like anything actually had changed*, but it felt like something was missing,” after Carrie Fisher died, with Mike, representing the Grief group, who felt that Robin Williams death was, “*earthshattering*. It’s definitely scary.” Metaphorically speaking, we’re sad when we lose a souvenir, but we panic when we lose a travel guide because it serves a more useful function in our ongoing exploration of the world. Grief and Melancholy are fundamentally different kinds of reactions because they are associated with meanings that serve functions at fundamentally different levels of cognitive salience.

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<sup>25</sup> This definition is inspired by Stryker & Burke’s (2000) “identity salience.”

Cognitive salience can be used to explain the spectrum of intensity within the groups as well. For example, Ben and Lauren, who both described Melancholy, reported drastically different intensities in the emotions associated with their figure's death. Ben's emotional reaction to Bowie's death was so intense because Bowie represented such a thick connection to his past, as a soundtrack to his life, a functional component of a lifelong friendship, and the center of one of his favorite memories of both. In contrast, Lauren, for whom Prince was only vaguely associated with important memories and relationships, reported a particularly benign account of Melancholy. Ben's Melancholy was more intense than Lauren's because Ben was more likely than Lauren to rely on Bowie as a symbol when reconstructing the past. The same dynamic is true in the Grief group as well, best exemplified by the juxtaposition of Yvonne and Cara, both of whom associated Prince with some important cognitive insights. While Cara reported that "I would say it didn't feel like I thought about him very often," Yvonne felt that she thought about Prince "daily. Literally, daily." Accordingly, while Cara described one of the less disruptive Grief reactions, Yvonne reported the strongest Grief reaction, demonstrating emotions that threatened her composure during our interview, a year after Prince died. Because Yvonne was more likely to rely on Prince as a cognitive resource than Cara, Yvonne's Grief was more intense. In both groups, greater cognitive salience was associated with a higher intensity of each reaction.

This analysis also has implications for understanding why people experience grief. While there are myriad factors that influence whether people might experience grief, the data suggests that grief occurs when someone's death damages or warps associations in the individual's cognitive framework that had been established while the decedent was alive. This temporal argument is supported by the narratives of Grief and Melancholy groups, and helps to explain the narratives that present special circumstances of these symbolic dynamics. For example, many respondents

talked about their figure's death in ways that strongly imply some kind of pre-existing meaning. Alice described Bowie's death as "an end of a creative vein.... There was a real sadness about, not just Bowie, but what I think he represented," while Samantha explained it felt like "what he stood for had somehow lost a bit of meaning." Melancholy respondents spoke more to having "the sense of something being ripped away," as Zeke put it, or, "being disappointed of something that enriches my life will be missing now," according to Ben. Andrew analogized Whitney Houston's death to "saying Christmas is no longer going to exist." In addition, almost every respondent reported specific meaningful memories from while the public figure was alive. Jackson related a story about one day in high school when "I wore my sister's skinny jeans and purple t-shirt and I thought about Prince a lot that day. Prince made me comfortable enough to do that." In the same vein, Lisa talked about relying on Galeano's writing for courage to pursue her education: "Before I came to the US, I was so scared and I did not know what I was going to do... I remember I read that book, and it was like he was speaking to me, he was inviting me to be brave." Andrew focused more on emotional associations with Whitney, talking about how excited he was to hear about The Bodyguard in 1992 and how disappointed he was watching her 2002 interview with Diane Sawyer. Ben's anecdote about when he and his friend raced 600 miles across Europe in one day just to see Bowie perform provides a particularly clear example of why respondents' narratives clearly point to a pre-existing meaningful symbolic relationship.

This temporal argument can also be applied to explain narratives that present special circumstances of these dynamics: Melancholy\* and Post-Death Effects. Alexis and Gina, the Melancholy\* respondents, both reported elements of cognitive insights from their figures, but neither reported any sense of utility over time before their figure's death, which is a necessary element of hermeneutic symbols. Without that meaning established *before* the death, their

reactions did not rise to the level of Grief. In the same vein, Post-Death Effects respondents Maggie, Sarah, and Sophia present the contrary temporal order: the figure died, then became meaningful. These individuals reported no meaningful contact with the public figure before their death and no meaningful reaction to the discovery of the death itself. These special circumstances cases support the temporal argument by demonstrating categorically different kinds of reactions when the temporal order suggested by the remaining data is absent.

While there is reason to doubt the detailed accuracy of interview data (Guenther 2002; Jerolmack & Khan 2014), there are compelling reasons to believe that the temporal order of these narratives is an accurate reflection of their reality. Theoretically, the temporal argument is supported both by research in bereavement and by the dual-process model of cognition. Mourning is the process through which people reconstruct their sense of the world after death and grief is an emotional response to death representing disruption to their sense of the world (Lofland 1985; Attig 2004; Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis 2014). The logical inverse of both of these consensus statements is that the significant other being alive is part of how the individual established meaning in their life. In the case of public figures, both Grief and Melancholy represent some level of disruption to the individual's sense-making process. If there were no symbolic meaning present when the figure died, then that death would not disrupt any part of the individual's cognitive framework.<sup>26</sup> The dual-process model of cognition provides additional support for the temporal argument because it demonstrates that cognition occurs and meanings exist at both conscious and subconscious levels (Vaisey 2009; Lizardo 2017). I am not claiming that all respondents could have articulated the relevant meaning while their figure was alive, but that meaning doesn't need to be consciously recognized for it to have been a part of their cognitive framework.

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<sup>26</sup> This captures the dynamics of the Post-Death Effects narratives.

Moreso, there is some direct evidence that demonstrate respondents had developed meaningful relationships with their public figure before that figure's death. Several respondents made some kind of social media posting in response to the figure's death, and Samantha provides a uniquely articulate example.<sup>27</sup> While discussing how she coped with Bowie's death by "finding new ways to draw upon the legacy he's left behind," Samantha remembered something she posted to social media the day after he died,<sup>28</sup> talking about a shirt she'd had for years – the same shirt she wore to our interview. She located the post on her phone and read it verbatim:

Several years ago, I went to the David Bowie Is show and bought this shirt. The exhibit pulsed with the electrifying freedom that David Bowie embodied – in his art, in his performance, and in his life. Today, as always, I wear this shirt when I need some extra courage to seize each day. This shirt has become my impenetrable shield, a reminder that the judgements of others cannot hurt me, that I can be free of that fear. The music plays, the air shifts, and I feel the strength inside me – 'We can be heroes, just for one day.'<sup>29</sup>

While it is possible that Samantha entirely constructed the meanings communicated by this post in the 24 hours after David Bowie died, the fact that she's discussing a t-shirt she bought several years earlier proves that Bowie was meaningful to Samantha, in some way, before he died. Similarly, Yvonne also provided clear evidence of a meaningful symbolic relationship with Prince before he died. During our interview, Yvonne showed me pictures from her wedding, which happened 2 days after Prince died. As she explained:

My wedding was Prince-themed, and I had planned it for a year. I'm like, the perfect time to get married is in April. His song Sometimes It Snows in April is one of my favorite songs off the movie Under the Cherry Moon, so I picked April 23<sup>rd</sup>. And I'm like, this would be the coolest wedding and I could do it all wintery.

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<sup>27</sup> I was able to find social media posts from some but not all respondents. Given the myriad factors that influence social media behavior, the lack of responsive posts does not indicate a lack of meaning present at the time of death.

<sup>28</sup> I verified both the date and content of the post after our interview.

<sup>29</sup> The wording of this quote has been altered to protect Samantha's anonymity, but the substance remains unchanged. Exact quote available for inspection on request.

Furthermore, Yvonne began our interview showing me a few of the Prince tattoos she has, the first 2 of which were done while Prince was still alive. While neither of these data can establish *what* Prince meant at the time of death, they directly prove *that* Prince meant something to Yvonne before he died.

Finally, the nature of interview data provides reason to doubt its accuracy, but not reason to reject it entirely. Furthermore, this presumption of skepticism applies with the weakest force to “the temporal and narrative structure of events that have already occurred” (Jerolmack & Khan 2014), a caveat that is supported by research in memory that demonstrates the relative reliability of the broad, structural details of memory reconstructions (Guenther 2002). This temporal argument provides a strong case to rebut any remaining doubts about the credibility of respondents’ claims about pre-death symbolic relationships with their figure. Accordingly, in answer to the primary research question, I argue that reactions to the death of public figures represent the loss some meaning constructed through pre-death symbolic relations, reactions whose kind and intensity depend on that meaning’s cognitive salience.

While, there was some evidence to suggest alternative explanations for the reactions described by the sample populations, none of the alternatives consistently explain both the reactions reported and the categorical differences between groups. Some respondents reported intense emotions while consuming grief media (e.g. televised funerals, memorials, retrospectives, etc.), which could support an explanation that relies on collective effervescence as its foundation,<sup>30</sup> one that argues that consuming “grief porn” (Behr 2005) leaves the individual in a state of “mourning sickness” (O’Neill 2004). However, some respondents perceived grief media as comforting, and members of both groups reported consuming grief media. Similarly, the type of death itself was a relevant

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<sup>30</sup> See, e.g. Harris 2008.

factor that influenced the intensity of a few reactions, but both groups included figures who died by suicide, overdoses, and natural causes. Furthermore, there were two public figures, David Bowie and Prince, that were discussed by respondents in both groups. While the nature of the figure's death clearly has an influence on the individual's reaction,<sup>31</sup> the data does not support the argument that the nature of death separates Grief from Melancholy.

In short, the reactions described by respondents in this study varied in intensity, some of which appear to be traditional grief, and others that appear to be a similar but less intense kind of reaction. These emotional responses should be understood as a signal that something used to maintain meaning in the individual's cognitive framework has been lost. The kind and intensity of the individual's emotional reaction are tied to how often the individual is likely to rely on that meaning to make sense of their experience. These meanings, established at some level of consciousness before the figure's death, were used to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and plan the future.

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<sup>31</sup> See, e.g. Holland & Neimeyer 2011.

## V. CONCLUSION

The fundamental purpose of this research was to analyze the phenomenon of grieving public figures. To explore these reactions, I examined both the emotional experience people report after the death of a public figure, as well as the meanings they associated with that figure. I conducted semi-structured interviews to answer these questions because interview data is particularly useful in determining how people feel and the frameworks they use to understand their experience (Pugh 2013), as well as the “temporal and narrative structure” of past events (Jerolmack & Khan 2014). The data demonstrate two different kinds of reactions, Melancholy and Grief. While Melancholy is characterized by impersonal sadness that presents a transient distraction, Grief reactions are characterized by psychic pain that feels personal and represents an obstacle to overcome. These reactions represent fundamentally the same process: an emotional reaction to disruption in cognitive functioning. Those who reported a Melancholy reaction described their public figure as a mnemonic symbol, something that helps them reconstruct their memories of the past, while those who reported a Grief reaction described their figure as a hermeneutic symbol, something that helps them (re)interpret their experiences. The kind and intensity of reaction they experienced depended on the cognitive salience of the meaning represented by the figure. These symbolic meanings served a purpose in the individual’s cognitive framework, and the figure’s death disrupted their ability to rely on that meaning to make sense out of their world.

The findings of this study contribute to several literatures. First, this study contributes to the literature on grief by tying the affective response to death to broader theories about the social nature of cognition. While extant grief research has not directly addressed why the deaths of others generally result in grief, this study places grief in a broader category of emotional reactions to disruption in cognitive frameworks caused by the loss of an external cognitive resource, losses like

job loss, divorce, or natural disasters. Additionally, the relationship between cognitive salience and characteristics of reaction can be used to support non-pathological explanations for the absence of grief when we might otherwise expect it (*See, e.g.*, Bonanno et al. 2002; Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse 2004).<sup>32</sup> More broadly, these findings contribute to the cognitive social sciences by suggesting a role that emotions play in cognition. Just as physical pain signals a threat to bodily integrity, grief is an emotional pain that signals a threat to habitual cognitive processing. While emotion may serve many purposes in terms of cognition, in this case, negative emotions signaled a problem with habitual cognition that required individuals to consciously articulate relevant meanings to resolve the threat to cognitive function. From this perspective, emotions appear to fit into the dual-process model by serving a communicative function between embodied and narrative levels of cognition.

This study also contributes to the literature on how people forge connections to public figures by incorporating insights from cultural cognitive sociology. The leading theories that address people's relations with public figures, celebrity worship<sup>33</sup> and parasocial interaction,<sup>34</sup> focus on delusional or illusory intimacy, respectively. This study suggests an alternative kind of connection: symbolic intimacy. Individuals who reported emotional connections to their public figures perceived the figure as representing more than just a person, but some kind of meaning. In these cases, perceptions of a special connection to a public figure comes from the internalization of that figure as a symbol in the individual's cognitive framework. These findings provide a new way to conceive of the role public figures can play in the lives of individuals. More broadly, in explaining

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<sup>32</sup> For example, when the decedent is particularly old, has battled a disease, or has required intensive care and accommodation by the bereaved

<sup>33</sup> *See, e.g.*, McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran 2002; North et al. 2007, McCutcheon et al. 2016.

<sup>34</sup> *See, e.g.*, Horton & Wohl 1956; Rubin & McHugh 1987; Giles 2002; Branch et al. 2013; Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen 2016.

the meanings present when public figures serve cognitive functions, this study contributes to work in culture and cognition by demonstrating what is internalized when cultural objects become part of an individual's cognitive framework. In this sense, this study reveals important insights into the way that distant figures, places, or events can resonate in the immediate present and influence how people think.

There are a few limitations to the findings presented by this study that point to future research on the phenomenon of grieving public figures. For example, a complete phenomenology of grieving public figures would need to examine the experience of carrying that grief into social interaction. The data from the Grief group suggests that the difficulty with which they communicate their Grief to others depends on factors like whether the other is also grieving or whether they understood the figure's symbolic significance. While this kind of grief has generally represented a traditional example of disenfranchised grief, or grief that is not socially recognized as legitimate (Doka 2002), the rise of mass communication, particularly social media, may have expanded the category of socially legitimate relationships. Future research should examine how people express this kind of grief, particularly strategies of communication and concealment.

Methodologically, the primary limitation is the nature of the data. While emotionally salient memories generally have higher reliability, semi-structured interviews can only produce reconstructed, narrative data. The evidence to prove directly the conceptualization of the model proposed herein would require data collection both before and after a public figure's death. Future research should examine the symbolic associations of living cultural figures and follow-up with study participants after the figure's death to verify the model argued by this paper. In addition, the public figures reported were almost exclusively artists of some kind; Princess Diana was the only public figure discussed who was not. This relative bias in response likely represents the more

frequent exposure to musicians, actors or writers relative to other kinds of public figures, as well as these artists' enduring presence or persona represented in tangible works. Future research should seek a greater diversity in public figures discussed, particularly religious figures or heads of state, to examine whether there are similar patterns of symbolic relations. Finally, my recruiting strategies (sampling on a college campus in a progressive city and relying on my social network) produced a sample with narrow political views and a higher than average degree of education. While neither of those characteristics appeared to have any influence on the patterns of emotional reactions or symbolic relations, future research should seek a more demographically diverse sample.

Ultimately, this research shows that in a highly differentiated world, a multitude of social factors combine to influence individual cognition. People rely on these sociocultural constructs to support a cognitive framework that helps them make sense out of their experiences. Whether it was as a souvenir that guides their walk through the past or a travel guide that directs their exploration in the present, these respondents saw their public figures as more than just one kind of shining star.

### Appendix A: Sample Demographics

| Interview | Pseudonym | Group | Birth Yr | Age | Place of Birth | Gender     | Ethnicity                                | Sexuality       | SES Growing Up | Politics         | Education    |
|-----------|-----------|-------|----------|-----|----------------|------------|--|-----------------|----------------|------------------|--------------|
| 01        | Steven    | G     | 1977     | 39  | USA (NC)       | Man        | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Lower-middle   | Liberal          | MA           |
| 02        | Lauren    | M     | 1972     | 33  | Hong Kong      | Woman      | East Asian                               | Homosexual      | Working        | Liberal          | MA           |
| 03        | Lisa      | G     | 1987     | 29  | Mexico         | Woman      | Hispanic                                 | Heterosexual    | Middle         | Liberal          | MA           |
| 04        | Tina      | M     | 1952     | 63  | USA (NY)       | Woman      | White, Eastern European                  | Heterosexual    | Middle         | (Very) Liberal   | JD           |
| 05        | Alice     | G     | 1985     | 31  | USA (OK)       | Woman      | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Lower-middle   | Liberal          | MA           |
| 06        | Samantha  | G     | 1987     | 29  | Hong Kong      | Woman      | East Asian                               | Heterosexual    | Upper-middle   | Very Liberal     | MA           |
| 07        | Cara      | G     | 1967     | 49  | USA (HI)       | Woman      | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Upper-middle   | Liberal          | PhD          |
| 08        | Zeke      | M     | 1957     | 59  | USA (CA)       | Man        | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Upper-middle   | Liberal          | BA           |
| 09        | Andrew    | M     | 1980     | 36  | USA (WA)       | Man        | White                                    | Homosexual      | Lower-middle   | Liberal          | BA           |
| 10        | Gina      | M*    | 1998     | 18  | USA (PA)       | Non-binary | White                                    | Pansexual/Queer | Lower-middle   | Slightly Liberal | Some college |
| 11        | Alexes    | M*    | 1997     | 19  | USA (WA)       | Woman      | African, Native, White                   | Heterosexual    | Lower-middle   | Slightly Liberal | Some college |
| 12        | Ben       | M     | 1982     | 34  | Israel         | Man        | Eastern Euro, Middle Eastern, N. African | Homosexual      | Middle         | Very Liberal     | PhD          |
| 13        | Maggie    | PD    | 1996     | 20  | USA (MN)       | Woman      | White                                    | Greysexual      | Middle         | (Very) Liberal   | Some college |
| 14        | Yvonne    | G     | 1959     | 57  | USA (CO)       | Woman      | White                                    | Heterosexual    | (Lower) Middle | Liberal          | Some college |
| 15        | Sarah     | PD    | 1990     | 27  | USA (WA)       | Woman      | Middle Eastern                           | Heterosexual    | Upper-middle   | (Very) Liberal   | BA           |
| 16        | Mike      | G     | 1984     | 33  | USA (NY)       | Man        | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Working        | Slightly Liberal | MA           |
| 17        | Sophia    | PD    | 1991     | 26  | USA (WA)       | Woman      | East Asian, Middle Eastern               | Heterosexual    | Working        | No Answer        | BA           |
| 18        | Tom       | M     | 1970     | 47  | USA (WA)       | Man        | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Upper-middle   | Neither          | Some college |
| 19        | Nikky     | M     | 1966     | 51  | USA (CT)       | Woman      | Hispanic, White                          | Heterosexual    | Middle         | Very Liberal     | BA           |
| 20        | Vicky     | G     | 1947     | 70  | USA (OH)       | Woman      | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Middle         | Liberal          | BA           |
| 21        | Jackson   | G     | 1994     | 23  | USA (MI)       | Man        | African, Pacific Islander                | Heterosexual    | Middle         | Liberal          | BA           |
| 22        | Karen     | G     | 1959     | 58  | USA (MA)       | Woman      | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Middle         | Slightly Liberal | Some college |
| 23        | Katie     | M     | 1991     | 26  | USA (IA)       | Woman      | White                                    | Heterosexual    | Middle         | Slightly Liberal | MA           |

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