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Grieving the Multiple Losses of LGBTIQ+ Breakups

ABSTRACT

This article addresses a topic seldom discussed in public or academic research: grief following breakups among LGBTIQ+ people. By attuning its analysis to queer grief as it is sensed, lived, and entangled within multiple grief assemblages, this article moves beyond prevailing frameworks for understanding LGBTIQ+ breakups, which often take structural and legal problems as their starting point. It advances and develops an affect-theoretical approach to grief in the context of LGBTIQ+ relationship breakups. Highlighting the multiplicity of queer grief assemblages, the article demonstrates how various elements – human, nonhuman, psychic, cultural, and spatial – are entangled in these assemblages, alleviating and complicating the grieving process. The analysis draws on thirty interviews with Finnish LGBTIQ+ people who have experienced relationship breakups. Employing Deleuzian research methodologies, the study seeks to identify the elements and relations within queer grief assemblages through which flows, blockages and accumulations of grief emerge. In these assemblages, affective intensities often condense around grief for the loss of a partner; however, the assemblages always extend beyond this loss to encompass other people as well as ideological, spatial, material and psychic elements. Rather than contributing to the most intense affective peaks within the grief assemblages, heteronormative elements often intensify grief, either by entangling painful past experiences that puncture the flow of grief in the present or by preventing grief assemblages from extending beyond the personal and private into the public sphere.

Keywords: LGBTIQ+ breakups, queer grief, assemblage, affect, heteronormativity

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THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES how grief over LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, and/or questioning) people's breakups is sensed, lived, and entangled in multiple grief assemblages. It draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (2004) work to offer novel perspectives on the becoming of relationship breakups, which is conceived as a becoming that unfolds in and through affective assemblages. Assemblages are dynamic intersections of bodies, actions, things, affects, discourses, and ideas (Buchanan 2015, 390). This kind of conceptualisation, which will be fully introduced below, shifts the focus to processes: entanglements and encounters between various elements, power relations, and affective forces within breakups (Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020).

The study goes beyond current frameworks for understanding LGBTIQ+ relationships and breakups, which often take structural and legal problems as a starting point (Goldberg & Garcia 2015; Frost & LeBlanc 2019). Separations between LGBTIQ+ people are often compared to mixed-sex relationship separations, and any differences are typically explained with reference to the discrimination LGBTIQ+ couples face (Balsam, Rostosky & Riggle 2017; Frost & LeBlanc 2019). This study advances an alternative view. It develops an affect-theoretical approach to grief over LGBTIQ+ breakups, showing that grieving the end of a relationship is an affective process in which multiple elements interact in diverse ways, both alleviating and complicating the process. An LGBTIQ+ breakup comes to matter differently through the grieving process, depending on the other elements within the queer grief assemblage (Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020).

Research on LGBTIQ+ relationships rarely focuses on difficult, negative affects such as sorrow or grief. In recent decades, in many Western societies, queer desire and relationships have been articulated in public discourse through an affective ethos of love. Political slogans such as "love is love" and "love conquers all" have celebrated LGBTIQ+ people's ability to create families and kinship against the odds (Dahl 2014). This emphatic framing of LGBTIQ+ families and relationships in terms of love can be burdensome for separated LGBTIQ+ people (Gahan 2018; Lahti 2015; Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020). In one Australian study,

separated same-sex parents felt that they had failed in maintaining the relationships and families they had had to fight for; this often led to feelings of shame, isolation, and anxiety (Gahan 2018). Queer theorists and activists have criticised the LGBTIQ+ movement's focus on family rights of "homonormativity" (Duggan 2002). Homonormativity refers to a politics that does not call into question dominant heteronormative lifestyles and institutions, such as marriage, but rather upholds and sustains them (Duggan 2002). In the lives of separated LGBTIQ+ people's, this can manifest as pressure to live up to the ideal of a socially approved version of happiness, which may begin to feel like an obligation (Dahl 2014).

However, it would be simplistic to view separations solely as ruptures in the normalisation of LGBTIQ+ relationships. In queer theoretical accounts, failures of queer love, though often painful, have been viewed as opportunities to break free from normative constraints and to imagine alternative futures (Halberstam 2011; Dahl 2014; Ahmed 2010). This perspective may be difficult to grasp for those who have undergone breakups, for whom separation may feel like a double burden (Gahan 2018). Separated LGBTIQ+ people often face social devaluation and a lack of recognition of their grief and the other complex emotions associated with separation (Gahan 2018; Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020).

The cultural and geographical locations in which LGBTIQ+ separations occur may significantly shape the experience of breakup grief. Finland is often listed as a progressive Nordic country with respect to the advancement of LGBTIQ+ legal rights (Ilmonen et al. 2017, 96), but it has often lagged the other Nordic countries in this regard (Taivaloja & Alasuutari 2024). For example, gender-neutral marriage legislation came into effect in Finland only in 2017 (Act 234/1929), several years later than in other Nordic countries. As in the neighbouring Nordics, confirming the couple as the normative form of intimacy has been key to establishing social acceptance and legal recognition of same-sex desire (Lahti 2015).

In Finland, a certain level of normalisation (e.g., in the form of marriage equality) has integrated LGBTIQ+ people into therapeutic ideas

about complex relationships and intelligible separations (Maksimainen 2010), at least to some extent. While therapeutic practices continue to reflect heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality (Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020), there has been an increase in counseling services (private or provided by nongovernmental organisations) intended to support LGBTIQ+ people's family relationships, including separation support groups. Because Finland is a Nordic welfare state, its public sector is expected to assume responsibility for the provision of social services and healthcare.[1]

Thus, compared to in some other countries with more market-driven welfare state regimes, in which the third sector may play a larger role in tackling homelessness, addiction and violence-related issues among LGBTIQ+ people (Esping-Andersen 1990), the nongovernmental organisations in Finland may have been able to focus more intensively on relationship-, family-, and identity-related issues (see also Lahti 2023). As urgently as LGBTIQ+-affirmative counselling services are needed, therapeutic frameworks can be problematic in their emphasis on the supposed universality of separation processes (Lahti 2020). Moreover, therapeutic discourses and services have been critiqued for primarily addressing the needs and experiences of white, middle-class women (Salmenniemi 2022). This focus can marginalise the complexity and pain of LGBTIQ+ relationships and separations, which continue to unfold in a heteronormative world.

This article argues that separation is not a singular event in which separated LGBTIQ+ people receive either support or dismissal for their feelings. It draws upon approaches to grieving from queer (Ahmed 2004; Alasuutari 2020), sociological (Doka 2002), psychosocial (Boss 1999), and psychoanalytical theory (Freud 1957). It combines these seemingly incompatible approaches using the "conceptual glue" (Ringrose & Renold 2016, 4) of relational affect theory and posthuman theory (Lykke 2022; Seyfert 2012; Kolehmainen, Lahti & Lahad 2022). The analysis points to a dynamic of grieving in which various forms of affective interaction – psychical, social, material and spatial – come together (Seyfert 2012). Grieving does not exclusively involve interactions

between human bodies (Lykke 2022). Rather, human and nonhuman elements, along with power relations, come together in queer grief assemblages to constitute another relationality (see also Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020). Rather than treating any single element or dimension as determinative – for example, assuming that breakup grief is determined by LGBTIQ+ identities – this article highlights the relational and multiple nature of grieving processes.

From disenfranchised grief to queer grief assemblages

In interview studies, separated LGBTIQ+ people often report that they are not supported or taken seriously in their grief (Gahan 2018; Lahti 2020; Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020). In sociological bereavement studies, the concept of disenfranchised grief refers to this lack of legal or social recognition (Doka 2002). Moreover, queer theoretical perspectives highlight how heteronormative conceptions of family affect the hierarchy of grieving (Alasuutari 2020). Not all losses – for example, the loss of a friend – are equally acknowledged or recognised (Alasuutari 2020).

However, the concept of disenfranchised grief is insufficient to account for the complexity of queer grief in the event of a breakup. It leaves the process of grieving curiously intact, as if it would be the same for everyone were it only properly acknowledged. What is at stake in an LGBTIQ+ separation is often not only the ended relationship or the partner(s) but also a community, friendship circle, or sense of identity (Lahti 2020). It often entails relinquishing something for which one has had to fight (Gahan 2018; Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020). What does it mean to grieve an LGBTIQ+ relationship that was only – whether due to family rejection or society's inability to recognise relationships beyond the nuclear family and couple norm – partially accepted? An LGBTIQ+ breakup can lay bare feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of a painful reality in which hoped-for social change has not materialised (Giffney 2017).

The concept of ambiguous grief (Boss 1999) more effectively highlights certain aspects of grieving an LGBTIQ+ breakup, as it refers to

losses for which there is no simple resolution, such as the ongoing dismissal of LGBTIQ+ people's relationships and lives. Ambiguous loss also encompasses situations in which a person is left with no explanation, as in the case of a sudden breakup: the individual searches for answers, which in turn complicates the grieving process (Boss 1999). Boss (1999) distinguishes ambiguous grief from disenfranchised grief: in ambiguous grief, the circumstances complicate the "internal" process of grieving, but it can still be acknowledged and supported by professionals or the community. While the concepts of disenfranchised and ambiguous grief highlight different aspects of grieving, I argue that it is simplistic to assume that what complicates grieving can be traced solely to "external" or "internal" circumstances.

Queer grief assemblages

In breakup situations, strong affects, such as anger and grief, often emerge (Lahti 2018). Instead of understanding these as individual emotions, relational affect theories emphasise that affects arise through bodies' encounters with other bodies (human and nonhuman), matter, affect, ideas and societal processes (Seyfert 2012). Assemblage theory highlights how the unique assembling of bodies increases or diminishes the affective capacities of the bodies involved in a particular assemblage (DeLanda 2019; Fox & Alldred 2015). What is at stake are the capacities of bodies or things to affect and be affected by one another (Deleuze & Guattari 2004; Ringrose & Renold 2014, 2016; Seyfert 2012).

While relational affect theories discuss how affects emerge through assemblages, the psychosocial mediation of affect is often overlooked (Blackman 2012). When addressing difficult affective states, such as grief or pain, it is essential to recognise that the embodied affective relations in an assemblage also carry psychical significance and dynamics (Blackman 2012). From a psychodynamic point of view, grieving is a painful psychological process (Freud 1957). To better understand the flows and blockages of grieving in queer grief assemblages, I also consider how psychical elements shape the interactions within an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari 2004).

Freud's (1957) psychoanalytic theory of mourning and melancholia has been widely discussed by queer theorists (e.g., Ahmed 2004; Butler 1997; Muñoz 1999), some of whom critique his distinction between the "healthy" work of mourning and the pathological state of melancholia, which he defines as the inability to let go of the lost other. Muñoz (1999) suggests that melancholia is a response to the ongoing catastrophes faced by marginalised people in their everyday lives and should not be regarded as a pathology. Ahmed (2004) argues that a refusal to let go can be understood as an ethical response to loss. Keeping the past alive – for example, remembering lives lost to AIDS – is ethical. That which has been lost need not be erased from history.

Nonetheless, I find Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia – or what might now be termed depression – helpful in understanding responses to personal loss. He theorises mourning and melancholia as alternative and potentially alternating affective responses to significant losses in a person's life (Freud 1957). During grief, as painful as it may be, a loss can be emotionally experienced. In depression, however, mourning is hindered for various psychical reasons. When the flow of grief is blocked, the individual is troubled by the agonising affectivity of depression – a persistent sad, anxious or "empty" mood. Psychoanalytic insights illuminate the psychical factors that can complicate the grieving process.

However, Deleuzian planar relations diverge from the assumption that any single element – such as a psychical or unconscious element – determines the others (Deleuze & Guattari 2004). Therefore, rather than assuming that grief over a relationship breakup is determined by psychical elements alone, I attend to the entanglement of human, nonhuman, material, psychical and cultural elements in grief assemblages, which shape emerging affective intensities such as anger and grief. While maintaining attention to the psychical and subjective, I shift focus away from a human-centered paradigm toward a more nuanced approach – one in which the multiple elements and affective effects of a grief assemblage can be identified (Clough 2013; Deleuze & Guattari 2004; Ringrose & Renold 2016).

Methodology and methods

This article draws on thirty in-depth interviews I conducted with Finnish LGBTIQ+ people individuals who had experienced relationship breakups. All participants were white ethnic Finns. Five interviewees were aged 25–29, five were 30–34, five were 35–39, four were 40–44, six were 50–54, and one was 55–59. Of the thirty participants, sixteen identified as women, one as a transwoman, six as gender-nonconforming women, four as nonbinary, two as men, and one as a gender-nonconforming man. The majority of participants were well educated: twenty-eight held higher education degrees, and two had vocational qualifications. None of the participants reported any physical disabilities.

Eight of the interviews were conducted in various Finnish cities and towns; due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the remaining twenty-two were conducted via Zoom. The interviews lasted between one and two-and-a-half hours. They were audio/video recorded and transcribed. Following the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019), I provided participants with a description of the study and its purpose, details about what participation would involve in practice, and the expected duration of involvement. I also informed them of the voluntary nature of participation, their rights, and the processing of their personal data, both prior to the interview and before they signed a consent form.

As an interviewing method, I adopted a focused version of Wengraf's (2001) biographical narrative interview method. In this version, the broad biographical question central to Wengraf's method – "Could you please tell me your life story…" – is narrowed to a specific theme. In my study, this theme was relationship breakups: "... regarding your experiences of the breakup or breakups of couple relationships, intimate relationships, or other romantic and/or sexual relationships?" Wengraf's (2001) method seeks to avoid interviewer-led structuring of the interviewee's account; refining questions are posed only after the interviewee has finished telling their story.

As a preliminary mode of analysis, I re-familiarised myself with the data and identified broad themes. I noticed that grief frequently

emerged in the interviews, and I aimed to provide a detailed analysis of the affective patterns of grief present in the data. Aligned with the study's affect-theoretical framework, I did not rely on language alone when analysing the emergence of grief in the data (see also Lahti 2018). My analysis rejects the notion that grief is located solely in specific words or expressions used by participants. Instead, I followed the flows, blockages, and accumulations of grief that I sensed "between the lines." Although I allowed interviewees substantial space to define what mattered to them in their breakup(s), my researcher-body was also part of the interview encounter (see also Lahti 2018). Affects circulating in the interview setting were also registered in my body. I regard this multiple registering, both bodily and linguistic (MacLure 2013, 170), as providing important insights for analysis (Kolehmainen 2019).

To utilise this registering, I did not have to rely solely on memory or interview transcripts and recordings. After each interview, I created audio notes to record my immediate impressions of the interview's central affective aspects. As I conducted my analysis, following these affective cues I could also revisit my audio and Zoom recordings to further attune myself to the material's affective aspects.

Following Deleuzian research methodologies, I identify the various elements and relationships within queer grief assemblages (Fox & Alldred 2015) that intensify grief and contribute to its flows and blockages. In this way, I formulated the three affective patterns of grief in the data: 1) multiple losses, 2) the accumulation of losses, and 3) flows and blockages of grief. By following affective intensities (MacLure 2013), I shed light on the forms and flows of grief that hide in the affective movement of events, experiences, and accumulated losses that come together in interviewees' accounts of breakups.

I noticed that, rather than contributing to the most intense affective peaks within the grief assemblages, heteronormative elements often mattered through their "haunting presence" (Blackman 2015). I therefore follow what Blackman (2015) describes as a "hauntological" mode of analysis, attending to traces of events and entangled temporalities. Accordingly, in addition to affective intensities, my analysis of the flows

and blockages of queer grief also traces the haunting effects of heteronormativity within the assemblages.

Intensities of grief as an effect of multiple elements in grief assemblages

To queer grief is to recognise that grief over a breakup is not solely about two people (see also Lykke 2022). Rather, my analysis shows that separations are processes in which grief emerges as a co-constitution of various human and nonhuman elements, which may amplify or diminish one another's effects. Grief assemblages often involve and interact with other people (children, friends, relatives, and coworkers); the characteristics of the breakup (amicable, sudden, or quarrelsome); societal power relations and ideals (couple normativity, the status of LGBTIQ+ relationships, and heteronormativity); and material and immaterial elements (legislation, living or housing arrangements, and substances) – all of which can intensify or alleviate grief.

In queer grief assemblages, affective intensities often condense around the difficult and painful task of disengaging oneself from affective attachment to one's (ex-)partner and reorienting toward something new. The pain of mourning can be amplified by the abruptness of a separation and the absence of closure, plugging in the characteristics of ambiguous loss (Boss 1999). Anna, who was in her fifties, had been left suddenly by her younger partner. Her interview was saturated with grief. At the very beginning, there was a long silence in response to my question about what had happened in the breakup. Her eyes filled with tears, and she paused as she tried not to cry. Finally, she responded in a thick voice, still fighting back tears: "Because it all came as a surprise to me. I had to gather it [my understanding] from various pieces. Like… was it this or that, or was it because of that." As is typical of ambiguous loss, the abrupt breakup left Anna searching for reasons the relationship had ended (Boss 1999). Within a few months of her partner leaving, the couple had sold the apartment they had owned together. Anna described her co-becoming given the new circumstances:

> I think… it was a bit too heavy for me… The moving day was too much for me physically. I became sick again. So last year was very interesting. I was on sick leave for three months after the move. And here I was, my head spinning with all the heavy pain medication… During those months, it was very dark.

The shock of a sudden breakup, a rapid relocation to a new apartment, physical and mental pain, subsequent sick leave, and strong medication all entangled to amplify the agonising affective intensities of Anna's grief assemblage. This assemblage extended beyond the two ex-partners to include psychical, spatial, and embodied elements and substances. Grief assemblages involve not only grief over the loss of a partner but also grief over the loss of other people and things. When one relation in an assemblage shifts, it often alters the relationships between other elements, both human and nonhuman. Grief also emerges in relation those lost aspects and connections. Ella describes this as follows:

> You must grieve over the summer cottage you had together – that you can't go and pick blueberries in the forest nearby anymore. You must grieve over not getting invited to birthday parties hosted by a particular family anymore. [You won't only grieve] the loss of one particular person but, in a way, all the aspects that were linked to that relationship.

Tom, in his thirties, described his relationship with his first boyfriend:

> I was head over heels in love… I started to imagine our future far ahead. Like, I dreamed that we would have kids one day… And then we broke up, and it was devastating for me, because I had planned my whole life around Mark.

Grief over separation was entangled with the loss of a future orientation often associated with coupled status and expected normative relationship milestones thereby amplifying feelings of loss (Kolehmainen, Lahti & Kinnunen 2022). Moreover, in the wake of recent public discussions

about LGBTIQ+ rights, which have centred on family issues, one's LGBTIQ+ identity is often made visible through one's couple relationship (Lahti 2015). Thus, some interviewees described a sense of losing both the authentic feeling and the socially intelligible expression of their LGBTIQ+ identities when they lost their coupled status. Laura, in her thirties, said the following:

> After the separation, there is no "real proof" of my LGBTIQ+ identity… I am easily assumed to be straight… I cannot casually refer to my partner in the way everybody else does… The easiest way to counter the heteronormative assumption [about me] is not there anymore.

Moreover, heteronormative elements, manifesting as silences or oddities, were often entangled with, and at times punctured, the flow of grief. This included, for example, expressions of joy from others about a breakup that was devastating for the person experiencing it. In twenty-nine-year-old Viola's grief assemblage, disenfranchised grief was amplified by her parents' violent rejection of her same-sex relationship: "My parents were so happy about that breakup, which was really horrible, when I was so heartbroken over it." Laura, in turn, had believed her mother had come to terms with her same-sex relationships following initial tensions after her coming out. However, her mother's reaction to Laura's breakup suggested otherwise:

> To this day, I don't know what it was about. … [W]hen I started to date my first girlfriend and my parents found out about it… it was difficult for her [my mother] that I was with a woman, but then, over the years… she completely – or at least I felt she accepted it – but then, when we separated, she said something like it was good that we broke up. At the time, I thought it was appalling, but I didn't say anything.

Heteronormative elements haunted the participants' current relationships and breakups (see also Blackman 2015). Painful past experiences of disapproval and discrimination often lingered in the background,

subtly interweaving with present breakups. These lingering effects amplified the grief and exposed the underlying social inequalities and heteronormative attitudes – attitudes that often remain concealed as long as everything is "okay" and the partners are still together.

Accumulation of losses

Various temporalities coexist in queer grief assemblages, as recent breakups are often linked to previous losses, with individuals entering their breakups with varying life experiences. In what follows, I will analyse how human (traumatic and psychic), nonhuman (houses and mould), normative (transphobic and heteronormative), and microcultural (family culture) elements can be intricately entangled in ways that lead to the accumulation of losses in queer grief assemblages. The stacking of losses can amplify the affective intensities of sadness and grief experienced in the present moment of the breakup.

Marissa is a nonbinary person in their fifties. Grief was entangled in their grief assemblage long before the actual breakup occurred, and it was not solely their human partner's actions or the dynamics between the partners that led to multiple losses and, ultimately, separation. A traumatic event experienced by Marissa's partner, its psychic consequences, and a house affected by mildew all held central agentic capabilities within the assemblage, where multiple losses were accumulating. Marissa explained as follows:

> After the trauma … she started to act very impulsively … with a mentality that we can die any time, so we must fulfil our dreams right now. … And her dream was a house. … In the end, I agreed to guarantee her loan [for the house]. And then, it was truly traumatising when … it became clear that it was a sick building. … I was heavily exposed [to the mould] … so we escaped to a small flat I owned, which was my only property and which also served as the loan guarantee.
>
> It was a daily struggle because of all this and trying to maintain the connection with the other person, which inevitably led to us drifting apart, and to grief and all that … and then another unfortunate thing

> happened: both of our cats died … and I was consumed by the thought that maybe it was because they were staying in the sick house with us. And then, somehow, her drinking got out of control, and I just couldn't bear it anymore …

In the assemblage, losses began to accumulate, as both Marissa and their partner were affected by the traumatic event the partner had experienced, her behaviour became increasingly impulsive and Marissa guaranteed her loan, something Marissa had not wanted to do. Moreover, both partners and their animals were affected by the "sick house," as they became heavily exposed to mould. This exposure constrained their bodies and strained their relationship, turning daily life into a struggle. The accumulation of losses and sadness intensified when the mould-infested house was thought to have potentially harmed their cats. As a result, Marissa lost their health, their property, their cats, and their sober partner, as the latter began drinking heavily. At that point, Marissa could no longer bear the weight of the multiple losses anymore: "I made the decision that I wanted to break up."

For Jana, a thirty-five-year-old nonbinary interviewee, the accumulation of losses was entangled with – and amplified by – cisnormative and transphobic elements that disrupted their relationship networks with devastating consequences. At the beginning of Jana's interview, they bundled two difficult separations together, signaling the affective connection between these two losses in the grief assemblage:

> One is the relationship [breakup] with my child's other parent. Let me think. We were together for ten years before we separated. The other is a long-term separation from my mother's family, which is now slowly beginning to repair, but it also lasted for a decade. These are the two hardest separation experiences in my life.

Jana was cut off from their close family members after beginning their gender transition and coming out to their mother, who could not accept the news and forbade them from contacting their grandparents or other

family members. Jana's relationship with their mother defined the networks of relationships they were able to maintain – with devastating consequences. Being cut off in this way had "cut them deep" and altered their world view by "painting it in very dark colours." It also affected their body's openness to other bodies for many years, as they felt unable to trust that anyone genuinely cared about others. Jana explained that they had struggled with low self-esteem, which had influenced their romantic relationships. They shared how their long-term relationship with their ex-partner had come about:

> In retrospect, I can't say she was such a compatible partner for me either. When we met, I still had very negative thoughts about life, and I felt that I would be left alone for the rest of my life … Maybe I clung onto her and thought that she was a nice person, and if she would take me, then we would be together. If I had had a stronger sense of self and valued myself more, maybe I would have seen it more clearly – that she liked me, but in the end, she was not so interested in me. Maybe I would have had the courage to admit it to myself.

Afraid of being left alone again, Jana was unable to see their relationship clearly. The breakup was abrupt and threw them into a crisis. They had to fight for custody of their child. Yet the effects of a separation can be unpredictable. From the perspective of Jana's life at the time of the interview, the separation had ultimately been a positive development, and they no longer expressed palpable sadness about it. They had happily moved in with a new partner, with whom they felt more compatible.

Unlike Jana, Anna – an interviewee in her fifties – did not account for the accumulation of losses that were entangled with her queerness. However, almost all members of Anna's family of origin had died, some in traumatic circumstances. This accumulation of losses had made her vulnerable in relationships, even before her most recent breakup. She told me that when she used to see her ex-partner with all her family members, as part of "a big gang," affective intensities of sadness and weariness were amplified:

> When I looked at it: there, she discusses her work with her father, who gives her advice. Oh, there, her mother. … gives her undivided attention to her child. Oh, there is her brother – oh God, is he just turning 25 [her own brother's age when he died]. It was … at first … like, okay, my father died when I was a child. How was it for me? How did I have it? How was it in our family after that … how easily stressed she [her mother] was, and where did she turn her attention? … It was wonderful to me to see that somebody had had the opportunity to grow up in such safety. Yet, at first, I became very tired when I looked at it, remembering all my own things, like ding, ding, ding. Is it this I have been missing for like forty years … It made me very tired; I could be very sad after those gatherings … and it could be that I withdrew to do my own things … I didn't quite sit in that culture of theirs. [There were] differences in family culture.

Although Anna was happy for her partner, seeing all the support and closeness that surrounded her, she would suddenly feel very tired and sad, as it reminded her of what she had lost and, perhaps, never truly had. The effects of such accumulated losses can be conceptualised as a form of affective inequality between partners (Kolehmainen & Juvonen 2018). The affective intensity of tiredness and sadness diminished Anna's bodily capacities and limited her body's openness to other bodies (her partner's family members) as she withdrew into herself, feeling that she (her body) did not quite "fit" within her partner's family culture. Such affective inequality can render one partner more vulnerable than the other in the event of a breakup.

The accumulation of losses in Anna's life became further entangled with her feelings of being cut off when her ex-partner's family did not keep in touch after the breakup. Later in the interview, Anna said she had been hurt that none of her ex-partner's family members had asked her how she was doing, despite her having socialised with them for many years. Such "vanishings" from an ex-partner's family can certainly occur after mixed-sex couple breakups as well. However, Anna's sense of having "vanished" from her ex-partner's family's life may have been

amplified by both her previous losses and the haunting feeling that the family may not have regarded their relationship as equal in value to a mixed-sex relationship.

Anna stated that when her ex-partner first came out, her family had taken a dim view of her homosexuality: "Go to conversion therapy." However, during their relationship, Anna had not felt unwelcome in the family: "On the contrary, [it was] like 'Of course you are welcome to us and to stay with us.'"

Nevertheless, the earlier rejection haunted Anna and her ex-partner's relationship, and Anna sensed that important family members had not entirely changed their views on what constitutes a "proper family." As she explained: "The [family's reaction to the partner's coming out] stayed as a bit of a background image, but not like a discord in everyday life … Still, in the background, there is that [heteronormative idea of a family] … which could come up if you talked on a more general level about couples and marriages and children."

Anna described having held an acknowledged place in her ex-partner's family, but after the breakup, her grief over their disappearance from her life was amplified by the haunting feeling that the relationship had never been viewed as entirely equal to a mixed-sex one in the family's eyes. Heteronormative elements thus affect queer grief assemblages through their haunting presence, which can intensify feelings of grief and loss in the aftermath of a breakup.

Flows and blockages of queer grief

The psychical, relational, material, spatial, and ideological elements that converge in a grief assemblage can either enable grief to flow or block its movement (Ringrose & Renold 2014). My analysis in these sections demonstrates that queer grief assemblages can operate on alternating temporal, spatial, private, and collective scales (DeLanda 2019). The entangled elements and relations affect whether the queer grief assemblage can extend beyond the personal and private sphere to, for instance, workplaces or neighbourly encounters or whether it remains confined to the domain of personal mourning. Heteronormative elements often

obstruct queer grief from entering and finding consolation in public spaces.

Laura described her former relationship as good and balanced. It had ended because the partners were unable to reconcile their differing desires about whether to have children. The atmosphere of Laura's interview was emotional and sorrowful. She began to sob in response to the very first question and broke down in tears multiple times throughout the interview. However, in the audio notes I made afterward, I did not record the kind of heaviness I had sensed in some other interviews. Instead, I noted that I did not feel worried about Laura. Although her grief was palpably painful and affectively intense, it appeared to flow freely, and she seemed to be on good terms with it. At the beginning of the interview, we had the following exchange:

> L: I'm starting to cry because the recent breakup is on my mind, and I have tissues here on the side [sobs] I thought this interview might be a bit too soon after the breakup, but I wanted to participate nevertheless. I apologize.
> I: No worries at all.
> L: I knew I was going to cry, but it's nothing dangerous.

Freud (1957) believed it was beneficial to let grief flow, and Laura's grief assemblage appeared to offer no psychical hindrance to that flow. Her grief assemblage included close friends who supported her throughout the grieving process. Nevertheless, there was a blockage that prevented the grief assemblage from expanding beyond Laura, her partner, and her closest friends. A box of chocolates inserted heteronormative elements into the grief assemblage, intensifying affective relations with Laura's neighbours, her ex-partner, the ex-partner's dog, their living arrangements, and the silences surrounding female relationships, thereby amplifying and complicating Laura's grief. She explained:

> I live in this small apartment building … Me and Emma, we got to know this old lady and one elderly couple here very well. They live on

> the same staircase … I'm sure it was clear to them that we were a couple. They visited our home and everything … Well, we didn't bump into them before Emma moved out. Oh well, this really makes me cry [in a surprised tone]. When Emma moved out, she left a box of chocolates for these neighbours, and on that same day, this old lady called me, like, "Who is this little elf who has left chocolate outside our door?" and I said it was from Emma [cries]. And then I told her … that Emma and our dog had moved out. And then, this old lady was like, "So, one moves out" [laughs] … It was difficult for her to say anything about it, and it wasn't like I expected some kind of consolation on her part, but it was a very strange situation … And already on that same day, the old lady visited Emma in her new home and thanked her for the chocolates … This made me think quite a lot … If a man had moved out, it would have been easier in relation to these elderly neighbours.

The material circumstance of living in an apartment building had made Laura, Emma and their elderly neighbours close acquaintances. They chatted in the yard and even visited one another's homes. Laura thought it was clear to everyone that she and Emma were a couple. However, the grief assemblage – which brought together spatial arrangements, former neighbours, ex-partners, and the silences surrounding female relationships through the material element of a box of chocolates – blocked Laura from expressing her grief and having it validated. Her elderly neighbour went to visit her ex-partner as if nothing of significance had happened. When Laura recounted these events in the interview, her sadness and tears intensified, and she herself seemed surprised by this. The silences and relationships within the grief assemblage revealed its heteronormative and discriminatory underpinnings, as Laura and Emma's separation was not something that could be acknowledged in a neighbourly interaction. Instead, the queer grief assemblage was forced to retreat into the private sphere. This exposure of the hierarchy of relationships led Laura to conclude that the situation likely would have been different if her ex-partner had been a man.

In the interview with Samuel, who was in thirties, there were no

tears, but a different kind of heaviness was present. His entire posture appeared weighted, his face expressionless, and he spoke slowly. He described the breakup of an on-and-off relationship that had marked the beginning of a difficult period in his life:

> [The breakup] quite irreversibly changed my life, and it still affects it daily … At times, I have been hopeless that I might ever get over it … but I have always tried and sought new kinds of help and … have helped myself … Of course, there have been different phases in my life, even before the breakup, but … the biggest thing is that it brought mental health problems with it … It sounds a bit dramatic, but a certain kind of darkness has come into my life, and I feel like I haven't … felt happiness since the separation at all.

When Samuel was still in the relationship, he had been happier than ever before, but the relationship had also been marked by uncertainty from the very beginning: "It is difficult to define … when the relationship started and when it ended." There were phases when the partners agreed they were no longer together, yet they remained in constant contact, spent time together and continued their sexual relationship as before. The ambiguity of such prolonged waiting and wondering can be stressful and tormenting (Boss 1999), and elements of ambiguous loss had already appeared during the relationship itself. When Samuel eventually sought clarity and asked whether they could be together, the partner's answer was "No." This was crushing for Samuel.

Samuel said he had done an enormous amount of work to move past the breakup: "I must have read every single [self-help] book written about breakups in the Finnish language and done every single exercise in those books." Nonetheless, he felt unable to move on: "It is often said that one should get over them [breakups]; for me, it seems totally impossible, that kind of getting over [them]." It is important to note that plugging in therapeutic culture's ideas about moving past breakups and reading self-help books may not always enable grief to flow or serve as a way out of grief. In Samuel's grief assemblage, agonising affects

persisted over time despite his sustained efforts to get better. Here, I want to draw attention to the vulnerabilities present in the queer grief assemblage. While theories of queer grief often stress the ethicality of melancholic attachments – emphasising the importance of not forgetting the painful histories of oppression (Ahmed 2004; Muñoz 1999) – Malins (2004, 102) offers an alternative view, theorising the ethicality of assemblages in terms of the affects they enable or block. In response to a personal loss, the devastating affective states and melancholic attachments that marked Samuel's breakup in Samuel's breakup constrained his bodily capabilities, as they blocked hope and joy from entering the assemblage. For Samuel, the effects of the breakup were devastating, as it was accompanied by the distressing and agonising affectivity of melancholia (Freud 1957).

During the darkest phases of grief, grief assemblages often shrink to a very small and private scale (DeLanda 2019). Immediately after the breakup, Samuel's grief assemblage included only himself and his apartment: "I just lay on the floor and cried and didn't do anything during the day, didn't even eat, and it was just really, really difficult." Eventually, however, the grief assemblage expanded to include a psychologist's office, as Samuel sought help and discovered separation support groups. Initially, heteronormative elements prevented the grief assemblage from extending further, as he was hesitant about joining a group not specifically aimed at LGBTIQ+ individuals:

> I am self-confident about my identity, so maybe I would have said straight out if there had been a problem about that. But, then again, I felt like I didn't want to pay for it and then need to educate cis heterosexual people.

The discovery of a separation support group specifically for LGBTIQ+ individuals was a relief for Samuel. This experience resonated with those of other interviewees, who felt they could be more at ease in a group aimed at LGBTIQ+ people – where they would not have to be constantly vigilant about how their sexualities might be perceived by other group mem-

bers or feel obligated to educate others about queer sexualities or genders (Lahti 2020). Samuel's grief assemblage expanded to include a community of separated LGBTIQ+ individuals: "I made many friends there who stayed in my life, and also, as a group, we are still in contact." Far from just diminishing separated individuals' bodily capacities or isolating them from the LGBTIQ+ community, as in Gahan's (2018) study, the pain of the loss of an important bond via a breakup – often that of a couple relationship – often made participants' bodies open to a wider set of relationalities and intimacies. Following their breakups, many interviewees sought out various clubs and associations. Queer grief can thus render bodies more open to one another and facilitate community-building.

Tom found that his ideas about relationships expanded following his first breakup. After the grief of his first heartbreak, his subsequent relationships often developed, after the initial dating phase, into forms in which the boundaries between friendship and partnership became blurred. This ambiguity was no longer a source of distress for him. The shift had occurred gradually, as elements of gay culture, Tom's growing comfort with his own sexuality, and evolving ideas about relationships were incorporated into his grief assemblage:

> Accepting my homosexuality was a difficult process … Yet it has opened different views of life for me. Like, I feel that among gay men, there are different relationship forms available, and quite many live in open relationships … [This was different from] when I met Mark for the first time, and I was quite new to that world. I guess [back then] I mirrored the traditional relationship norms and saw them as an ideal.

His exposure to the unhappy effects of the promise of happiness – relationship breakup – had led Tom to envision alternative ways of imagining a good or better life (Ahmed 2010). He believed that a person's vulnerabilities in relationships could be better supported by building a network of close relationships that included family, friends, and connections that did not fit neatly into the partner–friend binary. Moreover, his grief assemblage expanded from the very personal to the political:

> At the moment, I'm not focused on building a family or a relationship but, rather … I focus on generating change in wider society so that we stay within the world's sustainable limits and get human rights for everybody. I reach wider than just "me and my man," so to speak.

Tom resisted the idea of building a relationship or family as the centerpiece of his life, as well as the notion that LGBTIQ+ politics is concerned only with love in a narrowly private sense. His grief assemblage extended to encompass care for the sustainability of the more-than-human world and the advancement of human rights for all.

Conclusion

While the concept of disenfranchised grief emphasises that not all losses are equally acknowledged (Doka 2002) – often due to heteronormative underpinnings (Alasuutari 2020) – my analysis highlights that grief over LGBTIQ+ separations is not a singular event marked solely by the loss or invalidation of one's feelings. Rather, it is a complex mesh of relations, elements, affects, and intensities. To queer grief is to illuminate its dynamic processes, in which various elements – such as one's previous losses in life; connections to and intimacies with various humans (e.g., ex-partners, relatives, friends, and neighbours) and nonhumans (e.g., pets, houses and mould); and materialities and spatialities (e.g., housing arrangements and substances) along with experiences of cis- and heteronormativity and how one has been treated both as an LGBTIQ+ person and as a partner – come together, amplifying and/or diminishing one another's effects in a queer grief assemblage.

In queer grief assemblages, affective intensities often condense around grief over the loss of one's partner. However, the weight of this loss is impacted by many other elements within the assemblage. The work of mourning can be amplified by a range of elements: the abruptness of the separation, the absence of closure, and the continual accumulation of losses within the grief assemblage. Moreover, the assemblage approach stresses the affective capacities of all the elements and bodies involved in a queer grief assemblage (Ringrose & Renold 2014; Lahti & Koleh-

mainen 2020). When one relationship in an assemblage shifts, the other connections and elements also change in relation to one another. The concept of a queer grief assemblage thus has the potential to queer grief in the sense that it draws attention to the effects of grief assemblages – effects that extend to the loss of human and non-human relationalities and intimacies in breakups, including those involving friends, communities, houses, animals, coupled status, and identities that lie beyond romantic or erotic (monogamous) bonding.

Heteronormative elements are entangled in grief assemblages in various ways, influencing their interactions with other elements and relations within the assemblage (Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020). Heteronormative and transphobic elements can block or even (dis)assemble relational networks in grief assemblages in profoundly painful ways (see also Lahti & Kolehmainen 2020). Being cut off from relational networks and experiencing accumulation of losses over time can affect the body's openness to other bodies and make an individual vulnerable in terms of relating to others. At the same time, heteronormative elements often intensify grief in queer grief assemblages through their "haunting presence" (Blackman 2015). Painful past experiences of disapproval and discrimination become entangled with participants' breakups in the here and now in subtle ways.

While some grief assemblages are saturated with grief, the assembled psychical, relational, and other elements may nonetheless enable grief to flow. In others, the process of grieving is blocked and replaced by the distressing and agonising affectivity of melancholia. Often, the heteronormative elements and relationships entangled in grief assemblages affect whether those assemblages can extend beyond the deeply personal and private sphere to semipublic spaces such as neighbourly encounters or workplaces. However, queer grief is not solely an isolating force. Therapeutic elements – such as separation support groups for LGBTIQ+ individuals – can also allow grief assemblages to expand into LGBTIQ+ communities, where the communal work of mourning functions as an affective glue. In some cases, the incorporation of gay cultural knowledge and alternative relationship models further expands the personal grief assemblage to include forms of queer political activism.

My analysis of grief over LGBTIQ+ breakups is not easily reducible to fixed subject positions or the effects of overarching heteronormative structures. By attuning my analysis to the multiplicity of queer grief assemblages, I have shown how different elements – psychical, cultural, material, spatial, and heteronormative – are entangled within them. By highlighting the differences within grief assemblages, I have demonstrated the enduring significance of heteronormativity beyond predefined and top-down operations of power. I have illustrated the complex processes involved in LGBTIQ+ breakups and the everyday happenings in which different forms of power become significant in the experience of grieving these separations.

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NOTES

1. This is changing, as services have been commodified and marketised in Finland as well in recent decades in a manner that is typical of liberal welfare states.