

**Cultural differences
in conceptualization of loss and grief
as expressed by Americans and Poles**

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Independent Researcher

Cognitive Science and Psychology



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To Dad

Expertly using the toolkit of cognitive linguistics, Kamila Midor describes how Americans and Poles talk and think about loss and grief. In doing so, she provides us with deep insight into the forces that shape the ways they construct and experience these unavoidable aspects of the human condition.

Dr. Zoltán Kövecses
Professor emeritus
Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

Grief is an experience that unites us across cultures, languages, and histories. Yet the words we choose to describe loss profoundly shape how we understand, express, and ultimately integrate it. Kamila Midor offers a thoughtful and illuminating exploration of the metaphors of grief in Polish and American English, revealing both the cultural nuances that distinguish us and the universal threads that connect us. By showing how language constructs our narratives of loss, this work enriches not only our understanding of linguistics but also our capacity for empathy. This is a thoughtful, compassionate, and important contribution to our understanding of grief, language, and what it means to be human.

Anja Franczak
Founder of the Instytut Dobrej Śmierci (Institute of the Good Death)
and President of the Management Board of the Instytut Dobrej Śmierci
foundation, Poland

Kamila Midor offers a compelling cross-cultural account of how Americans and Poles conceptualize loss and grief. She bridges metaphor and blending theory with bereavement psychology to demonstrate how shared metaphorical patterns function alongside important cultural differences. Besides contributing to cognitive linguistics and health communication research, this book has clear relevance for professionals who support bereaved people.

Dr. Dennis Zhiming Tay
Professor
Division of Humanities
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China

In this engaging and compelling book, Kamila Midor explores how Americans and Poles conceptualise and communicate experiences of loss and grief. Grounded in a combination of metaphor analysis and blending theory, her work offers a thoughtful investigation of bereaved people's experiences, deepening our understandings of grief and loss and illuminating the role of culture in their conceptualisation and expression. It is sure to be of relevance not only to cognitive linguists, but to thanatologists, bereavement support professionals, and anyone with an interest in how we make sense of and communicate our experiences.

Dr. Sarah Turner
Centre for Arts & Creative Cultures
Coventry University, UK

Table of contents

List of figures	xv
List of tables	xvii
Acknowledgements	xix
Introduction	xxi
PART ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	1
Chapter 1 Loss and grief	3
1.1 General approach	4
1.2 Psychology and psychiatry	5
1.2.1 Definitions	5
1.2.2 Changing approach to loss and grief	7
1.2.3 Grieving over different types of loss: The person who died	11
1.2.3.1 Loss of a parent	11
1.2.3.2 Loss of a child	12
1.2.3.3 Loss of a partner	13
1.2.3.4 Loss of a grandparent	14
1.2.3.5 Loss of a friend	14
1.2.3.6 Loss of a relative	15
1.2.4 Grieving over different types of loss: Mode of death	15
1.2.4.1 Anticipated loss and anticipatory grief	15
1.2.4.2 Unanticipated loss	17
1.2.4.3 Suicide	17
1.2.5 Unusual cases	19
1.2.5.1 Disenfranchised and ambiguous grief	19
1.2.5.2 Non-typical grief reactions	20
1.2.6 Grief and gender	21

1.3 Culture	23
1.3.1 Grief and culture	23
1.3.2 Mourning and the history of death	24
1.4 Language: Terminology and translation problems	25
1.4.1 “Loss”	26
1.4.2 “Grief,” “bereavement,” and “mourning”	26
1.4.3 <i>Strata</i> and <i>utrata</i>	30
1.4.4 <i>Žaloba</i>	33
1.5 Conclusion	37
Chapter 2 Conceptualization: Metaphor and blend	39
2.1 Cognitive linguistics and conceptual science	39
2.2 Frames	40
2.3 Image schemas	41
2.4 Metaphor	42
2.4.1 Traditional perspective	42
2.4.2 Conceptual metaphor theory: Lakoff and colleagues	42
2.4.3 Conceptual metaphor theory: Kövecses	46
2.4.3.1 Emotion metaphors	46
2.4.3.2 Metaphor and culture	46
2.4.4 Reception, further development, and application of CMT	48
2.4.5 Image metaphor	50
2.4.6 Metaphor use in psychology, psychotherapy, and psychiatry	50
2.4.6.1 LOSS and GRIEF metaphors	51
2.5 Metonymy	52
2.6 Mental spaces	53
2.7 Conceptual integration or conceptual blending	54
2.7.1 Principles and constraints	55
2.7.2 Integration networks. Metaphoric blends	59
2.7.3 Metonymy in blending	61
2.7.4 Integration in grammar and integration of events	62

2.7.5 Reception, further development, and application of the theory	62
2.8 Cultural implications on conceptualization	63
2.9 Conclusion	64
Chapter 3 Methodology and research approach	67
3.1 Introduction	67
3.2 Overview of information needed	67
3.3 Rationale for qualitative research	68
3.4 Research sample	70
3.4.1 Sampling method	70
3.4.2 Americans	70
3.4.3 Poles	72
3.5 Data collection	74
3.6 Data analysis and synthesis	76
3.7 Ethical considerations	78
3.7.1 Research on sensitive topics	78
3.7.2 Benefits of participation	79
3.8 Issues of trustworthiness	80
3.9 Limitations of the study	81
3.10 Conclusion	83
PART TWO: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF LOSS AND GRIEF. THE ANALYSIS	85
Introduction to Chapters 4 and 5	85
Chapter 4 Americans: Loss and grief	87
4.1 Conceptualizations of LOSS	87
4.1.1 THERE WAS, NOW THERE IS NOT	87
4.1.1.1 ABSENCE	87
4.1.1.2 EMPTINESS	97
4.1.1.3 HOLE	100
4.1.1.4 DARKNESS	101

4.1.1.5 Summary	101
4.1.2 IT WAS [ADJ], NOW IT IS DIFFERENT	102
4.1.2.1 CHANGE OF SELF	102
4.1.2.2 Summary	105
4.1.3 THERE WAS NOT, NOW THERE IS	105
4.1.3.a PHYSICAL ENTITY (THING)	106
4.1.3.1 SUBSTANCE	106
4.1.3.2 INANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECT	106
4.1.3.3 ANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECT	108
4.1.3.4 Other	113
4.1.3.b UNPLEASANT BODILY EXPERIENCE (SENSATION)	114
4.1.3.5 ILLNESS	114
4.1.3.6 INJURY (WOUND)	115
4.1.3.7 PAIN	116
4.1.3.8 SCAR THAT BURNS YET STRENGTHENS	116
4.1.3.9 TRAUMA	120
4.1.3.10 FEELING IN THE STOMACH	120
4.1.3.11 Summary	120
4.1.4 JOURNEY	121
4.1.4.1 LOCATION	121
4.1.4.2 OBSTACLE ON THE JOURNEY	122
4.1.4.3 Summary	124
4.1.5 Summary	124
4.2 Conceptualizations of GRIEF	125
4.2.1 THERE WAS, NOW THERE IS NOT	125
4.2.1.1 EMPTINESS	125
4.2.1.2 Summary	126
4.2.2 THERE WAS NOT, NOW THERE IS	126
4.2.2.a PHYSICAL ENTITY (THING)	126
4.2.2.1 SUBSTANCE	126
4.2.2.2 INANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECT	128

4.2.2.3 ANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECT	132
4.2.2.b UNPLEASANT BODILY EXPERIENCE (SENSATION)	133
4.2.2.4 PAIN (IN THE PIT OF THE STOMACH)	133
4.2.2.5 Summary	134
4.2.3 JOURNEY	134
4.2.3.1 JOURNEY (GENERAL CATEGORY)	134
4.2.3.2 JOURNEY (CRAZY RIDE)	135
4.2.3.3 JOURNEY (PROCESS)	135
4.2.3.4 Summary	135
4.2.4 Other	136
4.2.4.1 GAME	136
4.2.4.2 DOWN / DESCENT	136
4.2.4.3 Summary	139
4.2.5 Summary	139
4.3 Conclusion	139
Chapter 5 Poles: Loss and grief	141
5.1 Conceptualizations of LOSS	141
5.1.1 THERE WAS, NOW THERE IS NOT	141
5.1.1.1 ABSENCE	141
5.1.1.2 EMPTINESS	149
5.1.1.3 ABSENCE / EMPTINESS	150
5.1.1.4 HOLE	152
5.1.1.5 DARKNESS	153
5.1.1.6 Summary	153
5.1.2 IT WAS [ADJ], NOW IT IS DIFFERENT	153
5.1.2.1 CHANGE OF SELF	153
5.1.2.2 Summary	157
5.1.3 THERE WAS NOT, NOW THERE IS	158
5.1.3.a PHYSICAL ENTITY (THING)	158
5.1.3.1 INANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECT	158

5.1.3.2 ANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECT	159
5.1.3.3 Other	164
5.1.3.b UNPLEASANT BODILY EXPERIENCE (SENSATION)	165
5.1.3.4 INJURY (WOUND)	165
5.1.3.5 PAIN	168
5.1.3.6 SCAR	168
5.1.3.7 Summary	169
5.1.4 JOURNEY	169
5.1.4.1 LOCATION	169
5.1.4.2 OBSTACLE ON THE JOURNEY	170
5.1.4.3 Summary	170
5.1.5 Other	171
5.1.5.1 TEST OF MATURITY	171
5.1.5.2 AWARENESS OF DEATH, INABILITY TO COMPREHEND IT	171
5.1.5.3 LOSS NOW VS. LOSS 4 YEARS AGO	174
5.1.5.4 Summary	176
5.1.6 Summary	176
5.2 Conceptualizations of GRIEF	176
5.2.1 IT WAS [ADJ], NOW IT IS DIFFERENT	176
5.2.1.1 [LOSS IS] CHANGE OF SELF	177
5.2.1.2 Summary	179
5.2.2 THERE WAS NOT, NOW THERE IS	179
5.2.2.a PHYSICAL ENTITY (THING)	179
5.2.2.1 INANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECT	179
5.2.2.2 ANIMATE PHYSICAL OBJECT	180
5.2.2.b UNPLEASANT BODILY EXPERIENCE (SENSATION)	181
5.2.2.3 PAIN	181
5.2.2.4 Summary	182
5.2.3 JOURNEY	182
5.2.3.1 JOURNEY (GENERAL CATEGORY)	182
5.2.3.2 LOCATION	185

5.2.3.3 Summary	186
5.2.4 Other	187
5.2.4.1 MEMORIES OF THE DEAD	187
5.2.4.2 SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE	187
5.2.4.3 CONTAINER AND JOURNEY	187
5.2.4.4 Summary	188
5.2.5 Summary	188
5.3 Conclusion	189
Chapter 6 Previous relationship and the mode of death	191
6.1 Americans: Relationship with the person	191
6.1.1 Loss of a parent	191
6.1.2 Loss of a child	192
6.1.3 Loss of a partner	193
6.1.4 Loss of a grandparent	194
6.1.5 Loss of a friend	194
6.1.6 Loss of a relative	195
6.1.7 Summary	195
6.2 Americans: Mode of death	195
6.2.1 Anticipated	195
6.2.2 Unanticipated	196
6.2.3 Summary	198
6.3 Poles: Relationship with the person	198
6.3.1 Loss of a parent	198
6.3.2 Loss of a child	199
6.3.3 Loss of a grandparent	199
6.3.4 Loss of a friend	200
6.3.5 Loss of a relative	200
6.3.6 Summary	201
6.4 Poles: Mode of death	201

6.4.1 Anticipated	201
6.4.2 Unanticipated	202
6.4.3 Summary	204
6.5 Conclusion	204
Chapter 7 Observations, conclusions, and recommendations	207
7.1 Matters of interpretation	207
7.2 Blends and their types	210
7.3 (In)directness in referring to loss and grief	213
7.4 Different perspectives	214
7.5 Concepts of loss and grief	215
7.6 Implications	223
7.6.1 Practical applications	223
7.6.2 Further research	224
7.6.3 Recommendations	224
Conclusion	227
Appendices	229
Appendix 1: Demographic data	229
Appendix 2: Questionnaire (questions only)	236
Appendix 3: Blend types	239
Appendix 4: Metaphoricity	241
Appendix 5: Further examples from the data	245
References	249
About the author	275
Index	277

List of figures

Figure 3.1: Americans – “Who died?” plot	71
Figure 3.2: Americans – “Cause of death” plot	72
Figure 3.3: Poles – “Who died?” plot	73
Figure 3.4: Poles – “Cause of death” plot	73
Figure 4.1: LOSS IS ABSENCE blend	92
Figure 4.2: LOSS IS (WORSE THAN) LOSS OF A LEG blend	96
Figure 4.3: LOSS IS EMPTINESS blend	99
Figure 4.4: LOSS IS A PERSON IN CONTROL (example 52) megablend	110
Figure 4.5: LOSS IS A SCAR THAT BURNS YET STRENGTHENS megablend	119
Figure 4.6: GRIEF IS A NATURAL FORCE (WATER) blend	127
Figure 4.7: GRIEF IS A BURDEN blend	131
Figure 5.1: LOSS IS LOSS OF A VALUABLE OBJECT (example 125) blend	146
Figure 5.2: LOSS IS INCOMPLETENESS OF SELF blend	156
Figure 5.3: LOSS IS AN INJURY blend	167
Figure 5.4: AWARENESS OF DEATH, INABILITY TO COMPREHEND IT blend	173
Figure 5.5: LOSS 4 YEARS AGO VS. LOSS YESTERDAY blend	175
Figure 5.6: GRIEVER IS A MACHINE, GRIEF AFFECTS THE MACHINE blend	178
Figure 5.7: GRIEF IS A JOURNEY (example 179) blend	184
Figure 7.1: Types of blends with reference to metaphoricity	212
Figure 7.2: The relations among death, loss, grief, and mourning	215
Figure 7.3: Americans – Model of LOSS	216
Figure 7.4: Poles – Model of LOSS	217
Figure 7.5: Americans – Model of GRIEF	219
Figure 7.6: Poles – Model of GRIEF	220

List of tables

Table 1.1: Translations of “loss” into Polish	26
Table 1.2: Translations of “grief” into Polish	28
Table 1.3: Translations of “to bereave” and its derivatives into Polish	29
Table 1.4: Translations of “mourning” into Polish	29
Table 1.5: Translations of <i>strata</i> into English	32
Table 1.6: Translations of <i>żałoba</i> into English	34
Table 7.1: Type of blends	211
Table 7.2: Metaphoricity	212

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Introduction

The fact that sensitive topics pose complex issues and dilemmas for researchers does not imply that such topics should not be studied.

(Lee & Renzetti 1993: 10)

When I first came up with the idea of conducting a research study on this topic, some people asked me: "Why don't you write about something positive, like joy or happiness?" Well, but why not grief? Loss and grief fascinated me more. This was especially true at the time, when I was getting to know my own grief, the grief that had been with me since my adolescence and through my early adult years. Over the years and with further losses, I started noticing that not all the ways others talked about grief resonated with me. When I chose to study how other people think about loss and grief, I decided to focus on my culture and the culture that was (and still is) dear to my heart: that of Americans.

In the globalization era, the differences between cultures and, at the same time, the awareness of cultural distinctiveness and cultural competences, are becoming the subject of great interest to researchers in various fields. In the humanities, the cultural turn can be seen in both literary studies and linguistics. Cognitive linguistics, which is the main area of my interest, emphasizes the role of culture and the surroundings in the process of conceptualization. According to cognitive linguists, the human mind is embodied, which means that the concepts we have in our minds result from our experience of the environment we live in. Therefore, conceptualization is significantly influenced by the world around us.

The above assumption is easy to understand if we take into account concrete and tangible concepts. But what if we deal with abstract concepts such as emotions? To understand these types of concepts, the human mind uses knowledge of the world acquired through experience, thanks to which we think with metaphors. The theory of conceptual metaphor was proposed by Lakoff and Johnson in their famous work *Metaphors We Live By*. The main postulate of the authors was to treat metaphor as something more than a linguistic tool; in their opinion, metaphor is a tool used by our minds to understand concepts, including abstract ones. We think in metaphors.

One of the most popular metaphors in American culture is LOVE IS A JOURNEY, in which lovers are considered as travelers, a relationship is a vehicle and a road, and any difficulties in a relationship are obstacles on the way. When we say “we are spinning our wheels,” it means that despite our best efforts, we are unable to move. We put a lot of effort into this activity, but to no avail. Just as it is when people in a relationship experience problems.

Another important theory is the one of conceptual integration proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), who were inspired by the theory of conceptual metaphor. Fauconnier and Turner argue that the human mind stores conceptual packets (mental spaces) through which we are able to perceive and understand the world. A conceptual blend arises when such a packet (input space) blends with another input space. Their common elements form a generic space, that is, a very abstract space on a different conceptual level. The result of this process is the aforementioned conceptual blend, i.e., a new structure that was not present in any of the spaces. This theory provides a useful framework for analyzing how people express their thoughts and emotions, including unconventional ones.

Conceptualization is closely connected to human experience. Cognitive linguists are therefore often interested in cross-cultural differences in the conceptualization of phenomena. A central question concerns the origins of these differences. By addressing this question, we can learn about cultures and gain insight into how the human mind works.

The subject of this book, which is based on a PhD dissertation, is loss and grief. Loss occurs when someone or something valuable to us is no longer accessible (Sabar 2000). Typically, when we think of loss, we mean the loss after someone's death. This is the type of loss I am going to study. Grief is a natural response to loss (Perlman 2002). It affects different aspects of life; not only the emotional, but also bodily, cognitive, spiritual, or social (Sabar 2002; Frączek 2017). Usually, it involves sadness, anger, disbelief, guilt, or anxiety.

Why study grief and loss? I assume that despite the universal presence of death around the world, the response to it might vary from culture to culture. The way people think and talk about their loss and grief might be all the more different. When we think and talk about these phenomena, we use conceptual metaphors and blends because it is easier for us to express how we feel. This is especially helpful when dealing with difficult and delicate topics, such as grief.

Furthermore, I assume that, despite some universal concepts such as UP-DOWN or the CONTAINER schema (HUMAN BODY AS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS) resulting from our bodily experiences, differences due to culture and personal

experience will be visible at lower, more detailed levels. It seems extremely interesting to study supposedly universal phenomena, such as loss and grief, and compare two apparently similar Western cultures.

Grief and loss are very subjective, personal, and sensitive matters. In some cultures, or for some people, these topics are still taboo. At the same time, many psychologists claim that a fundamental strategy in healing is to talk about one's feelings (Lee & Renzetti 1993; Torre & Lieberman 2018); it also helps regulate emotions (Torre & Lieberman 2018). In my view, people should talk more about these experiences.

Among the works on the conceptualization of emotions, there are many valuable studies, including those by Kövecses (2005; 2014), McMullen and Conway (1996), Tay (2016b), Gulz (1992), Apresjan (1997), Ross (2001), Krawczak (2025), which I will discuss in the appropriate part of this book. While metaphorical and conceptual approaches to emotion and illness have been widely studied, to my knowledge, no book has yet offered a comprehensive linguistic analysis of loss and grief that examines these phenomena cross-culturally, particularly in the context of Polish and American conceptualizations, and integrates both conceptual metaphor theory and blending theory. This book aims to fill that gap and builds on my previous work on the topic (Midor 2012; 2016; 2019; 2021a; 2021b).

The aims of this book are:

- to study *how* Americans and Poles talk about loss and grief, and *how* they conceptualize these phenomena,
- to examine *what* intra- and intercultural differences in the conceptualizing loss and grief are,
- to explore *in what ways* culture and individual experience might affect conceptualization of loss and grief.

In order to achieve these goals, I decided to structure this book in the following way. There are two main parts: the theoretical framework and the analysis. Thus, Part One consists of Chapter 1 on loss and grief, Chapter 2 on metaphor and blend, and Chapter 3 on methodology, whereas Part Two includes Chapters 4–7 devoted to the analysis and its results.

Chapter 1 offers an introduction to the topics of loss and grief from four perspectives: general and folk perspectives, psychology and psychiatry, culture, and language (translation and terminology). The subchapter on psychological aspects of loss and grief is the most complex, and it describes various types of loss (depending on the previous relationship with the person who died, and the

mode of death). Chapter 1, therefore, introduces the key phenomena explored in this book.

Chapter 2 is about conceptualization, especially metaphor and blend, a combination of which serves as a tool in my analysis. It is an overview of the theories of conceptual metaphor and conceptual integration, as well as several other notions that are relevant, i.e., frames, image schemas, metonymy, and mental spaces. In this chapter, I also discuss the relationship between conceptualization and culture.

Chapter 3 describes my research approach. Because of the nature of the research questions, I decided to conduct a qualitative study using an open-ended online anonymous questionnaire. There are two research samples: Americans (37 eligible participants) and Poles (42 eligible participants). Each step of the study is described: preparation, sampling, collecting data, and data analysis. Ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness, as well as limitations of the study, are also discussed.

Part Two, which is the analytical part of the book, opens with a short introduction to Chapters 4 and 5, since they are very similar. They both refer to the main analysis of the study, i.e., how Americans (Chapter 4) and Poles (Chapter 5) conceptualize loss and grief. The chapters are divided into subchapters and sections according to the semantic patterns I identify in the data.

Chapter 6 focuses on the conceptualization of loss and grief from the perspective of the previous relationship with the one who died and the mode of death. The samples are studied in two separate subchapters.

Chapter 7 collects the observations, conclusions, implications, and recommendations after completing Chapters 4–6. It is followed by the main conclusion, appendices, and a reference list, as well as a list of figures and tables.

I strongly believe that researchers should not limit themselves to their primary fields and that there should be more interdisciplinary research studies. There should also be more debate around mental health. I hope that this research will be useful to scholars, such as linguists, psychologists, culture studies researchers, and anthropologists, as well as mental health practitioners and social workers, especially those who embark on their professional journeys with the bereaved or work in intercultural settings. I also believe that translators and interpreters may find this book helpful. Finally, everyone who is interested

in the topics of loss and grief, as well as in American and Polish cultures, might benefit from this study.

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About the author

Kamila Midor is a linguist and translator from Poland. She holds a PhD in linguistics from Jagiellonian University in Kraków, where her dissertation—later updated as this book—explored cross-cultural differences in the conceptualization of loss and grief in American and Polish contexts, integrating insights from cognitive linguistics, psychology, and cultural studies.

In 2015–2016, she was a visiting student researcher at the University of California, Berkeley, where she further developed her expertise in cognitive linguistics and interdisciplinary research methods. Her research combines qualitative analysis, conceptual metaphor theory, and conceptual integration theory to examine how language shapes emotional experience.

In addition to her academic work, she is actively involved with the Institute of the Good Death (Instytut Dobrej Śmierci), a Polish foundation that promotes open, compassionate dialogue around death, loss, and grief in contemporary society.

Her interdisciplinary training and experience position her to contribute unique insights at the intersection of linguistics, psychology, and cultural studies, making her work relevant to scholars, students, and practitioners interested in the language of grief and emotional expression across cultures.

Index

A

American culture, xxii; 24–25; 47;
170
American metaphors, *see* *Chapters*
4 and 7.5; Appendix 5
Americans
 and mode of death, 71–72; *see*
 also Chapter 6.2
 conceptualizations of grief, *see*
 Chapter 4.2
 conceptualizations of loss, *see*
 Chapter 4.1
 previous relationship with the
 deceased, 71; *see also Chapter*
 6.1
anger, 7; 9–10; 19; 23; 48; 110
attitudes toward death, 25

B

bereavement, 10; 23–30

C

conceptual integration (blending)
 megablend, 59; 110; 116–119;
 150; 152; 168–169
 types of blends, 56; 59–61; 212;
 see also Appendix 3
conceptual metaphor theory
 (CMT), 42–52
conceptual science, 39–40
conceptualization
 in general, xxi–xxiii; *see Chapter*
 2
 cultural implications, 63–64
 in analysis, *see Chapters 4–7*
 of emotions, xxiii
cross-cultural comparison, *see*
 Chapter 7

D

data analysis, 76–77
data collection, 74–76
demographic data, 70–73; *see also*
 Appendix 1

E

emotions
 in grief, xxii; 6–7; 23–24; 34
 metaphors of, 46; 50–51
ethical considerations, 78–79

F

Fauconnier, Gilles, xxii; 40; 53–65
fear, 7; 17; 107; 164–165; 193
frames, 40–41; 59–62

G

generic space, xxii; 56
grief
 conceptualizations of, *see*
 Chapters 4–7; Appendix 5
 cultural implications, 23–24
 definitions of, xxii; 4–7
 disenfranchised grief, 19
 gender differences, 21–23
 linguistic (in)directness, 213–
 214
 metaphors, *see Table of*
 Contents; for a complete list of
 metaphors see Figures 7.5 and
 7.6
 models of the concept of grief,
 215–223
 psychological approaches, 5–11
 recent theories, 10–11
 stages and their criticism, 8–11

terminology and translation,
26–30
vs. bereavement, 26–30
vs. mourning, 26–30

I

image schemas, 41–42
input spaces, 55–59

J

Johnson, Mark, *see* Chapter 2

K

Kövecses, Zoltán, xxiii; 40; 46–48;
107; 108; 121; 130; 138; 155; 208
Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, 9–11

L

Lakoff, George, *see* Chapter 2; 87;
89; 102–103; 122; 136; 208; 213
loneliness, 22; 27; 97; 142
loss
 conceptualizations of, *see*
 Chapters 4–7; Appendix 5
 cultural implications, 23–24
 linguistic (in)directness, 213–
 214
 metaphors, *see* *Table of*
 Contents; for a complete list of
 metaphors see Figures 7.3 and
 7.4
 models of the concept of loss,
 215–223
 terminology and translation,
 26–30

M

mental spaces, 40; 53–54
metaphor
 and culture, 46–48
 conceptual metaphor, 42–52

emotion metaphors, 46; 50–51
grief metaphors, *see* *Table of*
 Contents; for a complete list of
 metaphors see Figures 7.5 and
 7.6
loss metaphors, *see* *Table of*
 Contents; for a complete list of
 metaphors see Figures 7.3 and
 7.4
traditional approach, 42
metaphoricity, 211–213
metonymy
 in general, 52–53
 in blending, 61–62; 136–138;
 242; 244
mourning, 8; 18; 21–22; 24–37

P

Polish culture, 25; 165; 170–171;
185–186
Polish metaphors, *see* Chapter 5
 and Appendix 5
Poles
 and mode of death, 72–73; *see*
 also Chapter 6.4
 conceptualizations of grief, *see*
 Chapter 5.2
 conceptualizations of loss, *see*
 Chapter 5.1
 previous relationship with the
 deceased, 72–73; *see also*
 Chapter 6.3
psychotherapy, 21; 50–51; 101; 223

Q

qualitative research, 68–69; 80–83
questionnaire, 74–76; *see also*
 Appendix 2

R

research sample, 70–73
rituals, 10; 18; 24–28; 34

S

sadness, 5–8; 28–34; 51; 91; 101;
130; 136–139; 193–194
Schut, Henk, 9–11
source domain, 43–45
SOURCE-PATH-GOAL (SPG) schema,
42; 121–122; 138–139
strata, 5; 5–26; 30–33; *see also*
Chapter 5
Stroebe, Margaret, 9–11; 20–21
suicide, 6; 15–20; 52; 108; 197;
202–203
survey, *see* questionnaire

T

target domain, 43–45
trustworthiness, 80
Turner, Mark, xxii; 40; 46; 50; 53–
65

U

utrata, *see* *strata*

Z

żałoba, 33–37; *see also* *Chapter 5*

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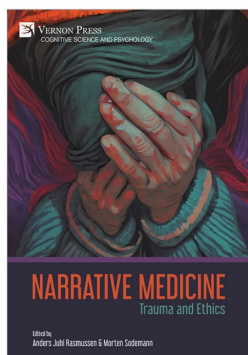
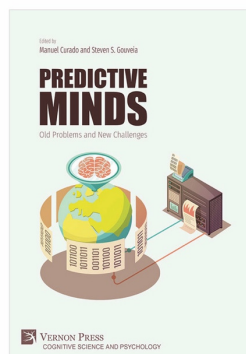
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