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Funerals against death

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ABSTRACT *While anthropological studies in non-Western societies show how funerals protect the community from the threat of death, sociological studies of British funerals have so far focused on meanings for the private family. The article reports on results from a Mass Observation directive – the first British study to focus specifically on the entire funeral congregation – and shows how attendees experience the contemporary life-centred funeral as a symbolic conquest of death. While the eulogy's accuracy is important, even more so – at least for some – is its authenticity, namely that the speaker has personal knowledge of the deceased. Whereas Davies analyses the power of professionally delivered ritual words against death, our data reveals how admired is the courage exercised by non-professionals in speaking against death, however faltering their words. Further, the very presence of a congregation whose members have known the deceased in diverse ways embodies a configurational eulogy, which we term relationships against death. We thus argue that funerals symbolically conquer death not only through* words *delivered by ritual specialists, but also through those who knew the deceased* congregating *and* speaking.

KEYWORDS: funeral; Mass-Observation; eulogy; mourners; congregation

Introduction

This article explores two ways in which a number of contemporary English funerals confront and conquer death, focusing on the congregation rather than the principal mourners who have hitherto been the focus of both funeral professionals and sociologically minded researchers. By 'congregation' we mean the group of people who have congregated, i.e. gathered together, to say farewell to the deceased; we make no assumptions about their religiosity. By 'mourner', we mean anyone who attends the funeral. First, we examine how congregations experience the eulogy, fast becoming the core of the modern 'life-centred' funeral. Second, we discuss how the very presence of the entire funeral congregation embodies the deceased's often diverse relationships and thus comprises a configurational eulogy, which we term 'relationships against death'.

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Funerals against death

Funerals are social responses to death (Hoy, 2013; Metcalf & Huntington, 1991). Indeed, anthropologists have long theorised funerals, including funerals in contemporary Britain (Hockey, 1993), as signifying death (Grainger, 1997), and symbolising the endurance of society and its values in the face of individual death and thus symbolically conquering death (Bloch, 1992; Bloch & Parry, 1982; Durkheim, 1915; Hertz, 1960; van Gennep, 1960). Long and Buehring (2014) offer a convincing analysis of contemporary American funerals in such terms.

Compared with some other modern societies, such as Ireland and Japan where hundreds may attend the wake or funeral of an unremarkable elderly person (Walter, 2012), British funerals are often rather private. Fearing to intrude upon the family's grief, non-family often choose not to view the body, not to attend the post-funeral tea or even not to attend the funeral itself (Bailey, 2012; Harper, 2010). This may reflect the sequestration of death (Mellor & Shilling, 1993), and specifically the cultural norm that grief should be private (Gorer, 1965; Walter, 1999). In the USA, where public viewing of the body is still common, the concept of 'the private' enters the funeral in a different way, namely in the therapeutic idea that the funeral's prime function is to assist 'the grief process' of the closely bereaved, rather than any function benefitting the group or society. One might expect that a funeral reduced to private grief (Britain) or individual grief psychology (USA) would likely lack symbolic power to enable the wider community to confront death. And given the professionalisation of funerals (Howarth, 1997), what symbolic power the rite does have might be expected to be the product of professional expertise and skill. Our research interrogates these expectations.

The congregation

This image of the funeral as a professionally enabled family affair is reflected in funeral research, which – at least in Britain – interrogates very close relatives of the deceased and/or the funeral professionals whose clients they become. Thus, a recent Scottish study interviewed 56 funeral professionals and 10 bereaved people who had arranged a funeral (Caswell, 2009). A major study in the north of England researched 46 funerals by observing the pre-funeral meetings between the client and funeral director and (where permitted) minister or celebrant, observing the funeral, interviewing one or two principal mourners after the funeral and interviewing funeral professionals (Holloway, Adamson, Argyrou, Draper, & Mariau, 2010, 2013). Though the former study is contextualised within the Scottish community, and the latter included observations of the composition of each funeral's total congregation and recognised its significance, each interviewed only funeral professionals, their clients and family members very close to the client. Each analysed the funeral as primarily a

co-production between professionals and close family – an illuminating perspective but not, we argue, the whole story.

Although anthropologists studying funerals in more traditional societies keep within their sights the more general community of mourners (Danforth, 1982; Jindra & Noret, 2011; Seremetakis, 1991), it is striking that no study of contemporary British or American funerals clearly focuses on the whole community of mourners. Sociological studies position these mourners as largely irrelevant or merely passive followers of an active funeral director (Bradbury, 1999; Howarth, 1996). Yet, if the funeral is to work as a social rite against death, it must work for all, not just for the closely bereaved. And indeed, just as a play – a co-production between the playwright, director and actors – needs an audience, one might hypothesise that the funeral 'audience', the congregation, is crucial for the rite's effectiveness. Just as cultural and media studies are interested in audience response to a performance as well as the performance itself, we argue that funeral research that ignores almost everyone present (to the extent of not interrogating them) is lacking something.

Funeral directors, celebrants and ministers may receive feedback from their client and occasionally other close family, but rarely, if ever, from the congregation as a whole. Likewise, researchers have not focussed on the congregation – with the one exception of O'Rourke, Spitzberg, and Hannawa's (2011) American study. Thus, though funeral professionals and sociologists know what principal mourners value in contemporary British funerals, whether what they value works also for the rest of the congregation remains unknown.

Methods

How then might congregational experiences of funerals be researched? Obtaining extensive qualitative data on how people experience public events is something for which Mass-Observation (M-O) is particularly well suited. M-O is a long-running and large-scale qualitative writing project based and archived at the University of Sussex in which 'correspondents' (the project's participants) respond to 'directives' sent to them three times a year. These are open-ended questionnaires on 'themes which cover both very personal issues and wider political and social issues and events' (Mass-Observation Project, 2011). Our data comes from the 2010 M-O directive *Going to Funerals* that we commissioned, asking correspondents to write about the most recent funeral they had attended – most likely, not one they had themselves arranged. This wording intended to capture, across all the correspondents, a wide range of mourners, from closely to distantly attached to the deceased, and included family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, club and association members, nurses and police officers, etc. The only other study to use a comparable methodology is O'Rourke et al.'s (2011) online survey which also asked American respondents about the most recent funeral they had attended.

The 500 or so active M-O correspondents are somewhat elderly, with 64% aged over 50 (compared to 34% of the British population) (Mass-Observation Project, 2011), but possibly reflecting the typical age range of British funeral attenders. There are more female than male correspondents, more middle and lower middle class than working class and few from Asian or Afro-Caribbean backgrounds; correspondents come from all over Britain, but not evenly so (Sheridan, 2002). In sum, correspondents are disproportionately white, middle-class women over 50 living in south-east England who enjoy writing in response to directives. Those who responded to the *Funerals* directive do not differ from M-O correspondents as a whole, and certainly not in terms of age and gender.

Most funerals written about had taken place within the past 2–4 years, with some correspondents writing immediately after one. The funerals were all Christian (including Anglican, Roman Catholic, Quaker and Methodist) or non-religious (including Humanist). Only one green funeral (with a wicker coffin and held in a natural burial ground) was featured. One or two correspondents were Pagans. Funerals with no attendees, which do occur (Prior, 1989, pp. 172–173), were of course not described. Replies varied considerably in length; some comprised just a short paragraph, most were between two and six sides and some considerably longer.

Of the 241 replies, 161 were handwritten or typed on paper, held at the Archive; 80 were electronic (normal response rates for the Archive). Given our geographical distance from the Archive, we read the electronic replies first, and then visited the Archive to add paper replies that offered new material; after analysis, we revisited the Archive to see if we could find any material contradicting the analysis (we could not). Thirty very short replies that seemed to us uninformative were excluded, as were reports of funerals held in other countries, and three reports by correspondents (two clergy, one bearer) who had attended their last funeral in a professional capacity. Though we included material where correspondents had participated by writing a eulogy, reading a poem or helping to choose music, we excluded material on the few funerals which correspondents had themselves been responsible for. This was because our aim was to balance existing knowledge based on the funeral director's client. After exclusions, 173 replies form the basis of our (inductive thematic) analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Typographic errors by correspondents have not been corrected in any quotes; identifying names have been altered, but the M-O code numbers are given in order to enable scholars visiting the archive to check our data and our interpretations.

Compared with much other qualitative data, M-O material is not only rich but also very extensive, yet M-O correspondents' attendance at funerals cannot be taken to represent all mourners' experiences. Their writings represent *some* mourners' experiences, even if we do not know what portion of mourners are here represented. Thus, what follows is a *partial* account, in many senses, of some British mourners' experiences of funerals. But it is by far the fullest account that there is.

British funerals

Funeral rites, practices and customs vary considerably between and within modern western societies (Walter, 2005a). The Christian or Humanist funerals that correspondents wrote about tend to have certain features, differentiating them from minority religious funerals in Britain and from funerals in other countries. About 75% of British funerals are cremations, 25% burials, this figure masking regional and urban/rural variations. Whereas in North America, the funeral service is usually preceded by a social gathering open to anyone to view the deceased in the funeral home, viewing the body at British funeral premises is private, and the funeral director's client, usually a close family member, may gatekeep who is allowed to view (Harper, 2010). The main British social ritual therefore is not viewing, but typically – with cremations – a service or ceremony in the chapel/hall with which every British crematorium is furnished, and – with burials – a service in a church or chapel after which some, but often not all, mourners proceed to the graveside. After the cremation or burial, there is usually a social gathering, referred to here at the funeral tea, in a pub, hotel, community hall, private home or other venue. Mourners typically choose, first, whether to attend the main service in church or crematorium. They then make other choices: what to wear and where to sit (if attending), whether also to attend the tea, whether to send flowers (of what kind) or a donation (how much, to which charity). Although individuals may have their own ideas of what is proper or respectful, social norms in Britain allow mourners considerable variation in answering such questions, illustrated in the M-O replies.

Most funerals are led by a church minister, with an increasing number led by a celebrant independent of any religious organisation. (We use the generic term *officiant* to cover both.) Most funerals now include a eulogy, spoken by the officiant and/or one or more friend or family member, and – as in several other countries such as the USA (Garces-Foley & Holcomb, 2005), New Zealand (Schäfer, 2011), The Netherlands (Quartier, 2009) and Belgium (Vandendorpe, 2000) – officiant and close family collaborate to construct a funeral that reflects the deceased's unique character (Holloway et al., 2010). It is to the eulogy that we now turn.

Words against death: the eulogy

Drawing on Bloch (1992), Davies (2002) argues that funeral rituals do not simply acknowledge or effect changes in social relationships, but also imbue participants and the social group with a reinvigorating force in the face of death. Key to bringing about this transformation for mourners, Davies considers, are the 'words against death' common to almost all funeral rituals across the world. His argument is based on the assumption that some kind of adaptation to death is needed since, thanks to self-consciousness, humans are conscious of death, which destroys that very self-consciousness. Humans respond to this threat above all through language, a fundamental symbol and

manifestation of self-consciousness. Since it is symbolic, this self-conscious meeting with death can be survived, and its successful accomplishment transforms those who yet live.

Davies, like Bloch, draws on and develops van Gennep's (1960) idea of the rite of passage as transformative. Departing from van Gennep, however, both Davies and Bloch highlight not the preservation or re-creation of social order, but the psychological and existential changes wrought by the ritual within participating individuals. In contrast with theories which emphasise the role of the deceased person (e.g. Hertz, 1960), or of those making choices about the funeral (e.g. Caswell, 2011), Davies' theory of 'words against death' allows a focus on those who attend the funeral and may (or may not) be transformed by it.

Davies makes clear that it is the *content* of the words which does the work against death. It is their rhetoric – their power to persuade, to state a case in defiance of the fact of death – through which mourners' beings and identities are transformed. Some funerary words may constitute 'performative utterances' (Austin, 1961), that is, statements which bring about the very thing that they state. Austin's own classic example of such an utterance is 'I name this ship'. Davies (2002) suggests that the liturgical incantation 'We commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust' comprises a performative utterance precisely because it does not itself place the body into the ground (and indeed is spoken during or often after the lowering of the coffin), but instead declares that the living relinquish their custody of the deceased, transferring the same from living society to the ground.

Not all – perhaps few – words against death are performative utterances. Words of comfort to the grieving, words which proclaim the religious meaning of death, words which evoke any 'significance realm' in which death may have a meaning, words which assure that the death will not have been in vain, poetry expressing loss and survival, words incorporated into music and drama – all these, Davies suggests, may be words against death. Even music without any words and cultural forms such as painting, sculpture and architecture (in particular, the architecture of memorials) may be 'against death', if they convey the possibility of living more strongly having borne the suffering of loss. These illustrations can plausibly be imagined in contemporary Britain, and Davies' book offers more varied examples from other societies. What is common to all these 'words' is that they must be able to confront death with hope, and, if they are to be successful, must be experienced as doing so (Davies, 2002).

A particular form of words, namely the tribute or eulogy, is typically now the core of non-church life-centred funerals in Britain, and is becoming so even in many religious funerals (Cook & Walter, 2005), though some clergy perceive tensions between the eulogy and more traditional liturgical words (Caswell, 2011; Quartier, 2009). While liturgy aims to counter death religiously, the eulogy celebrates the deceased's life and, if the eulogy counters death, it does so humanistically, by recounting human values embodied in the deceased's life – values which may of course also be religious or spiritual (Long &

Buehring, 2014). So do eulogies function as words against death? Davies (2002) suggests they can, but does not elaborate. If not, how does the eulogy function? We use what the M-O correspondents wrote about eulogies to help answer these questions, which are central to understanding if and how contemporary life-centred funerals work, or do not work. We consider three issues raised by correspondents in relation to eulogies: accuracy, authenticity and performance.

Accuracy

It is important to those arranging the funeral that the eulogy present a full and accurate representation of the person who has died (Caswell, 2011; Holloway et al., 2010). M-O correspondents concurred with this, both praising occasions when it happened and criticising funerals when it did not:

> I had been impressed at the full description that was given of my aunt's life, rather than just the passing references that you sometimes get in 'church' ceremonies. (*D1602, male, 68*)

> ... a vicar took the service and talked warmly but quite impersonally, giving the impression that the whole event was a bit perfunctory. (*G3423, female, 51*)

Correspondents were not asked for and did not often offer details about the *content* of the eulogies they heard. Nonetheless, quotes such as these illustrate the importance that correspondents attached to the eulogy, and particularly its full and accurate representation of the deceased's biography, character and identity. Most mourners are unlikely to know every detail of the deceased's life, and learning more was appreciated by some correspondents:

> The personal tribute at the funeral by her son was lovely – it gave all her history (a lot of which I didn't know) and from it, you knew what sort of person she was. That's more my idea of a funeral – celebrating the life of the person, and reminiscing about them. (*G3963, female, 38*)

The prevalence in contemporary society of geographical mobility, reconstituted families and the separation of home and work (and often leisure) means that few modern people live in isolated small communities in which everyone knows everyone else's business – and everyone's history. Thus, contemporary mourners are likely to know the deceased person in different ways and to have different pictures of him/her (Allan, 1996). This carries the potential for other mourners to experience attempts at personalisation as less successful than do the eulogist's informants – often just one or two people who knew the deceased in particular ways. The data bear this out, on a number of aspects.

> The whole funeral felt very weird – there was nothing in it about his life in the cinema business, yet that was his main interest. (*D4101, male, 50*)

> I couldn't get out of there fast enough. Trying to pin it down, I think it was a feeling of falseness. Whoever organised it, wrote the eulogy, devised the event, had decided on an image of my friend that was only partially recognisable. Yes she was the things they said, but she was many other things too. (*M1201, female, 47*)

As well as different people having had different relationships with the deceased and known him/her in different ways, psychology tells us how fallible memories are. We may accurately remember a few basic facts such as a marriage breakup or a house move, but why these events occurred is more variable, depending on the rememberer's current experience. As Kellehear (2014, p. 164) puts it: 'Remembering is a small matter of facts and largely a matter of making sense'. Eulogies attempt to make sense of the person's life, and officiants (probably correctly) consider that if their tribute tells the facts but no story, it will be dry and ineffective. But whose version of the story are they to tell? One informant's story may differ from another's, which in turn may not be a good enough story for everyone attending the funeral. The officiant's considerable challenge is to produce an authoritative story, recognisable by all as 'accurate'. A personal eulogy from a friend, by contrast, is likely to be taken by the audience as simply the friend's version of the deceased's story, and accepted as such. A multiplicity of voices, with the officiant acting as master/mistress of ceremonies, might solve this, and does indeed occasionally occur in Britain, the USA (Long & Buehring, 2014) and frequently in New Zealand (Schäfer, 2011).

Unfortunately, members of British funeral congregations are unlikely to be reflecting on the subjectivity of memory or the ambiguities of modern relationships, and are more likely to want a professionally delivered eulogy to be 'accurate': yes, that's how the deceased was, that's how I remember him. Thus, when the eulogy failed to present a recognisable or full picture, the result for M-O correspondents was uncomfortable. This emphasis on the deceased's identity, particularly in the eulogy, fits Davies's (2002) analysis of 'words against death'.

The other main cause for discomfort was what might be termed a 'bad life' – a biography or character which, however accurately recounted, mourners could not celebrate:

> This lady who was in her 80's had lived all her life in the hospital. She was really unwell mentally but there was something about her which was warm and touching. Her funeral was in a small, cold chapel, there were about 2 relatives and about 4 hospital staff. The sadness was that her whole life from her twenties to her 80's had been spent in the hospital. She had no choices, no options. It felt like it was a life denied. (*J2891, female, 46*)

Others have noted the significance of the 'good' or 'bad' death for the experience of grief (Seale & van der Geest, 2004), but not the significance of the 'good' or 'bad' life. How may one speak of a life that was wasted, abused or unfulfilled? For several correspondents, the problem was not that an accurate

eulogy was not forthcoming, but that an accurate eulogy could not present the life as one in which the person's full potential was attained (Walter, 1990, pp. 220–221). The 'bad life' (more than the 'bad death') challenges life-centred funerals which aim to counter death by celebrating the person's life.

Authenticity

The importance of accuracy is unlikely to be news to funeral celebrants and researchers. There is, however, an entirely novel theme in the M-O data. This is that some mourners complained about officiants who did not know the deceased person, even though their eulogy was (according to the correspondent) entirely accurate. This has not been noted before in the literature. For example:

> The funeral was a dull affair, conducted by a clergyman who clearly did not know the family. Instead of inviting them to take part he quoted from what his children had told him, when they were sitting there and could have spoken for themselves. (*B2240, male, 89*)

> The vicar spoke and gave a summary of his life, which was very odd as he had never met him. None of his immediate family spoke, which I found surprising … I didn't pay much attention to the funeral to be honest, simply because the words didn't mean anything to me as they were being said by someone who didn't know him. (*E4556, male, 26*)

For these correspondents, it was not what was said that was the problem, but who was saying it. The implication is that speakers who knew the deceased man would have been preferable to this officiant, who did not. The criticism, however, is not that the minister does not know the mourners' relationships with the dead person well enough to speak accurately of what they have lost, for he is perceived as reporting what the children themselves would have said. The criticism is that the minister does not know the dead person well enough to be qualified to speak at all – and does not know the deceased man's children well enough to be qualified to speak on their behalf. This criticism questions the basis of the officiant-led personalised eulogy, however popular such eulogies are with families.

One celebrant training course that we have observed describes the celebrant's role as listening in the pre-funeral meeting to what the close family tell him or her about the deceased, and then at the funeral re-telling this to the congregation in the spoken tribute. Post-funeral client surveys indicate high levels of satisfaction from close family, but the M-O data raise the question how this is experienced by congregation members who may wonder why the family do not speak for themselves. In New Zealand, where life-centred funerals have been popular for several decades, family members much more often speak within the funeral, reducing the officiant's role to that of master or mistress of ceremonies (Schäfer, 2011).

Correspondents also provided examples of funerals where those people who did know the deceased person were described as being able to do a better job than the officiant:

> … the very worst was … a member of the Humanist organisation, who had not known J, prating on about him in a disinterested way (and I do mean disinterested, not uninterested) about his life and family ... In a nearby hotel, the event turned into J's real farewell. There were sincere, and hilarious, tributes from ex-bosses, from his family and from a caller who had worked with his barn dance band … everyone remembered the man they had known, not the soulless person described in the crem. (*W633, female, 68*)

Here, the officiant, who did not know the deceased, is contrasted unfavourably with mourners who did. The formal ceremony – the sphere of the 'experts' – is also contrasted with the informal surroundings of the tea – the sphere of intimates (Allan, 1996). Here, we may note O'Rourke et al.'s (2011) American survey of funeral satisfaction across the whole range of attendees; satisfaction correlated not with formal rites, including eulogies, but with social interaction in more informal settings such as the wake.

Of course, sometimes the officiant *does* know the deceased person, and such cases were always mentioned with approval, typically because they were perceived to demonstrate authenticity and sincerity in their eulogy:

> … [the officiating vicar] was wonderful. She at least did know my family & so she seemed to be totally genuine in her service. (*O3436, female, 56*)

By contrast, an officiant speaking on behalf of others, even when it was known that what they were saying was authentic in the sense of being true, could be experienced as inauthentic:

> ... someone in the family had written some anecdotes for the person conducting the service to read out. I remember being puzzled through my tears as to how this stranger supposedly knew so much about our family life and feeling angry that he spoke about my granddad as if he'd known him personally. (*K4268, female, 29*)

Here, it is not the presentation of the deceased person which is experienced as objectionable, but the presentation of *familiarity* with the deceased person which, because untrue, is experienced as objectionable. Indeed, it is experienced as intrusive, inappropriate to the actual lack of intimacy between the officiant, deceased person and mourners. Though few officiants claim to know the deceased when they do not, at such an emotional occasion as a funeral any such disclaimer may not be heard by all mourners, so any 'professional' eulogy runs a risk of being deemed inauthentic. What the eulogist says about the deceased may thus be less important than how the eulogist is related to the deceased.

Walter ([1990](#), p. 220) characterises the eulogy as a statement of the deceased person's fulfilled potential, Caswell ([2011](#)) as the completion by proxy of the deceased person's project of the self, Long and Buehring ([2014](#)) as a statement of the deceased's relationships with others and hence of the importance of relationships. For these scholars, it is crucial that the eulogy be accurate and present a recognisable picture of the one who has died – but it should not matter who gives it. In Walter's biographical model of grief, a stable place for the dead in the lives of mourners is accomplished through talking about the deceased person – sharing stories, comparing impressions, reminiscing together – with other people who knew the dead person. Nevertheless, he writes about the funeral ([1996](#), p. 22): 'To have a public, and accurate, biography told in the funeral may help mourners find an enduring place for the deceased in their lives – not least because the recounting of it there gives them permission to continue their own recounting in the weeks and months ahead'. Walter emphasises the biography's accuracy, but the M-O data suggest that hearing stories of the deceased person, even though true, from someone who had not known them, can be experienced as not quite satisfactory. Conversely, hearing stories from someone who did know the deceased person – authentically – might be experienced as positive. This suggests that, for at least some mourners, the success of a eulogy depends on the social as well as the biographical.

Performance

It is important to some correspondents not only *who* delivers the eulogy or reads a poem, but *how* they carry it off:

> The best I have been to was a most difficult funeral for a young baby who died after 10 weeks ... The minister was superb ... Nonsense to an atheist like myself – God's plan is not ours to understand was the gist. It was not what he said but the way that he said it that carried it off. (*H3821, male, 58*)

Here, transformatory power lies not in the words themselves, but in their delivery. This correspondent was far from alone in admiring the speaker of the words, although he was unusual for commending an officiant, but in this case, the sensitivity of the performance trumped his (we presume) lack of first-hand knowledge of the deceased. Other correspondents' admiration for speakers who were fellow mourners focused on the meaning not of their words, but of their very speaking:

> The most admirable thing that I have seen at funerals is people who are brave enough to stand in front of their friends and family and speak. Speaking in public is something that most of us do not have much experience of and it can be very intimidating. Add to that the grief that you are feeling at a funeral, which makes it even harder to stand up and speak. I can offer

> nothing but praise to the people that are prepared to do this small but beautiful last act of kindness to the memory of a deceased friend or relative. (*K4286, female, 29*)

> My brother in law surprised us and stood up and spoke about my sister. I remember admiring him incredibly. (*J3887, female, 44*)

The reasons for mourners' admiration fell into two broad categories. The first was that speaking in public is difficult, and some speakers may be expected to have particular difficulties with the task:

> ... his younger son, who is not literary minded, read out a tribute he had written, which expressed his gratitude to his father exactly. He had sweated for ages producing it, and it was very affecting. (*W2322, male, 66*)

> My ex-boyfriend then read a Christina Rosetti poem. He read it perfectly despite having a fear of reading out loud, and even of reading altogether, since he was made fun of at school for being a slow reader ... I felt saddest when the two readings took place, especially my ex-boyfriend's because I was so proud of him ... (*B4672, female, 29*)

In these examples, the work of producing speech was what mourners admired and considered a tribute to the person who had died – a tribute *in addition to* the actual words said.

The second reason for admiring speakers at the funeral was the emotional challenge which they were seen to take up and, largely, overcome:

> It was hard in that funeral. I think that there was a huge sense of it being too soon for the deceased to part from us and a real sadness that here was some-one who was so lovely and it was hard and painful, especially when his son spoke. I think that was when most of us felt really upset, it was mostly because he was so utterly brave and strong in saying what he was saying. We could all sense that he was in tremendous pain. I was full of admiration of his strength of character in being able to say what he did. I can't remember the poem that he read or the verses. It was beautiful though. The elder brother got up to support his younger brother and that was also lovely to see. (*B4750, female, 35*)

In these and similar extracts, the words themselves are somewhat appreciated, but there is real admiration for the speaker's ability to do two things. The first is individually and publicly to be the one to face death with words – to have the 'strength of character' to be 'brave and strong', that is, not to break down and succumb to grief in the moments of delivering the words. Successful man-agement of emotion (Hockey, 1993) during this act was appreciated by corre-spondents as skilful and effortful work. Staying calm in the face of death and mastering the emotions that could so easily sabotage the performance are applauded in a British culture that since at least the Churchillian days of the Blitz has learned to value stoicism in the face of grief, death and loss, yet now

wishes to speak more of death and grief (Jalland, 2010). While exercising self-control, feelings are to be made manifest. We might think of this particular kind of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) as 'speaking against death'.

The second thing that speakers against death are doing for mourners is acting as a proxy. These speakers are no ritual specialist standing symbolically against a figurative death. They are fellow mourners, confronting *the* death, of the one who has died and is mourned. Their self-control for those minutes can assist other mourners to defy the effects of death and grief; their loss of self-control can precipitate others' defeat by grief. Officiants who do not know the deceased person cannot do this, no matter how good their words. They cannot do it because they simply are not relationally eligible; they are not a mourner whose speaking against death can model speaking against death for all mourners. These lay eulogists are not 'mediator deathworkers' acting on behalf of the dead (Walter, 2005b), but 'mediator mourners' acting on behalf of the congregation. When speakers act in this way, their utterance – the act rather than the content – is indeed performative (Austin, 1961; Davies, 2002), bringing about the very state of affairs for which it stands.

The correspondents frequently support Davies' concept of 'words against death'. Through ritual performance of good words – about the deceased, about faith, about love – 'human beings use language so as not to let death have the last word' (2005, p. 20). But some correspondents do question, or perhaps augment, Davies (2002, p. 17) assertion that

> individuals may simply not belong to a suitable speech community able to voice powerful ritual words. This is precisely where the established funeral professions move into action and provide various sets of traditional words against death, whether from the churches, from the funeral-directing world, or from death counsellors

Davies may well be correct that mourners do not belong to the specialist speech community that can convincingly pronounce traditional liturgical words such as 'Dust to dust, Ashes to ashes' or 'I am the resurrection and the life'. But they may be eminently qualified as eulogists, precisely because they are not professionally trained, and precisely because they have a relationship with the deceased, which professionals do not. That said, many mourners may be unable to perform a eulogy, either because they do not know the deceased well enough, or because they know the deceased too well and are grieving too deeply to be confident about controlling their emotions, or because they do not feel confident speaking in public – though we do know people whose first public speech was a funeral eulogy.

We do not know how widespread a practice it is for mourners to write and deliver a eulogy at a funeral, and it may be that correspondents commented on it precisely because it is unusual. Indeed, speakers would hardly be praised for their courage in speaking if such speech were routine. But the data do challenge any idea that the eulogy's power lies in the words alone. Furthermore,

mourners recognise that belonging to a suitable speech community to produce the words is not on its own enough. It takes emotional as well as cognitive skill, and may take relational as well as professional accreditation to perform words against death. Professional expertise, Walter's (1994) chief source of authority in the modern way of death, may be insufficient. As is clear from Davies' work as a whole, emotional and social are as important as linguistic dimensions in producing funeral ritual.

Relationships against death: attendance as configurational eulogy

In the M-O data, funeral attenders included friends, neighbours, colleagues and former colleagues, acquaintances, fellow members of societies and clubs, charities, churches, sports groups, social services and civic and political organisations, as well as community figures such as police officers and well-known local shopkeepers (c.f. Holloway et al., 2010, p. 123). Such representatives of the deceased person's affections, interests and activities can combine to represent the deceased's life:

> I attended as a representative of the village amateur dramatic group, which was started by R over twenty years ago. Many of the other people attending were also representing local societies and charities that R had been involved with. (*D4104, male, 50*)

> There was standing room only and the crematorium was filled with people from all the different areas of his life. He had a very rich and varied life and his funeral reflected that. (*J2891, female, 46*)

These constellations of people were experienced by correspondents as a kind of configurational eulogy to the person who had died, highlighting the *relational* aspects of the deceased person's identity (Finch & Mason, 2000; Long & Buehring, 2014; Smart, 2007) rather than, or in addition to, the biographical. Mourners saw the congregation as a tribute to the value of the life that was being commemorated (Grainger, 1997; Holloway et al., 2010):

> Yes, it was a good Funeral, and would, I think, have surprised the deceased, to see just how many lives he had touched during his own life. (*M2061, female, 80*)

A large attendance at a funeral was considered by correspondents to be one of the most important factors in a 'good' funeral precisely because it was taken to signify the value of the one who had died:

> My father-in-law funeral was amazing, there were hundreds of people. (*S3342, male, 57*)

By the same token, a poor attendance could lead to a 'bad' funeral:

> One of the saddest funerals I have been to was that of an old lady who lived alone in our road ... Only a handful of people attended, which is why I found it so sad. (*D1604, male, 50*)

In the following quote, we can see how mourners' very presence was 'against death':

> It was undoubtedly A Good Funeral in the sense that it gave an opportunity for a very large number of people who really had felt connected to the deceased to show their respect and appreciation of the man. I doubt the church had been as full for many years, and this enhanced rather than detracted from the occasion. (*V3767, male, 72*)

Attending a funeral is described as an 'opportunity', a way for people actively to challenge the annihilation of an individual's identity.

While large attendances were universally experienced as 'tributes', *who* attended could be as significant as how many (Holloway et al., 2010):

> All in all it was a 'good' funeral – all her family + friends were there. Every-one paid tribute. (*W3730, female, 43*)

Here, it is not only mourners' roles in relationship to the deceased person which constitute a 'good' attendance, but their familiarity with the deceased person, and their authenticity as mourners whose affirmation of the deceased person's value can be taken to be reliable. Even correspondents who expressed some regret about having attended a funeral related this to their relationship to the deceased not truthfully 'meriting' attendance:

> I have felt a bit of a hypocrite on occasions if the person was someone I found difficult to deal with. (*P1009, female, 79*)

Mourners intended to confirm the value of the deceased by attending, and others recognised them as doing so. But correspondents also intended to sustain other mourners by attending, and while we do not know whether the intended recipients felt supported, we do know not only that close family often feel supported by the congregation (Bowman, 1959; Holloway et al., 2010, 2013), but also that *other* mourners' experience of the funeral and the death can be transformed by a meaningful assembly. For mourners, a meaningful assembly was one which, in their perception, stood testament to the value of the deceased person's life. This value was viewed by mourners to be evident both quantitatively (how many were there) and qualitatively (who was there). Furthermore, a meaningful assembly meant collectively supporting both the deceased person's family and other mourners. In these ways, we see the extra contribution to mourners' experience made by 'people against death'. This confirms both the power of collective assembly in the face of death, as highlighted by Durkheim, and the importance of relationships – both spoken of, and

embodied through attendance – in legitimating the value of this life, and of social life in general (Long & Buehring, 2014).

Conclusion

The life-centred funeral's confrontation with death works because of the collaboration of three, not two, parties: funeral professionals, close family members and the congregation as a whole. British funerals may be more effective at publicly confronting death than is suggested by the 'privatising of death' thesis or by critics of professionalisation (Walter, 1990; Weinrich & Speyer, 2003). Yet, despite the popularity of professional officiants, the power of a eulogy delivered by a mourner who knew the deceased rather than by a paid professional who did not indicates the limits of professionalisation. The longer that a country's citizens have to get used to life-centred funerals, the more it seems they reduce the officiant to the role of MC (Schäfer, 2011). This is still a long way off in the UK, where most mourners produce 'eulogies' not by standing up and performing in public, but informally – by writing condolence letters and in books of remembrance, by talking to the family at the post-funeral tea, or simply by turning up.

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