

**A relative absence: exploring professional experiences of funerals without mourners**

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**Abstract**

When someone dies, it is usual for relatives to gather at a funeral to embody a collective act of eulogy for the deceased and stand against the finality of death. When someone who lived alone dies alone at home, it is not always possible to identify anyone to attend a funeral. In such cases, funeral professionals are required to perform the appropriate social rites in the absence of the confirmatory power of a society. Drawing on interviews with funeral professionals and ethnographic observations of funerals without mourners, we explore how professionals understand their roles in performing social rites against death when there is no one to participate in them. We consider the impact of attempting to make good a death generally perceived as bad, and we examine the significance of funerals as a social rite when the deceased is assumed to have forgone social relationships during their lifetime.

**Introduction**

The performance of a ritualised series of actions when disposing of a body after death continues to underpin our common understanding of a funeral, even in more secular societies (Howarth, 1996; Parsons, 2018). A funeral constitutes an important rite of passage, marking the transition from life to death, providing an opportunity to collectively remember and acknowledge the deceased person, and serving as a staging post for mourners on the way to a life in which they are no longer physically present (Holloway et al., 2013).

Recent media articles describing the anguish of relatives unable to attend the funeral of someone close following a death from COVID-19 serve as a sharp reminder of the importance of being present to participate in the proper observance of funeral rites. In one national media report, an experienced funeral celebrant draws on the collective ideal of a good

funeral to explain, 'Conducting a funeral under restrictions is so much harder because you know the person that's passed away really deserved a packed house and a wake where everyone shares happy memories' (Westcott, 2020). Others have raised the spectre of mass burials in unmarked graves as services become overwhelmed by the number of deaths and families are unable to reclaim the bodies of their deceased (Meaton et al., 2020).

Yet the disposal of bodies in the absence of mourners has taken place throughout history for various reasons; sometimes following an outbreak of disease (Meier, 2020), but also in more mundane circumstances, such as when there are no known relatives or friends to arrange or attend the funeral of a deceased person (Caswell, 2019). In such cases, the local authority may step in to manage the processes that take place after a death including organising a funeral. Local authorities in England and Wales are required to ensure the safe disposal of bodies under the terms of the Public Health Act (1984). When they are unable to identify anyone connected to the deceased person, professionals who deliver public health funerals may be called upon to perform the appropriate social rites in the absence of the confirmatory power of a society.

Drawing on a qualitative study of people who lived and died alone at home in England and Wales, this paper explores the phenomenon of funerals without mourners. We examine how funeral professionals understand and perform the social rituals associated with disposing of a body when there is no one to participate in them. We consider the impact on practitioners of attempting to make good a death which is generally perceived to be bad, and we explore the broader significance of the funeral as a social rite in the context of a lone death, where the deceased person is often assumed to have forgone social relationships during their lifetime.

The paper focuses on funeral professionals whose role brings them into contact with mourners, such as funeral attendants and celebrants, rather than those whose work takes place out of the public eye, such as morticians and crematorium technicians. We begin by outlining the evolution of the contemporary funeral and ways in which funeral work has developed in response to emergent forms of commemorating the deceased. We consider the role of public-facing funeral professionals in performing social rituals in the context of 'ordinary' funerals. We then introduce a research study exploring the social management of lone deaths, including arrangements for disposing of a body when no one steps forward to claim the person who has died.

### **Background**

Funerals occupy a liminal space between life and death, using ritualised forms and practices drawn from available social narratives to make sense of the relationship between these two spheres (Holloway et al. 2013). Until relatively recently, the predominant form of the funeral service in England and Wales was based on the Christian religious narrative of the restoration of the soul of the deceased person to the spiritual realm. Traditional Christian funerals led by an ordained priest rely on a liturgy handed down through generations, with little variation between one service and the next (Davies, 2015). A lack of knowledge of the deceased person does not detract from the redemptive purpose of the traditional religious funeral, and the presence of mourners is not required for the ritual to succeed.

Since the late twentieth century, a secular social narrative of individuation, personalisation and choice has been in the ascendant, such that funerals are now more commonly regarded as an opportunity to display and celebrate the uniqueness of the life that has been lost (Walter, 2017). In the contemporary, life-centred funeral, a congregation of mourners gathers to bear

witness to the deceased person's life through the medium of the eulogy, sometimes accompanied by specially chosen items of music, text or visual imagery (Gordon-Lennox, 2019). It is this shift towards celebrating a life through the medium of the funeral that undermines the effectiveness of a funeral without mourners, since there is no one to account for the deceased person's life.

The evolution of funeral rites and practices during the last century gave rise to concomitant changes in the work of funeral professionals. There has been considerable scrutiny of how the newly emerging occupation of funeral directing began to take over the delivery of funerals as the role of the clergy receded (Howarth, 1996; Parsons, 2018). Bailey (2010) identifies three distinct components of the modern funeral director's work; funeral arrangement, body management, and funeral conducting. The funeral arranger liaises with the deceased person's next of kin to determine their preferences for disposing of the body and plan the funeral service. The body management role encompasses the material work of collecting, housing and embalming the deceased. Those involved in funeral conducting accompany the body to the funeral and ensure the service runs smoothly. Larger corporations may allocate different staff to each function, but in smaller, family firms, the same personnel often carry out each task (Jordan et al., 2019).

The funeral ritual is overseen by a celebrant, who may be a priest or other religious leader, a humanist celebrant, a non-affiliated celebrant or a family member. The role of the celebrant in writing and delivering the eulogy is central to ensuring the social ritual of the life-centred funeral is properly enacted (Holloway et al., 2013). Drawing on the work of Davies (2002), Bailey and Walter (2016: 154) elaborate on the purpose of the eulogy as 'words against death', in which death is confronted through articulating and celebrating the meaningful acts, relationships and values of the deceased person's life. The presence of a body of mourners to

validate and commemorate these defining attributes acts as a 'configurational eulogy', in which the congregation stand together to affirm the endurance of communal life in the face of an individual death (Bailey and Walter, 2016: 162).

Considering its importance to fulfilling the ritual purpose of the contemporary funeral, there has been relatively little research exploring the experience of being a funeral celebrant, although the role has been construed in various ways. Walter (2005) describes celebrancy as a form of 'mediator deathwork', whereby the purpose is to interpret the deceased on behalf of the living. The celebrant curates the deceased person's life to prepare the eulogy, producing an account that mourners can recognise, reflect on, and expand in the months and years ahead. Walter suggests that the skills required to marshal a convincing account are primarily cognitive rather than emotional, although celebrants need to be skilled performers and adept at navigating the potentially volatile emotions of the funeral service. In a later paper, Bailey and Walter (2016) reiterate the successful self-management of feelings during the delivery of the eulogy as skillful, emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). Mourners must be convinced of both the authority and authenticity of the celebrant for the eulogy to be effective as a ritualised form of words against death.

The focus on performative aspects of the celebrant's role reflects Turner and Edgley's (1976) dramaturgical analysis of funerals as theatre. Turner and Edgley are concerned with the work of funeral directors, and like Bailey (2010), they distinguish between the 'backstage' work of body preparation and the 'frontstage' drama of the funeral, in which the funeral director acts as compere and the deceased person's life becomes the plot. Mourners, the celebrant and others in attendance are conceived as members of the cast, who must be coached and coaxed into position for the performance to be successful. This interpretation of the celebrant and congregation as passive players in the funeral drama is at odds with later studies

demonstrating their critical involvement in co-constructing elements of the service (Bailey and Walter, 2016; Holloway et al., 2013). However, it highlights the importance of a social gathering to the effective performance of funeral rites, in that an audience is required to receive and affirm the words against death that give the funeral its ritual potency.

Turner and Edgley (1976) characterise the drama of the funeral as a morality play, in which a social commentary on the deceased person's life is woven into the performance. Bailey and Walter (2016) found that mourners experienced a particular challenge to the life-centred funeral when the deceased person was deemed to have led a 'bad' life; 'a life that was wasted, abused or unfulfilled' (p.156). Since speaking ill of the dead tends to be socially prohibited, at least in public (Scarre, 2012), a creative re-imagining of a life less well-lived may sometimes be necessary (Davis et al., 2016). Celebrants in particular may be required to perform a delicate balancing act to deliver a sufficiently authentic account without compromising the deceased person's moral reputation.

The efforts made by funeral professionals to tidy away less favourable aspects of the deceased person's life draw attention to funeral work as 'dirty work'. This term has been used to describe work that evokes a sense of rejection and disgust, which by association taints the identity and social status of those who perform it (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2013; Hughes, 1962). The physical handling of dead and decaying bodies is strongly associated with notions of dirt and contamination (Douglas, 1966; Jordan et al., 2019), but funeral professionals may also be called upon to clean up the tarnished reputations of those deemed to have lived or died in a manner outside socially prescribed boundaries of acceptability. For example, our research found that media reports of deaths that take place alone at home often apportion blame for a 'bad' death to the deceased person or their associates (Turner and Caswell, 2020). Examining the funerals of people who died in these circumstances may shed light on the place of

reputational remedial work in funeral ritual and add to understandings of the role of funeral professionals.

Holloway et al. (2013) suggest that one objective of the contemporary funeral is to facilitate good grieving by supporting mourners to connect with and celebrate the deceased person whilst simultaneously letting go and moving on. In his biographical model of grief, Walter (1996) proposes that through sharing stories and memories, mourners create an enduring account of the person they have lost, which enables them to integrate the dead into their ongoing lives. Funerals thus serve an important therapeutic function for those in attendance and can be interpreted as a form of care work (Donley, 2019). For example, Bailey (2010) found that in their family liaison work, funeral arrangers were motivated by an empathic care that went beyond the prescriptive emotional labour required by professional codes of conduct. Funeral professionals may not be engaged as therapists, but their words and actions tend to be chosen and delivered in a manner intended to offer consolation and comfort.

When a funeral takes place in the absence of anyone who knew the deceased person, the meaning and purpose of social rites pertaining to the disposal of a body may not be consistent with current understandings. For example, when a professional delivers a funeral without mourners they are not mediating between the deceased and a living audience, speaking out against death on behalf of a congregation, or easing the passage of grief for relatives and friends. Our review of the literature suggests that the significance of public-facing funeral work is largely socially situated, in that professionals rely on the presence and engagement of others as memorialists and mourners, accomplices and audience, to validate the performance and realise the meaning of their work. How, then, do funeral professionals enact these social roles in the absence of a society, and what sense do they make of this work?

Our research aimed to develop understanding of the social circumstances surrounding lone deaths, which we define as deaths that take place alone at home and where the body remains undiscovered for some time. In some cases, a family member of the deceased person is identified and takes responsibility for arranging a funeral and inviting people to attend. However, sometimes the deceased person has become estranged from others prior to death and relatives cannot be traced or do not want anything to do with the funeral. Instead, the local authority provides a public health funeral, which may often be unattended.

We set out to explore how workers who deal with the aftermath of a lone death understand and negotiate their roles. In this paper, we focus on the experiences of funeral professionals in delivering funerals for people who died alone at home and where the funeral took place without mourners. Prior to commencement, the study was reviewed and approved by the university faculty Research Ethics Committee.

### **Methodology**

There were three components to the research study:

1. A qualitative case study of ten individuals who died alone at home based on information obtained from as many sources as possible, including documents from coroners' files and interviews with people who knew the deceased when they were alive and people who responded to the lone deaths.
2. An in-depth interview study of twelve professionals who deal with the aftermath of lone deaths, including local authority funeral managers, funeral providers and funeral celebrants. We observed four funerals of people who died alone at home, took photographs where possible, and obtained copies of funerals scripts.
3. An analysis of responses to lone deaths reported in the UK news media.



Data collection took place between January 2019 and July 2020. The key findings from the case studies and from the media analysis (Turner and Caswell, 2020) are reported elsewhere. In this paper, we draw on our interviews with funeral professionals, observations of funerals and funeral scripts.

### *Participants*

The twelve participants all had contact with relatives of the deceased following a death; six were employed by local authorities to identify any relatives and arrange public health funerals, two were employed in separate branches of a family funeral company, three were celebrants. One celebrant was a church minister, one belonged to the British Humanist Association, and one was a non-affiliated celebrant. One participant worked for an independent genealogy company who specialise in tracing relatives of the deceased. They were previously employed by a local authority to manage public health funerals; therefore, all participants had direct experience of arranging and attending funerals without mourners.

### *Procedures*

Professionals were invited to participate in the study via a process of snowball sampling. Initial respondents were identified during data collection for the case studies and were asked to nominate others within their professional field who had experience of dealing with the aftermath of a lone death. The limitations and potential biases of snowball sampling are acknowledged, but our aim was not to seek 'representativeness' in our sample. Rather, we set out to include perspectives from a wide range of different professional backgrounds and services. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with each participant by one of the authors, either face to face or by telephone. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full.

We attended four funerals at the invitation of a celebrant who had taken part in an interview. Field diaries of our observations and reflections were completed after each service. Funeral scripts were obtained for two services, and a third script for a funeral we did not attend was provided by another participant.

### *Analysis*

We conducted an inductive thematic analysis of each interview transcript supported by NVivo 12. Each transcript was openly coded by both authors in the first instance, allowing a series of descriptive codes to emerge. Using the constant comparative method, individual codes were grouped to generate clusters of meaning which were organised under second level analytic codes. We cross-compared the emerging thematic framework with observational data from research diaries and funeral scripts, and further refined the analysis through drawing connections with sensitising concepts based on our research aim of understanding funeral professionals' roles and sense-making when delivering funerals without mourners. We discussed our preliminary findings during regular research meetings and elaborated and developed the thematic codes as the analysis progressed.

### **Findings**

Our analysis of funeral professionals' accounts of performing the social rituals associated with disposing of a body when there is no one to participate in them identified three key facets of their roles. Funeral professionals acted as advocates, authors and adjudicators of the deceased person; roles in which they enacted processes of representation, reconstruction and restoration. We explore each of these elements in turn using quotations from participants to illustrate our analysis. Names and some personal details have been changed.

#### *Advocates: Representing the dead*

Funeral professionals were concerned with ensuring that people who did not have relatives or friends to arrange a service for them were still accorded a 'proper' funeral. They described how they treated everyone equally, regardless of the circumstances of death:

If we saw a hearse drive out of here now, a funeral director paging, and we always page from the premises, paging in front, the hearse with a coffin and flowers on it, you wouldn't know. No one would know whether that was a private funeral or public health funeral - that's really important. (P04, funeral arranger)

It looks very much like any other service apart from, the hearse will pull up, if there are no flowers, the funeral director will put a lily on top of the coffin. Everything is done exactly the same as a normal funeral service. If there has been no one to pick any music, I will pick the music. (P05, celebrant)

The importance of promoting the appearance of sameness is an indication of the stigma associated with funerals that take place outside the usual parameters. Despite the name change, public health funerals retain their association with 'paupers' funerals' of the past (Webb et al., 2020). Funeral poverty remains a concern in the UK, with more people needing state support to meet the basic requirements of bodily disposal (Foster and Woodthorpe, 2016). However, not all public health funerals are funded by the state; in some cases where people die alone and no relatives can be traced, the costs are recovered from their estate. Still, it appears that disposing of a body without the involvement of family and friends remains sufficiently shameful to require covering up.

In funeral professionals' accounts of avoiding outward signs of discrimination, social values of respect for the individual and personal dignity were alluded to:

It is a funeral service, and this is not just about environmental<sup>1</sup> but any funeral that I do. We don't want it to be disrespectful. It needs to be appropriate to the individual, it needs to be dignified. (P07, celebrant)

I think it's important that you are dealing with a deceased, you know. You're dealing with a person who has got the right to have a dignified funeral. And I find it very frustrating when they're not treated like everybody else. (P02, local authority officer)

Funeral professionals understand their role as advocating for the dead, representing their best interests and ensuring they receive a proper funeral when there is no one else to act on their behalf.

To some extent, the advocacy role may be rhetorical, and a reflection of commercial interests, service standards of practice and professional codes of conduct, as much as an individual commitment to securing social justice for those who have died. From our observations of funerals, it is impossible not to be alert to the singularity of services when there is no one to participate in them, and we sometimes witnessed funeral professionals stepping outside their professional boundaries. The following extract from the researcher's field notes describes arriving at a funeral without mourners:

The group were formally dressed and clearly identifiable as funeral officiants. They stood erect, hands clasped in front of them, looking straight ahead. Yet as I approached, the mood was light-hearted. The small party were laughing and joking about an incident one of them was describing relating to her recent house move. This moved on to a discussion about the best type of vacuum cleaner to buy. (F01, researcher observation)

In occupations requiring a significant degree of professional emotional management, it is perhaps not unreasonable to regard the absence of an audience as an opportunity for some respite. However, it is also possible that on this occasion, funeral professionals may have been using humour to smooth over what may otherwise have been a discomfiting situation, waiting for mourners who were not going to arrive. Funerals without mourners often affect funeral professionals, as we shall go on to discuss.

In their role as advocates, funeral professionals try to keep up appearances as far as possible to avoid any sense of public indecency attached to bodily disposal without the proper rites. However, local authorities do set financial limits on how far funeral professionals can go in representing the best interests of the deceased person:

I think people tend to think 'Pauper's funeral, that's it, they don't do anything'. But it will be just the same as if you arranged it yourself, except you won't have the additional car, and obviously we wouldn't pay for the flowers. (P12, local authority officer)

#### *Authors: Reconstructing the dead*

When there was no one to provide an account of the deceased person's life, funeral professionals had to be creative in weaving a narrative from the limited information available. This task was usually initiated by the local authority officer who searched the person's home for any information that might identify them, and any relatives or assets left behind. Some described the process of piecing together the evidence of a life as one of the most satisfying aspects of their work:

I think it's a real privilege to be able to look, because basically you're looking through somebody's life. You're finding their birth certificate, sometimes you might find their school reports or their education certificates. You're in this privileged position that

nobody else has probably been able or had the opportunity to do. (P10, local authority officer)

Reconstructing the past of someone who died without social connections appeared to be a means of restoring them to their place within society. The information acquired was passed on to the celebrant responsible for preparing the eulogy, thereby facilitating the celebration of a life at the heart of the contemporary funeral service. Celebrants alluded to the significance of their role in authoring the deceased person's life:

I think stories are very important within a community, and we're able to tell people's stories for them. And I think that's one of the things about being a celebrant, is you're actually telling their story, and the story of the people that are around them. (P07, celebrant)

Nevertheless, in some cases, very little information about the deceased person was recovered, making it difficult to speak about them in any meaningful way:

It's a challenge. A real challenge. I'm managing lots and lots of funeral services, all about lots of lovely people who've done wonderful things in their lives and then all of a sudden you're faced with this blank. And you start to think, 'Right, how do I make this respectful?' I know absolutely nothing about them...and it literally is just having a stab in the dark. (P05, celebrant)

One celebrant described how a housing officer told her that a man whose body was found some weeks after his death used to enjoy gardening. From this kernel of information, the celebrant devised a eulogy depicting the man in a positive light, and accounting for his solitary state:

[Housing officer's] picture of George is of a man who loved nature and his garden, managing his vegetable plot or just sitting out and listening to the wind whistling through the trees. From this I get a sense of a man who, while wanting to look out and experience the world, was clearly happier enjoying the natural world and maintaining a distance from the demands and confusion of social relationships. As a tribute to this self-sufficient man, who mostly looked to nature rather than people for emotional support, I am going to read this poem. (P08, celebrant's script)

Although the circumstances surrounding the death were unknown, the celebrant elected to present the absence of social contact as the positive choice of a self-reliant individual, rather than the loneliness of an unloved man. As authors of the deceased person's life, funeral professionals scripted accounts in which they tried to make sense of living and dying outside the socially acceptable choices available. In doing so, they constructed moral tales, intended to make good a manner of living and dying usually regarded as bad. We elaborate on this process in the following section.

Sometimes, there was simply no thread with which to spin a story, leaving celebrants with the difficult dilemma of whether to acknowledge the hole at the centre of the life-centred funeral, or to take a 'stab in the dark' and construct an account in the absence of any facts. During one of the funerals we observed, the eulogy consisted of the following statement:

Funerals like this are incredibly difficult to put together and deliver. The only piece of information that I have about Douglas is that he had a son called Graham. When I spoke to Graham, he told me that his relationship with his Dad had broken down many years ago and he didn't want to contribute anything or attend the service. (P05, celebrant's script)

The celebrant chose to make a simple and honest statement to account for his lack of knowledge of the deceased person. However, this was followed by a speech to accompany the committal of the body implying a close and valued relationship:

It is now time to say goodbye to Douglas. There is sadness in his passing, but we take comfort in remembering all that he gave to our lives. We are grateful for his love, his kindness, his protection, his wise words and his generosity. We are lucky to have been part of his life and feel blessed to have been loved and guided by him. We cherish the memories we have of him and know that he will always live on in our hearts. (P05, celebrant's script)

Sentiments such as these are typically iterated at this point in a funeral service, but the inauthenticity of the celebrant's words in this context was striking. Nevertheless, in a funeral without mourners there are no relatives or friends of the deceased person to be discomforted by any inaccuracy or inauthenticity in the celebrant's account, and usually no researcher. Instead, there is only the celebrant, and sometimes a funeral arranger, to be troubled by bearing false witness to a life without witnesses, a point we will return to later.

#### *Adjudicators: Restoring the dead*

Death offers a vantage point from which to review and reflect on the life that has been lived. Funeral professionals are instrumental in a process of weighing up a life story, smoothing over any negative aspects and extrapolating moral messages for those left behind. For example, we have illustrated how one celebrant set out to fill the gaps in the narrative of a man who died alone with a positive interpretation of his solitary existence. In this case, the celebrant continued:



George, you are a reminder to all of us that, however someone appears to the outside world, however difficult they find normal interactions, however prickly they may be, there is someone very lovable inside who can be reached if we give time and if we care enough. (P08, celebrant's script)

Through the funeral service, the deceased man was restored as a social being and his lone death was repurposed as a universal moral lesson in caring for others, even though there was no one to receive it.

Walter (2016) points out that contemporary life-centred funerals have not altogether eliminated the element of judgement explicit in traditional Christian funerals. He suggests that, in endeavouring to present the deceased person in the best possible light, celebrants may 'rose-tint a bit' (p.254). We found that in their creative reconstructions of the lives of people who died alone and with no one to mourn them it was sometimes necessary for funeral professionals to rose-tint a lot, but occasionally the task defeated them:

The worst one I did was a burial for a 40-year-old lady with no one; me and a funeral director. How do you get to 40 and have no one? To be brutally honest with you, the only thing I could come up with is she must have been an incredibly unpleasant person. To be a 40-year-old and have no one, but no one, to have any love or respect for you. (P05, celebrant)

Funeral professionals were usually motivated to carry out moral repair work on behalf of people whose lives and deaths threatened to damage their reputation and legacy, but they did not always succeed in convincing themselves of the person's worth. In a context in which turnout at a funeral is seen as a measure of social value (Holloway et al., 2013), the absence of

mourners implied the deceased person had no worth. Funeral professionals tried to counter the reputational damage incurred:

It just feels really, really important to be able to mark the fact that this man lived, and he contributed, you know, and he had a worthwhile life. I suppose that I think, hearing someone saying it was a wasted life, no it wasn't, it wasn't a wasted life. (P08, celebrant)

People have said to me, well it doesn't matter what sort of service you give them does it? Yes, it does. It does because they're like you, they're like me, their whole life they lived on this earth. They have as much right as anyone else. The path they took was different to ours, but they still deserve respect at the end of the day. (P05, celebrant)

Funeral professionals drew on notions of privacy, autonomy and choice to construct a defense of funerals when there were no mourners:

Some people, even with a lot of friends and relatives, chose to have funerals where nobody attends. So, they can make choices to do that, it's not as unusual as you might think. People want that privacy even in their funeral. (P04, funeral arranger)

Through their roles as advocates, authors and adjudicators, funeral professionals tried to reconstruct accounts of living and dying alone that were easier to live with than the prevailing narrative of a bad death. Since these accounts were delivered in the absence of a congregation, the primary audience for their endeavours was themselves. In the following section, we consider the emotional impact of funerals without mourners on funeral professionals and examine the motivations behind the moral repair work they undertake on behalf of people who die alone.

*Affective responses to a lone death*

Funeral professionals alluded to the profound emotional impact of dealing with the aftermath of a lone death, particularly when the body remained undiscovered for some time:

I mean of all the things I've ever done that's probably left the biggest impression, because it's just so tragic isn't it for somebody to pass and then for them not have the dignity of being looked after when they've passed. To have been lying there for so long and, yeah, it's sad. (P03, funeral arranger)

Even during the chapel, the organist who deals with the music, afterwards he said, 'Oh I'm so upset'. You know, it was a story that touched him, and he must hear these so many times a day... I think when I'm doing a funeral there's family members that are carrying the grief. And I think those of us there carried it for George, that sense of the loss of a human being. (P08, celebrant)

Although it might appear that no one has been affected by a death when the body remains unclaimed, funeral professionals adopted the position that because we share a common humanity, any death represents a collective loss to society. They regarded it as their public duty to commemorate this loss on our behalf through performing the appropriate social rites, and often through embodying the sadness associated with the loss of someone close when there was no one else to do so.

In reflecting on lone deaths, funeral professionals empathized with the deceased as fellow members of society, even though they died outside its bounds in a manner they would not choose themselves:

The thought for me of just sitting in my little room, passing away and no one knowing, I just think it's a dreadfully sad thought. But it could be any of us. (P05, celebrant)

It's a horrible thought for most of us, isn't it, that we might die alone. (P08, celebrant)

The knowledge that the person was alone before and after death was especially troubling to funeral professionals, yet we cannot be certain that the deceased people in our study would have viewed their circumstances as tragic. Some may have preferred living, and possibly dying alone over other options available to them (Caswell and O'Connor, 2019). Nevertheless, for funeral professionals, attending to a lone death appeared to evoke an existential fear of the loss of social attachments and social identity represented by the absence of significant relationships.

Funeral professionals attempted to make good the breach in their relational understanding of what it means to be human through seeking to ensure that no one crossed the symbolic divide between life and death alone:

I always make sure that once we've arranged the funeral, where at all possible I will make sure that that person never goes on their own. Either I will attend, or I'll send another member of my staff to attend if we know there isn't going to be family present. (P06, funeral arranger)

I was thinking about maybe starting a Facebook group or something where I could ask someone, do you want to go to a funeral?... I don't know, I always think it's a shame that there is no one there just to say goodbye to someone. (P05, celebrant)

If a congregation represents 'people against death' (Bailey and Walter, 2016), when there are no mourners, funeral professionals must stand alone and bear the burden of speaking against

death on behalf of an absent society. The emotional labour involved appeared to go beyond what might be expected of funeral professionals in their role as mediators between the living and the dead, and was often cited as one of the most difficult aspects of their work.

### **Discussion**

In our study of deaths that take place alone at home, the role of funeral professionals in delivering funerals without mourners was threefold; funeral professionals represented the best interests of the deceased person in the absence of relatives or friends, they reconstructed a life-story of the person to the best of their ability with limited information to build on, and they took action to restore the moral reputations of people whose death placed them outside the bounds of social acceptability.

Tending to the physical, social and moral remains of people who died alone with no known associates was a form of care work involving emotional labour undertaken on behalf of wider society, rather than directed towards a discrete group of mourners. Although there were occasions when funeral professionals appeared to abandon the prescribed performance of emotion required by their roles, accounts of delivering funerals without mourners suggested they often experienced personal discomfort when standing against death alone. Funeral professionals' affective commitment to performing the appropriate social rites when there was no one to participate in them underscored the philanthropic emotional orientation towards their work observed by Bailey (2010). Bailey found that being able to offer compassion and empathy to bereaved relatives was a major source of job satisfaction for funeral professionals. However, this does not explain the willingness to invest emotionally in delivering funerals without mourners we observed.

In their research on public health funerals in New Zealand, Thompson and Yeung (2015) found that funeral professionals expressed strong religious or professional motivations for regarding a 'proper' funeral as a necessary rite regardless of the circumstances. We suggest that funeral professionals also demonstrate a deep-seated relational motivation to restore the social identities of people who die alone, who are often assumed to have undergone social death prior to physical death. Through emphasising the deceased person lived a valid life and 'could be any of us', funeral professionals established an empathic connection and re-claimed a place for the deceased as 'part of a community transcending the present' (Jonsson, 2015: 292). In this way, funeral professionals positioned themselves as acting on behalf of the wider community, rather than a discrete group of mourners.

Indications that this work could be hard, and sometimes distressing, reflected the difficulties inherent in delivering an accurate and authentic performance of the appropriate social rituals to a funeral without mourners. Bailey and Walter (2016) emphasise the importance of these qualities to the success of the life-centred funeral; mourners must be able to recognise the person transfigured through the eulogy, and the words against death must be grounded in a genuine knowledge of the deceased. When there was no living repository of stories for the funeral professional to draw on, and no one to speak to, this represented an impossible task.

Celebrants in particular sometimes found themselves in the difficult position of having to deliver a eulogy they knew was inaccurate and inauthentic because they had been required to fabricate it. The lack of information about the deceased person placed them in a double-bind; not to speak, or to speak of nothing. This was a dilemma that could not be refused or resolved, except by passing the task on to someone else. The absence of mourners may have meant there was no one to criticise their efforts, but there was no one to validate them either,

which may have affected the satisfaction they were able to draw from their work. Conversely, local authority officers who were responsible for seeking evidence to contribute to a life-story took great satisfaction from uncovering even the most basic details of the deceased person's life.

If knowledge of the deceased person is a pre-requisite for the effective ritual performance of the life-centred funeral, this raises the question of whether there are ever grounds for concluding there is too little information to successfully undertake the task? We mentioned that some local authorities place financial restrictions on public health funerals; some only provide a direct cremation for people with no relatives or friends to arrange a service, followed by disposal of the ashes in a common plot (Local Government Association, 2010). The idea of bodily disposal taking place without the proper rites has been interpreted as a threat to the moral fabric of society (Castex, 2007), yet others have suggested that there may be other ways of honouring the deceased and commemorating their social identity as part of an on-going community (Gopp, 2007). This debate is particularly pertinent in the context of a major pandemic, when alternative approaches to disposing of the dead may be necessary and acts of commemoration may need to be separated from the process of disposal (Meaton et al., 2020). For example, the Marie Curie foundation is calling for the UK Government to inaugurate a national day of reflection to recognize, grieve and remember people who have died in difficult circumstances (Marie Curie, 2020). Those who have died alone could be counted among this list, even though they may not be known.

Although it has become the dominant form of contemporary funeral practice, not all funerals are life-centred celebrations, and the well-composed eulogy is not the only means of commemoration. When someone has died alone and has no known associates, an alternative approach to the funeral service may involve acknowledging the private character of the person

who died and accepting the absence of a public narrative. Indeed, it could be argued that this might represent a truer version of the person than the invented life-story, and in that sense more of a funeral centred upon their life.

### **Conclusion**

In funerals without mourners, we found that funeral professionals understood their roles as advocating for the deceased, authoring an acceptable version of their lives and adjudicating their reputation and legacy. This work could be rewarding, but it could also be challenging when funeral professionals felt obliged to present an inauthentic account of the deceased, and took a stand against death on behalf of people who appeared to have foregone the society of others during their lifetime.

We conclude that, in many cases a funeral that celebrates a life remains an important social ritual that helps the living to make sense of death and configure a place for the deceased in their lives. Sometimes, however, it may be more suitable to simply acknowledge the death of a private person who was nevertheless a community member. In these circumstances, perhaps it may be more accurate to rebrand the public health funeral as a community funeral; carried out on behalf of the community by a funeral professional in recognition of a life that has been lost, even if it is not mourned.



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