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A Day at the Morgue: Student Interpretations of Death and Reality



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Abstract This study involved the reflections of 15 college students six months after a visit to a morgue. After witnessing the various aspects of death at the morgue (e.g. morgue intake of bodies, significant time spent in a very large storage cooler for corpses, as well as an autopsy) a qualitative inquiry was conducted to determine whether or not the participants' experiences were "real" or "surreal." Analysis revealed that most determined their experience to be surreal. The students' lack of experience with death, to the extent they experienced it at the morgue, no doubt resulted in more subjects determining the experience to be surreal.

INTRODUCTION

While there are opportunities in life in which one's sensibilities can be tested, there are fewer opportunities that allow follow-up to evaluate the nature of these instances. Death is one such instance. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966:101), "death also posits the most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life. The integration of death within the paramount reality of social existence is, therefore, of the greatest importance for any institutional order. This legitimation of death is, consequently, one of the most important fruits of symbolic universe."

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Symbolic interactionists believe that the meaning of death comes from an individual's shared experiences with others (Charmaz 1980). One's involvement with others in a shared situation is confirmation of the significance and "reality" of the event (Goffman 1963). Of all the events in life that have the potential to test one's sense of reality, death ranks high in challenging one's ability to comprehend significant events. Death is key in challenging reality, partly because significant firsthand experience with mortality is still rare. The family is typically the primary source for educating the young about death, but television, books, magazines, and the Internet also are crucial to one's socialization regarding death (Brabant 2011). According to Kears (1989), most peoples' perception of death is garnered from television, movies, and various news sources. While this can seem real to the casual observer, the sights, smells, and interactions that surround actual death are nothing like those deaths depicted or reported in popular media. While news can be contrived as a type of social reality, it is merely a symbolic social reality (Siu 2009).

In this exploratory study, criminal justice students from a Midwestern college visited one of the busiest morgues in the United States, and were evaluated to determine whether or not they perceived their experiences as real or surreal. These students were selected to analyze their interpretation of events at the morgue. Most people, let alone young college students in their 20's, rarely have this opportunity. Students voluntarily chose to participate in the morgue tour. Students viewed hundreds of dead bodies in a cooler, saw multiple dead bodies arriving at the facility in body bags, and observed the medical examiner performing an autopsy. Ultimately, the ongoing process of interpreting the reality of significant events tests one's sensibilities as one reflects back on pre-existing knowledge, as was the case with these young students who experienced extremely intense aspects of death during their visit.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theorists have long grappled with the issue of reality and how reality is internalized and becomes present as a part of an individual's everyday life. Reality can be described as "everything that exists." It includes everything that is, whether or not it can be observed, accessed or understood by philosophy, science, religion, or any other analytic system (Morse 2007). Many would also agree that reality is generated through one's interaction with others. The reflective component of symbols is very important in the manifestation of reality. Thus, reality is socially constructed through interaction and the process of socialization. People understand life and death because of the social interaction they have with others (Kearl 1989). The way in which individuals view the situation at hand is connected to what can and does become real based on whether or not the individual likes or dislikes the situation (Goffman 1961). "Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world." (Berger and Luckmann 1966:19).

According to Goffman (1974), when frames are used to interpret our experiences, they beg to answer the question "what is going on here." If a situation is determined to lack reality, then it is believed that the frame applied may not fit the situation (Rettie 2004). Symbolic interactionists assume that if challenged, individuals will modify previous accepted notions to make better sense of the new experience (Charmaz 1980). But what if reality is incoherent to the point that a new reality cannot be modified? What if one's sensibilities are compromised to the point that the internalized reality no longer makes sense?

The definition of surreal in the academic literature is nearly non-existent, except in terms of mathematics and art. One definition indicates that surreal is defined as fantastic imagery, incongruent, and dreamlike (Vaughan 2009). Another definition indicates that the dream-like notion is connected to the unconscious, while reality is tied to consciousness

(Magrini 2009). Fantastic imagery may then be a result of unfamiliarity and limited exposure to the situation. The morgue experience is especially surreal because unlike morticians and funeral directors (as discussed below), morgue attendants make no attempt to display bodies in ways that will be familiar or “real” to novices and visitors. On the contrary, the very nature of post-mortem investigation requires that bodies be as close as possible to the condition when they were found. As a result, “real” in the morgue setting is not just something that is perceived by the people who work there. It is a necessary and required condition for the morgue’s operations.

According to Charmaz (1980:320), “death lies in the future for everyone. But the future of death takes shape in whatever collective meanings and practices are constructed by people around concrete instances of death as they engage in their everyday lives.” There are some areas of everyday life that are not reachable by an individual (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Remote and rare events like death can be unfamiliar and can challenge reality. Bills and colleagues (2009) in their study of the experiences of rescue and recovery workers/volunteers at Ground Zero following the terrorist attacks, found that 7% of the respondents described the experience as surreal and described it as living on “another planet”. This imagery is a clear example of surreal versus real when faced with images of death.

For most, each day is filled with activities through which reality can be understood and embraced, but sometimes other sector events and activities seep into one’s surreal realm. The significance of those events can be measured based on the challenges they instigate. As long as they don’t touch a completely different reality, most individuals can successfully mediate and wrap their minds around the issue at hand. “The reality of everyday life encompasses both kinds of sectors, as long as what appears as a problem does not pertain to a different reality altogether (say, the reality of theoretical physics, or of nightmares). As long as the routines of

everyday life continue without interruption they are apprehended as unproblematic" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:24). Individuals are then capable of moving from perceived reality to things that seem unreal, but it is the unreal or surreal sectors that challenge reality because the experience varies in regard to anything previously experienced. Likewise, Goffman (1974) posits that it is the scripts of everyday life that helps shape one's reality. For example, the cues of being in a morgue for the first time are not there since the experience is so outside one's everyday living. "Different objects present themselves to consciousness as constituents of different spheres of reality. I recognize the fellowmen I must deal with in the course of everyday life as pertaining to a reality quite different from the disembodied figures that appear in my dreams. The two sets of objects introduce quite different tensions into my consciousness and I am attentive to them in quite different ways" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:21).

Death then is an opportunity like none other to test reality. "It is in the legitimation of death that the transcending potency of symbolic universes manifests itself most clearly, and the fundamental terror-assuaging character of the ultimate legitimations of the paramount reality of everyday life is revealed" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:101). But why is it that death challenges reality?

Individuals are compromised by precarious events that challenge the realm of everyday activity. People experience the death of others and as a result think more about their own demise (Berger and Luckmann 1966). "All social reality is precarious. All societies are constructions in the face of chaos. The constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever the legitimations that obscure the precariousness are threatened or collapse" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:103).

Key elements make death so pertinent to the study of reality. First, there is nothing more final than death. Death is permanent and irreversible. Second, there are very few things

that obstruct or minimize the reality of death. If one cannot keep disorder under control, the institutional order is compromised (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Again, death of another is not something with which most people have extensive experience. While death is universal, the focus after death in America tends to be on the nature of grief and the mourning rituals (Unruh 1981).

In our culture, we rely on others (medical professionals, morticians and funeral directors) to take care of the dead and prepare them for public viewing. So the average person more than likely does not have a significant experience with all or even some aspects of death. In the past these experiences were even more limited as funeral parlors functioned mostly as places to buy a casket. Religious leaders were the primary participants while the mortician played a secondary role. Today, funeral directors play a prominent role in not only preparing the deceased but supplying a place for people to visit the dead (Phipps 1987). According to Barley (1983) funeral directors employ cultural codes when restoring and displaying corpses so that they appear natural to viewers. They use procedural rules to prepare a person's makeup and hair, their attire, and position in the casket. This "naturalness" allows grievers to employ a common and situation-specific system of meaning, which directors maintain reduces acutely expressive disruptions during the viewing of the body and during the funeral (Barley 1983:402). Some individuals are surely motivated to be more involved with the death process, but laws, regulations, policies, and our culture dictate minimized or no involvement. Thus, motivation is tied to interaction but mediated by normative restriction (Frank 1979).

The morgue visit is quite a different experience for visitors compared to the carefully prepared criteria that funeral directors and others practice to prepare their bodies for viewing. The morgue personnel do not concern themselves much with making corpses appear real.

Therefore, the experience of viewing corpses in a morgue is much more likely than bodies prepared for a funeral to be perceived as *surreal* by visitors.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

A total of 20 undergraduate students took part in the visit to the morgue. Of the 20 students, 15 responded to the qualitative open-ended questionnaire. Of those 15 respondents, 10 were female and 5 were male. None of these respondents had previously visited a morgue. The twenty students who voluntarily chose to visit a morgue (this was not a class project or affiliated with any course, but an approved student organization outing) were contacted approximately 6 months after their visit to ask them about their experiences. Specifically, the authors wanted to ascertain if they felt their perception of the experience was “real” or “surreal” through an open-ended questionnaire.

Researchers contacted students approximately six months after their visit to the morgue to provide ample time for them to fully process their experience. This period between the morgue visit and student surveys may seem counterintuitive at first blush because of assumptions that memories will be most accurate immediately after an experience. However, the researchers here purposely delayed to ensure that students who reported the experience as “surreal” were doing so not simply because of the initial shock they may have experienced during the morgue visit. As supported herein, surreal experiences, by their very nature, should maintain their surreal quality over reasonable periods of time because those experiences are so unlike other stored experiences and, as a result, they so significantly affect the subject. If an experience was not truly surreal, we would expect that effect to fade during post-experience processing. That respondents were able to recall their experiences as surreal six months later only further strengthens the view that those experiences were indeed surreal at the time and are significantly strong to survive post-experience processing.

Measurement of Variables

For this qualitative analysis, respondents were given a description of what is considered "real" and what one might consider "surreal." The definition of real was explained as follows: Often times the term reality is described as "what is real." It includes things that exist whether or not they can be observed or make sense. In contrast, the definition of surreal was explained as follows: The term surreal is often defined as something with fantastic imagery that may resemble a dream. Participants were asked if they had ever visited a morgue before this experience, and whether or not they believed their experience was "real" or "surreal." Respondents were then asked to elaborate on why they felt their experience was "real" or "surreal."

RESULTS

Analysis after coding revealed that 10 subjects (67%) believed their experience to be surreal, while 4 subjects (27%) believed the experience to be real. One participant (6%) determined the experience to be both real and surreal.

From the qualitative responses, some themes emerged that help to explain why the morgue visit seemed real or surreal to participants. For those who believed their experience to be real, most could not articulate specifically why they believed it was real. This is fairly common, as most people don't question aspects of reality in their everyday lives. Individuals tend to take for granted what they know and believe to be real. For those who thought their experience was real, their visit apparently fit some frame of reference matching reality, even though they hadn't visited a morgue before. One respondent indicated that it was her understanding of death in general that made it seem real, as she understood that people indeed die and some require autopsies.

As for those who determined their experience to be surreal, other themes emerged. The most often cited theme contributing to the surreality of the experience was the scenes students witnessed. How the dead looked, how they were stored, and how they were brought into the facility struck a chord with participants. How the morgue smelled was another popular theme that many emphasized as pertinent to their surreal experience. Some cited the fact that even after the morgue visit their clothing remained ripe with the stench of death. Finally, the actions of the medical examiner and his assistant became a reoccurring theme for those identifying the experience as surreal. Many cited the nonchalant way in which the workers handled the deceased baby. Specifically, some said that it was as if the deceased baby was a rag doll and not a once-living person.

While all the qualitative responses of participants contain very rich data, limited space allows only a select few responses to be detailed here.

Examples of Student Responses

The following responses are divided by those classified as: real and surreal, real only, or surreal only.

Student 1 (Female- coded as real and surreal)

"I think the experience was both real and surreal. It was surreal because the bodies did not look like they were once a living person, they looked so fake. The way the morticians handled the bodies made them seem fake as well, I understand that they were dead but they just flung them around like they were dolls. It seemed real because of the horrible smell and the hundreds of bodies in the cooler, some of which were dripping and rotting."

Student 2 (Female- real only)

"I thought it was very real. Before the visit, I could only imagine what went on behind closed doors... I enjoyed visiting the morgue, it reinforced the purpose of choosing this particular field of study."

Student 3 (Female- real only)

"The experience seemed very real to me. Seeing the bodies being brought in and the process they go through to get them identified made everything clear. The

autopsy of the baby was sort of surreal but the teenager was very real. I walked out of there knowing exactly what I had just experienced."

Student 4 (Female- surreal only)

"When actually walking through the cooler I didn't think what I saw was real. I was standing in a room full of dead bodies. I saw things from a green man to practically a skeleton... Once in the autopsy room, the girl killed recently also didn't look like she was real, even the bullet wound looked fake... When first looking at the man dicing up entrails I was just intrigued about the roughness in his chops. Seeing the baby lying wide open with the top of its head missing was the deciding factor in my surreal experience."

Student 5 (Male- surreal only)

"The outside of the building and inside, in the main lobby gave me a feeling that we were at a high priced office building that would be clean and refreshing throughout the interior. I was very wrong. It was dirty and a well-used facility. I pictured a place where everybody would be tucked away in its own refrigerator like compartment with plenty of room for the chilly fog that surrounds a person once inside. If you've ever heard the expression, "It's not like in the movies?" This was one of those times. The bodies were stacked like you were shopping for lumber at Menards to build your front deck. All the bodies were nude and few were covered. The bodies that were covered, were covered with a blue tarp... Some eyes were open, and others were closed. Some were burned. Some were huge with green, white, and even purple goop gushing from their icy cool flesh... Once we moved on, our next stop was into the autopsy room. There was a three month old baby girl, laying on a cold stainless steel table with her organs beside her ready for examination. Her head opened up with her hair line draped over her face and brain removed from the skull. At that point, I felt as if I was in a dream. I knew it was real but my brain was telling me something else."

Student 6 (Female- surreal only)

"When describing if it was "real" or "surreal" I would definitely have to go with "surreal". It seriously didn't seem real what so ever! It was like a nightmare come true! The smell was so horrid and disgusting I can't even explain it. I had to change my clothes as soon as we left because they smelled like the morgue... Going into the freezer with all of those bodies was by far the scariest thing ever! I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Nothing at this point seemed real. I couldn't even get it through my head that I was in the same room with so many dead bodies all around me. I always thought that the bodies in the freezer were in drawers that pulled out. WOW was I wrong! It reminded me of a grocery store but with isles of dead people. I just felt so bad for all the people. I remember walking by this tray with a blue bag over the dead body and there were little feet sticking out of the end. I also walked by and saw these burnt bodies. The deceased bodies had their arms sticking up and their mouths were open in a complete circle as if they were yelling. Their skin was like a burnt

marshmallow, It looked like it would just fall off if someone would touch it. Some of the bodies had not been embalmed and their body fluids somehow leaked out of them and were froze to the tray they were lying on."

Student 7 (Male- surreal only)

"My experience at the morgue was so intense that there was no way my mind thought it was real. I knew I was awake in there but there was no way I could comprehend everything that was affecting my senses. The smell of all the bodies, trying to breathe through your nose made you want to throw up, breathing through your mouth made you taste it for a few hours after the tour. The sight of them bringing in the bodies, and throwing them around literally like a sack of dirt was something that was an experience in and of itself. The cold air only adding to the experience and made it that much more uncomfortable. I thought the whole thing seemed completely surreal. The things we saw were so detailed and still in my mind, much like a kid would have the images of the boogey man in his or her mind following an intense nightmare. .. The morgue did not seem real and was more like a bad dream."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As the results of this qualitative analysis reveal, more respondents believed their experience at the morgue was surreal than real. The literature on the construction of reality indicates that surreal experiences may be a result of events and activities in life that are rarely experienced. According to Goffman (1974), individuals try to embrace precarious situations but soon find out that their frame of reference is broken and disrupted. The individual lacks prior experience and a well-framed realm no longer exists. Critical to Goffman's frame analysis is the importance of experience related to the situation.

Expecting to take up a position in a well-framed realm, he finds that no particular frame is immediately applicable, or the frame that he thought was applicable no longer seems to be, or he cannot bind himself within the frame that does not apparently apply. He loses command over the formulation of viable response. He flounders. Experience- the meld of what the current scene brings to him and what he brings to it- meant to settle into a form even while it is beginning, finds no form and is therefore no experience. Reality anomically flutters (Goffman 1974:379).

Because such experiences are rare, one's sense of reality is challenged. Death and its aftermath give researchers unique events and settings in which to test reality. This test of reality is even more pronounced when subjects are exposed to aspects of death that most people typically do not have the opportunity to witness.

Such was the case here. Survey respondents experienced what many would consider the most morbid sectors of death- and not surprisingly for some the experience was comparable to a nightmare that wasn't actually a dream. Participants experienced scenes disengaged from the normality of life, and for that matter, the normality of death. Most people have experience with death to some degree, but few have the opportunity to witness death in the way that a large impersonal morgue presents it.

As Goffman would likely have predicted, for most of the students surveyed, seeing rotting, burned, mutilated, and dismembered bodies while enduring the unbelievable stench of death was too much for the human mind to fully comprehend. Their frame of reference was broken and disrupted so they perceived the experience as surreal even though they were able to recall in significant detail the sights and smells from that day. Several of the student recollections excerpted above fully support Goffman's and other researcher's conclusions about experience and reality: the meld of what the current scene brought to those students (dead bodies, death's stench, unfamiliar surroundings steeped in death) and what the student brought to it (limited personal and/or inaccurate media experiences with death) could find no form and was therefore not perceived as a real experience at all, but only as the fantastic imagery of surreality.

Despite the somewhat universal perception of death as surreal, some U.S. courts mandate that DUI offenders visit the morgue as punishment. This practice presumes that witnessing death at a morgue will be a "real" experience that will reduce recidivism. Little

research has been conducted thus far to determine if these morgue visits have reduced recidivism, but one study revealed that emergency room or morgue visits by those who have committed alcohol related crimes are not effective in reducing recidivism (Leary 1991).

While this study has produced the important foregoing results, it is, like any qualitative study, subject to some general limitations. Qualitative research often suffers from a limited number of respondents, is not tested for statistical significance, and cannot be easily replicated. Beyond these general limitations of qualitative research, this study presented some methodological challenges. First, students were self-selected because they voluntarily signed up for the tour. Second, because the respondents in this study were criminal justice students, they may not be representative of the larger population of students with other academic interests. Third, it is quite possible that the students' responses could be influenced by discussions with or observing the reactions of other students who also toured the morgue. Finally, the six month delay between the morgue visit and the data collection may have affected student responses, but the researchers contend that the delay was benign because surreal experiences by their very nature, tend to imprint on subjects more clearly and permanently.

Despite any limitations caused by its qualitative nature, this study contributes to the understanding of the human perception of reality. Perhaps its greatest contribution is identifying and further clarifying the nature of the surreal experience and what venues and events might be best for evaluating such experiences. With the exception of natural disasters and/or man-made tragedies like terrorists attacks, very few events provide the type of fantastic imagery available in a major metropolitan morgue, especially if a visitor is able to witness the medical examiner performing an autopsy. Most people simply do not have the opportunity to observe the dead the way they appear and are handled in a morgue where, unlike funeral homes, death is on display in its most raw and unadulterated form to facilitate the investigatory

duties of medical examiners. Thus, a morgue presents, as it did in this study, a venue like no other to test the human perception of reality.

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