

## 'My Memories of the Time We Had Together Are More Important': Direct Cremation and the Privatisation of UK Funerals

Sociology  
2022, Vol. 56(3) 556–573  
© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/00380385211036350  
journals.sagepub.com/home/soc



**Kate Woodthorpe** 

University of Bath, UK

**Hannah Rumble**

University of Bath, UK

**Anne Corden**

University of York, UK

**John Birrell**

University of Bath, UK

**Henk Schut**

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

**Margaret Stroebe**

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

**Cate Newsom**

University of Bath, UK

**Yvette Smith**

Dignity Funerals, UK

---

**Corresponding author:**

Kate Woodthorpe, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK.

Email: [k.v.woodthorpe@bath.ac.uk](mailto:k.v.woodthorpe@bath.ac.uk)

## Abstract

Funerals have long been of interest to social scientists. Previous sociological work has examined the relationship between individuality, belief and tradition within funeral services, founded on the assumption that public rituals have psycho-social benefit for organisers and attendees. With the introduction of direct cremation to the UK, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on funeral service attendance in 2020 and 2021, critique of this assumption is now needed. Drawing on interviews with recently bereaved people who organised a direct cremation in late 2017, this article illustrates how compromise, control and consistency are key drivers for not having a funeral service. The article argues that a declining importance in the fate of the body and a move towards 'invite-only' commemorative events represents a waning need for social support offered by a public, communal funeral service. In turn, this indicates a sequestration, or privatisation, of the contemporary funeral.

## Keywords

commemoration, cremation, funerals, privatisation, public, ritual, sequestration

## Introduction

Funerals and their purpose have long been of interest to social scientists. Numerous theorists have attempted to explain their socio-cultural function, with most concluding that as a public ritual funeral services provide social support and psycho-social benefit to organisers and attendees (see Hoy, 2020). Since the turn of the century the organisation of funerals in the UK has been shaped by a 'secular social narrative of individuation, personalisation and choice' (Turner and Caswell, 2020: 3) with a 'good funeral' based on an amalgamation of custom, belief and individual expression (Caswell, 2011; Holloway et al., 2013). Questions have been raised as to who has responsibility for funeral arrangements within families (Corden and Hirst, 2015; Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016), how the organisation of the funeral industry shapes organiser's funeral choices (Walter, 2017) and potential for the extension of commemorative activities via cremated remains (Prendergast et al., 2006). Much of this work has been founded on the assumption that funeral services have therapeutic value after a death, and that participation in them is wanted and needed by organisers and attendees (O'Rourke et al., 2011).

However a rapid review of the utility of funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic (Burrell and Selman, 2020) has not been able to ratify this supposition, and a recent empirical study into what constitutes a 'good funeral' found that a funeral service may 'not necessarily be the most important thing' after a person has died (Rugg and Jones, 2019: 6). Moreover, exploring the efficacy of contemporary funeral services is not simply an academic pursuit: it too has been queried by the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) (2020) who, in their investigation of the UK funeral sector, rigorously examined the very definition of, and need for, a funeral service after someone had died.

Prior to the CMA's investigation launch in 2018 the assumption that a funeral service was wanted, needed and helpful to organisers and attendees was already being challenged by clearly labelled direct cremation packages in the UK. Introduced in 2012, direct cremation is when a cremation takes place without a concurrent funeral service, effectively disconnecting the public commemorative components of the funeral service

from the cremation by (re)turning body disposal into a matter of public health and hygiene (see Natural Death Centre, 2013). In less than a decade, direct cremation in its purest form (that is, no commemoration at any point) has grown to account for 3% of all cremation funerals; rising to 6% if the definition includes a cremation with a separate (typically invite-only) celebration of life service or commemoration, with or without the ashes, held on a different day (Royal London, 2019), and it is predicted to rise (Jones, 2020). Indeed, the most recent figures, which include funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic when funeral attendance was severely limited due to lockdown restrictions (BBC, 2020), suggest that in 2020 14% of all deaths resulted in a direct cremation (SunLife, 2021). Of the nearly 700,000 registered deaths in 2020, this represents around 100,000 people.

Sociologically, as this article will show, a separation of the disposal of the body from a public and simultaneous gathering represents a sequestration and privatisation of the contemporary funeral. The introduction of clearly demarcated direct cremation packages – now a legitimate choice to *not* have a funeral service – means that a publicly accessible funeral occasion can be rejected outright or in favour of invite-only commemorative event(s). Such shifts, this article will argue, mirror changes to contemporary weddings and a decline in (and need for) social support derived from physically present, communal funeral services.

Drawing on a longitudinal multi-method study into the impact of cremation choices on the grief experience, taking place before COVID-19, the article examines participants' reasons for choosing direct cremation, and what direct cremation means for the future of UK funerals. It opens with an introduction to sociological work on death and funerals specifically, before introducing the reader to UK cremation funeral practices. It details the empirical study from which the article originates, finding that compromise, control and consistency are the key drivers for direct cremations. The article argues that the introduction and growth of direct cremation in the UK reflects the declining significance of the deceased body and need for social support from public events, and as a result we are witnessing the disaggregation and sequestration of funerals and, by extension, their privatisation.

## Background

Questions about how the end of a life and its aftermath are experienced, managed and marked has been of interest to social historians, archaeologists, human geographers, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists. Sociologists have long concerned themselves with the extent to which death is individual or communal, public or private (Elias, 1985; Gorer, 1965). A 1990s surge of sociological interest in death saw attention centred on its institutionalisation (James and Field, 1992; Lawton, 1998), with questions raised about what constituted a 'good death' (Seale, 1998) and its concealment from public life (Mellor and Shilling, 1993). The idea that death is sequestered has become 'the dominant sociological theory of death in contemporary society [where] the organisation and experience of death have become increasingly private, separated from mainstream society' (Walter, 2019: 389). In recent years sequestration theory has been used to explore death's 'domestication' behind closed doors (Stanley and Wise, 2011) and the extent to which death in the public domain is 'spectacular' (Jacobsen, 2020).

Situated within debates about the public/private nature of death, the commemoration of the dead has been a popular area of interest. In examining the purpose of the contemporary UK funeral, Bailey and Walter (2016) have argued that a service's function is to confront death and protect the mourners – the attendees – from death's reality, through the content of the (preferably accurate) spoken eulogy. Attendance, they contend, creates something of a 'configurational eulogy'; that is, by attending the congregation is creating a tribute to the deceased. Elsewhere, sociologist Caswell (2011) has examined how personalisation has been, and can be, accommodated within 'traditional' Scottish funeral rituals. Through their rich ethnographic study of funerals, Holloway et al. (2013) have further argued that a 'good funeral' incorporates religious and non-religious belief, with consistency between belief and ritual choice(s) critical to the perceived success of the service. Common to these works has been the assumption that there is therapeutic value pertaining to the public and communal nature of the contemporary funeral service (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2019).

Alongside this sociological interest, in recent years there have been growing broader policy concerns regarding UK funerals. These concerns have included how much they cost and their organisation (Corden and Hirst, 2015; Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016), the commercial imperatives that shape the delivery of funeral director services (Fletcher and McGowan, 2020a), the remit of the state in providing financial support for funerals (Fletcher and McGowan, 2020b) and questions about who is responsible for paying for a funeral after someone has died (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016). All have contributed to the aforementioned CMA's (2020) investigation into the funeral sector, which has been driven by questions as to the potential exploitation of funeral organisers by funeral directors (Birrell and Sutherland, 2016; Fletcher and McGowan, 2020b). While the tension between funeral commerce and choice is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that funeral arrangements take place within this socio-economic context, and are typically collaboratively organised (Bailey and Walter, 2016; Woodthorpe, 2017).

Within all these studies, sociologists and policy analysts alike have founded their work on the assumption that the contemporary funeral service has value for organisers and attendees. There has been little critique as to whether, now two decades into the 21st century, this is still the case. In response to COVID-19 UK lockdown measures in 2020, which in the UK have restricted the number of people who can attend a funeral service (BBC, 2020), a study on the efficacy of funeral attendance found that there is no conclusive evidence that funeral services are of benefit to attendees (Burrell and Selman, 2020). Yet signs that funeral services can no longer be assumed to be valued by all were there before the arrival of the pandemic, with the creation of direct cremation – that is, body disposal without a funeral service. Well established as a legitimate funerary choice in the USA and Australia, direct cremation arrived in the UK in 2012.

### *Cremation Funerals*

Although only a little over 100 years old, with 78% of the population choosing cremation (around 450,000 people a year) the UK has one of the highest cremation rates in the world (Cremation Society, 2019). In terms of what defines and constitutes a cremation funeral, there are a set of well-established normative practices. First, the deceased person

is relocated from their place of death or mortuary to a funeral director's premises for cold storage, where viewing by family and friends may be possible. In the UK viewing is usually arranged in advance, not publicly advertised, and undertaken surreptitiously on the funeral director's premises (Harper, 2010). In the immediate days following it is usually the deceased's next of kin who registers the death and, often in consultation with others including the funeral director, determines funeral arrangements (Woodthorpe, 2017). By this point, with the deceased in cold storage, very few people change funeral directors and will organise the funeral according to their procured funeral director's offer (CMA, 2020). With the funeral director's input, a date for the cremation is booked and any concurrent ritualised service arranged. Members of the deceased's and organiser's social network are informed of the service arrangements, with details sometimes publicised via obituaries or announcements, in newspapers, via social media and online. Often this information is disseminated similar to snowballing, with (for example) a friend being told and asked to pass on the details of the funeral service to (known and unknown) others. Such open advertising and cascading of information means that the organiser of the funeral may not know who is attending the funeral service (if there is one) until people actually show up on the day. Crucially, pre-Covid, given the nature of this method of advertising and unrestricted attendance, funeral services are largely seen and experienced as a communal and public event (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2019).

On the day of the cremation, the funeral director transports the body to the crematorium or funeral service location, typically in a hearse with the coffin covered in floral wreaths. If there is no funeral service or the attendees meet the deceased's body at the venue, transport of the deceased may be in a van marked as a private ambulance. If there is a funeral service, attendees gather at the venue. After the funeral service there may be a 'wake' where attendees meet and have refreshments. Without knowing how many will be attending, organisers often have to estimate the size of the wake venue and the volume of refreshments needed. While the wake is happening the deceased's body is cremated or, to ensure maximum efficiency in cremator oven usage, will be 'held over' until the following day. Once the cremains (the bones) are cooled and crushed, a few days later the ashes are returned to the funeral organiser, or remain uncollected at the crematorium or funeral directors. Eventually those that remain uncollected will be scattered in the crematorium grounds.

Today, around three quarters of ashes are returned to the funeral organiser (Day, 2017). A seminal study into their destination indicated that activities with ashes have extended ritualised commemorative processes after someone has died, which do not rely upon a timebound or clear decision-making trajectory (Prendergast et al., 2006). Rather, deciding what to do with the ashes can unfold creatively over time, responsive to their custodian's understanding of what and where is significant and appropriate for memory, meaning and emotions (Kellaher et al., 2010). As a result, ashes can be scattered almost anywhere, for example on golf courses, favourite family walks or into the sea; buried in the garden or at favourite holiday spots; made into jewellery; or even discharged in a firework or blasted into space.

Although technically it has long been possible to select and reject elements of the conventional cremation funeral process outlined above (Walter, 2007, 2017), the introduction of demarcated direct cremation 'packages' has meant that in the last decade the

UK funeral industry has been segregating the constituent parts of the cremation funeral as discrete and legitimate options for their client to purchase (or reject). Often one-third of the cost of a traditional funeral service, and thus marketed as a solution to funeral affordability (SunLife, 2020), direct cremation now accounts for 3–6% of all cremations depending on the definition used. In its ‘purest’ form, it involves the deceased person being cremated with no funeral service, on an unspecified date and unknown location, with the ashes retained by the funeral director or available for collection. In the UK direct cremation is an evolving proposition however, and packages have progressed over the last five years to include ‘unattended’ and ‘attended’ cremations. Such inconsistency between providers and its identification means there is no sector-wide agreed definition nor standard package for direct cremation, leading to substantial variation in how ‘direct’ a cremation actually is and concerns as to how knowledgeable organisers are when making their purchase (CMA, 2020; Royal London, 2019).

Critically, this ‘opting out’ of having a funeral service on the day of the cremation separates the disposal of the body from any concurrent funeral service or commemorative ritual involving the deceased’s body. An implication is that the centrality and integrity of the deceased’s body is much reduced, and reflects the (ongoing) decline in religious ritual associated with the separation of the soul and the body, and the spiritual committal of the mortal remains of a person (Davies and Mates, 2005). As this article will show, it further serves to privatise the funeral and thereby mirrors what has happened to contemporary weddings, which have moved away from public events that serve the community to become more clandestine occasions that (re)present individuality and personal choice (Illouz, 2012).

## The Study

The study underpinning this article was a multi-disciplinary research project into the relationship between cremation choices and experiences of grief. Funded by Dignity Funerals, it was an independent academic study that took place over 2.5 years between 2017 and 2019 (so, pre-COVID-19). The study utilised two surveys to generate quantitative data on grief outcomes over time, and one-off interviews between the two surveys to qualitatively explore the driving factors behind cremation arrangements. The project received ethical approval from the University of Bath, and the ethical implications are detailed later in this article.

In April 2018 survey one was sent to 1942 clients who had organised a funeral using Dignity Funerals or Simplicity (Dignity’s online direct cremation arm) during a three-month period between the end of 2017 and early 2018. Of the 261 returned postal surveys (13.7% response rate), 17 had organised a direct cremation. A second survey was sent out a year later, to generate data on grief responses over time (see Birrell et al., 2020). It was during the intervening year that interviews took place.

Although the demographic features of interviewees are not critical to nor detailed further in this article, it is worth noting briefly here that participants were broadly representative of the UK population. Of the 233 participants that completed both surveys, the average age of participants was 64 years old, and most (69%) were female. The majority (61%) were retired from work, and most identified as Christian (64%). The average age

of the deceased was 81 years old, with death after a lengthy illness the most common cause (62%). Most of the deceased (51%) were a parent, with 34% mothers and 17% fathers. For 35% of participants it was their partner who had died. In terms of income the sample reflected the UK's average household income, with 42% in receipt of a household income of less than £26,000 per year, 32% with a household income of between £26,000 and £46,000 per year, 26% earning more than £46,000 within their household per year and 17% with an annual household income of less than £16,000 per year.

### Interviews

In order to find out more about the reasoning behind decisions thirty participants of the 261 who completed the first survey were invited to take part in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in their home or a location of their choice. A study priority was interviewing those who had replied to the first survey and organised a direct cremation, thus interview participants were recruited according to funeral type rather than any other socio-demographic feature. All of the 17 participants who had organised a direct cremation were invited to interview, and 14 accepted. Since the participants who had chosen a direct cremation were geographically spread across the UK, for ease of administration and due to limited financial budgets for travel, those who organised a direct cremation were matched geographically with interviewees who had arranged a 'traditional cremation' (the remaining 16 participants), which for the purpose of this study was defined as a cremation with a funeral service on the same day. This article focuses specifically on the interviews with the 14 people who had arranged a direct cremation.

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes between October 2018 and January 2019. All were audio recorded with permission and later transcribed by a third-party transcription agency. A thematic analysis was used to organise and categorise the data.

### Ethics and Study Limitations

In terms of study limitations, the participants were clients of one national funeral directing company and a self-selecting population who responded to the request to complete a survey. As the sample shows, participants were representative in terms of age, gender and income distribution. Given this, and the aforementioned lack of consistency across the funeral industry in what constitutes a 'direct cremation', it was felt that a sample of participants from a single provider – rather than being a limitation – was a *strength* in terms of the uniformity of terminology and funerary options. It also meant that materially different approaches in the arrangement of cremation funerals between diverse providers were reduced.

Echoing age-old concerns about the ethics of profiting from death and potential funeral director exploitation of bereaved people (Mitford, 1963), the funder of the project has been subject to critique for the 'vulgarity' of profit(eer)ing from death (Fletcher and McGowan, 2020a). Upholding conventional standards regarding funder integrity, the research contract went through normal University of Bath contract procedures to ensure that there were no questions as to the academic freedom of the research team. After finalising the research questions' before the research team remained independent of the funder



throughout the project, bar their assistance with participant recruitment and guidance regarding their clients' data availability.

In terms of research ethics, after their completion of the first survey all interviewees were contacted with additional information about the interviews, with written consent sought at the commencement of the interview. All data were confidential to the research team, and participants were anonymised via pseudonyms. The interviewers were experienced in working with recently bereaved people and took bereavement-support material to interviews should participants indicate that they would like additional discussion following the interview.

## Findings: The Factors Driving Direct Cremation Choices

There were three themes that emerged in terms of the driving factors for direct cremation arrangements: compromise, control and consistency. In terms of compromise, one-third of interviewees reported that the choice to *not* have a funeral service was due to circumstances that obstructed the intended funeral type or the wishes of the deceased. For example, Lesley's deceased father had already bought a pre-paid funeral plan to finance his whole-body burial in the family grave. However, after his death it was discovered that there was not enough space in the grave and, after discussion with her siblings, Lesley decided to cremate his body and have his ashes buried in the family grave instead. She and her siblings had assumed their father would have a funeral service at the time of the burial, but as a burial was no longer possible none wanted to attend the cremation nor organise a service at the crematorium. Instead, their father was cremated, and they buried his ashes in the family grave with only his adult children present:

On a number of occasions, the undertaker rang me up and kept saying, 'This is when dad's cremation is, do you want to be there?' and I said, 'I don't want to be there.' My sister lives down south and she said, 'I don't want to be there either', and my brother said, 'I don't want to be there either' . . . I collected my dad from the undertaker and he sat on the sideboard for a week. (Lesley)

After his mother's death, Jeff discovered that their local authority crematorium was not available for funeral services, although the cremator ovens were still available for the actual cremation. Given that he recalled that his mother had wanted 'no fuss', he and his brothers opted for a direct cremation and organised several family-only smaller commemorative activities after the cremation. Jeff's mother's ashes were then split three ways: some were buried in the crematorium's garden of rest next to her husband's; some were repurposed into ashes jewellery and given to Jeff's sister-in-law and niece; and the remaining ashes were scattered under a bush that his mother used to gaze onto from her flat, admiring two robins who regularly visited.

Two further interviewees arranged a direct cremation because the deceased's wishes to donate their body to medical science had been thwarted due to the timing of their death over a public holiday. Patricia reflected on her mother's earlier death and how this led her to choose a direct cremation for her father:



Mum decided she would leave her body to medical research . . . She liked the idea of when she passed away her body would be handed to medical research and I would not receive a body back. I would receive ashes back and it could be any time, three or four years after the process . . . Then I would attend a celebration of life and be thanked for my relative giving their body and she liked that whole idea. And at that point I would get ashes back and I could do with them what I wanted at that point. (Patricia)

However, her mother died over a public holiday when the local university medical research school was closed and could not accept bodies for donation. Patricia commented on the implications of the timing of her mother's death:

At that point, knowing that I now had a body and I didn't want a funeral, which was never on the cards, I contacted [the local funeral directors] . . . I didn't know about private [direct] cremations . . . I wanted it to just happen and to be told it was done, because that is what was going to happen if I had gone down the university route. (Patricia)

It was not until Patricia's father died almost seven years later (for which she organised a direct cremation, and whose death led to the interview taking place) that she collected her mother's ashes along with her father's, and commissioned jewellery to be created. She mixed their ashes and commissioned a pair of earrings and a ring, which her son now wears.

Similarly, Tina had been ready to donate her husband's body to medical science:

I think because he [Michael] had received such wonderful care and support from the NHS. I mean, with every chest infection he was in hospital, ambulated in . . . We just felt it was a way of repaying the NHS and we knew it was an unusual disease at that point and just thought research might help. (Tina)

Michael died on New Year's Eve and, as with Patricia's mother, the local university medical school was closed. Unlike Patricia, Tina and Michael had talked about contingencies in case his body would/could not be accepted and had decided he would have a direct cremation. Since Michael's ashes had been returned, Tina had been scattering them – sometimes alone and sometimes in company – in various locations that held memories for her: holiday locations, a local park and woodland where they would take their two sons, and even under the front driveway of her home.

Dying in the festive period was a factor for another participant, Amy, who explained how she decided to pursue direct cremation for her estranged brother. Hers was the only case where the participant did not follow the request of the deceased (if known), as a direct cremation contradicted her brother's request to be buried with their parents. Amy chose direct cremation because she could not promptly organise her brother's funeral as he died just before Christmas:

Practically speaking it was near Christmas, I could not arrange for his body to be taken to [X] . . . It just wasn't possible . . . I will take his ashes to [X] and he will be buried with our parents . . . But how was I going to arrange a funeral in [X] at two weeks' notice before Christmas and inform people? (Amy)

For all these participants direct cremation was selected because it was a compromise that was in keeping with the interviewee's or the deceased's values.

The second and third driving factors for opting for a direct cremation were importance of control and, as above, being consistent with values and beliefs. Control came up repeatedly in interviews in terms of symptom management or place of death, the funeral arrangements and memorialising activity. All interviewees felt that by organising a direct cremation they had enhanced their control of the arrangements. For example, in organising her husband's direct cremation and later memorial service, Gaynor felt she had a high degree of control over who attended, which was important to her:

I felt . . . that we only had to invite people that we wanted that had been part of our, in my case [John], being ill and dying. I didn't want a lot of strangers coming to a funeral who I had to be nice to, but I didn't know from other parts of his life. I'd never seen them when he was ill. (Gaynor)

Because David wanted to control who was attending and the content of any commemoration to his wife, her direct cremation meant there was no rush to plan any commemorative activity, thereby creating time to take stock of his options:

I think one of the main positives I got from doing it the way I did is it actually gives you time to think . . . because of the various pressures you have about how it should be done, that's many and varied, is you need time to think that through. (David)

The importance of controlling attendance and commemorative content were echoed in other interviews, where direct cremation was deliberately chosen to *exclude* particular individuals' attendance, who the interviewee felt had let down the deceased be it through illness, estrangement or unresolved family conflict. For example, Brian commented:

When mum was very, very ill and we were out here struggling, looking for carers et cetera, on the phone to doctors and all of that, where were you? You never phoned up and said, 'Do you want a hand with mum, because we know she's really struggling?' Where were you? I went to see her twice a week in the care home, why did you not go and see her in the care home? (Brian)

Another participant, Sherry, spoke of how she and her brother 'were just abandoned basically' and so she arranged a direct cremation for him because she did not want to give extended family members an opportunity to attend his funeral:

None of them were there to support us. So, when he died . . . I thought, you know, they hadn't seen him for at least 30 years and he's lived on his own all that time and none of them had been to see him and they're always saying 'Let us know when the funeral is', and I thought I'm not going to have a funeral. I thought, I'm not going to have them [there], they're all hypocrites! (Sherry)

Sherry was not alone in noting hypocrisy when it came to attendance at a funeral:

Our daughter Sophie had quite severe mental health problems and had had for some years. And sadly, family and friends deserted her, she really had no one at the end except me . . . Sophie

did not want people turning up at a funeral who had not been anywhere near her when she was alive, and she was needing them. (Marie)

Similarly, Kenneth had explicitly organised a direct cremation for his wife Margie after she had spent 20 years living with Parkinson's and dementia because 'We didn't want a service at a crematorium which will be full of people who, over the 20 years that Margie was ill, never ever came to see her or ask how she was.'

Control of attendance and commemorative events was thus critical to interviewees. This, they felt, was in keeping with their or the deceased's values and beliefs.

Consistency was the final driving factor for opting for a direct cremation. Reasons for choosing a direct cremation included that the deceased did 'not want a fuss' (Gaynor, Brian), that 'we're a private family' (Patricia), that they wanted 'a celebration' of the deceased's life because 'a funeral is drab' (Nathan); and because the deceased was reported to have not liked 'all the trappings of a traditional service' (Simon). These comments emerged from interviews irrespective of religious faith (or none).

For all interviewees, opting for a funeral type that was consistent with beliefs was much more important than fulfilling societal expectations (Holloway et al., 2013). Beliefs and values in this context did not equate to spiritual or religious beliefs, rather they included attitudes towards the body, the quality of relationships to others, their sense of duty to the deceased and/or attendees, and the expression of the deceased's and/or their own identity, lived experiences and shared memories. Common to all interviews was that participants did not feel the deceased's body's fate was integral to any act of commemoration or remembrance. This did not mean they did not care about the deceased's body; rather, they felt no requirement to do anything to mark the day of its incineration by cremation. *Both* those of strong faith and those of none reported that the deceased's body was simply a receptacle. For example, Gaynor, a self-identified atheist commented 'To me once you're dead, that's it . . . The body is nothing to do with it; it's just a vessel you were in.' A similar sentiment was expressed by Nathan, who worked as a church minister. He had organised a direct cremation for his wife Sally, who had died after years of ill health:

Her body isn't her, it's just a body, it's a vessel to host her life, her soul, her being . . . She was a positive person and she wanted her funeral to be a positive event, not to be seen as a loss, but to be thankful for her being when she was here and to rejoice in the good things that God had done, in her, through her and for her. To me, it was a no-brainer, not to have a funeral service. I couldn't think of anything more drab, and, certainly, it would not be respectful to her or reflect her being at all. (Nathan)

Marie was also an active member of a church congregation and did not regard the day of the burning of the deceased's body as critical to any commemoration:

My memories of the time we had together are more important to me than a disposal of remains. I have, I suppose, quite a pragmatic approach to that, because I firmly and truly believe that this physical life is not all there is. (Marie)

Nathan and Marie opted for a direct cremation as it aligned with their views on the inconsequentiality of fate of the dead body.

## Discussion

The resolve of the participants in their rejection of UK cremation funeral norms is as palpable on the page as it was to the interviewers during the interviews. As people who had organised a cremation without an accompanying funeral service in 2017, the 14 people who took part in interviews were at the vanguard of direct cremation in the UK. Common to all was their conviction that they had made the 'right' choice. This conviction was enabled by the introduction of direct cremation as a legitimate and identifiable funeral option by funeral directors. It was further reliant on participants' clear association between their own (or the deceased's) beliefs and values, and the funeral choices they had made. Such conviction and emphasis on consistency confirmed Holloway et al.'s (2013) assertion that a 'good funeral' is one that is in keeping with belief systems, with our findings suggesting that this extends to electing *not* to have a funeral service at all. Interestingly, although direct cremation is marketed on affordability (SunLife, 2020), the increasing cost of funeral services was not a motivating factor for any participant.

Such a strong conviction in having made the 'right' choice was further reinforced by participants' attitude towards the deceased's body, which reflects an ongoing decline in religious ritual associated with the separation of the soul and the body, and the spiritual committal of the deceased person's body to the next life (Davies and Mates, 2005). For all 14 participants, the body was either matter that could be useful to medical science, or else its incineration was inconsequential to any associated commemorative activity. For those who had compromised on their original plan for the body, opting for a direct cremation was in keeping with their (or the deceased's) beliefs regarding minimal formality or 'no fuss' around its disposal (Lesley, Marie, Gaynor and Brian); for others, the decision to have a direct cremation was a consequence of their regard for the utility of the deceased body (Tina, Nathan and Marie).

For all participants, ensuring there was consistency with beliefs and values was a key driving factor in deciding to not have a funeral service, and was underpinned by a wish to retain as much control as possible over the arrangements. This was particularly important in terms of attendance and the content of any commemorative activity, confirming Bailey and Walter's (2016) emphasis on the importance of funeral content (the eulogy) and presence (the configurational eulogy) for organisers. As above, this extends to *not* having a funeral service.

Such a high degree of control over attendance and content, effectively sequestering the cremation and any subsequent commemoration to an invite-only event, contrasts sharply with the conventional cascading and open advertising of a funeral service outlined earlier in the article, and its subsequent communal, public nature (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2019). Moreover, it raises questions as to the function of the contemporary funeral service, as it is this public character that has led to academic consensus that in the 21st century the funeral service's purpose is to serve the psycho-social needs of the attendees (Cullen, 2006; Holloway et al., 2013; O'Rourke et al., 2011; Schafer, 2007). As noted already, such a supposition has come under scrutiny during COVID-19 and in their rapid review Burrell and Selman (2020) found inconclusive evidence that funeral services provided benefit for attendees. Instead, they found that:

the benefit of after-death rituals including funerals depends on the ability of the bereaved to shape those rituals and say goodbye in a way which is meaningful for them, and on whether the funeral demonstrates social support for the bereaved. (Burrell and Selman, 2020: 32)

Our findings concur in part. For all the participants in this study the decision to *not* have a funeral service was meaningful, as it was consistent with their (or the deceased's) beliefs and values and meant that they could retain a high degree of control. However, to opt not to have a funeral service challenges the supposition that funerals are (regarded as) a source of social support or seen as having therapeutic benefit to organisers. Indeed, for some participants, to *not* have a funeral service had psycho-social benefit as it meant they would not have to face people they felt had badly let them and/or the deceased down.

So, what does this mean for UK funerals? Certainly, the question of the extent to which a funeral service is a source of social support mirrors changes to weddings since the 1960s. A move towards smaller, invite-only commemoration reflects trends in contemporary weddings, whereby there has been a separation of the varying components (legal and ritual) and a trend towards smaller sequestered events that emphasise the uniqueness of the people involved (Illouz, 2012). Just as this article has shown with direct cremation, the purpose of this smaller wedding ritual has evolved to recognise and reflect the individuality of the people involved, rather than emphasising the provision of social support or as a method of upholding social cohesion. At a time when weddings have never been freer of cultural norms (Carter and Duncan, 2017), comparable liberation from funeral norms is likely to grow as direct cremation becomes an accepted and legitimate funerary choice and organisers feel empowered to purchase and reject components of funeral services as they see fit, in favour of what is meaningful to the individuals involved.

Crucially, through the rejection of funeral norms and convention, direct cremation challenges the assumption that a public funeral service derives psycho-social benefit for organisers and attendees. A key reason for the declining need for social support from a funeral service is that support can now come from alternative sources, and the need for a public event to mark the death and bring a wide and disconnected network of people together may be no longer needed given the opportunities to commemorate and come together elsewhere, at another time, and online (Walter, 2019). Conversely, opting not to have a funeral and restricting attendance to subsequent invite-only commemoration can serve to mitigate risks of psycho-social harm that can come from the uncertainty of who will attend, and of having to confront particular individuals. In other words, rather than being detrimental, to not have a funeral service may actually be beneficial for the organiser.

Fundamentally, the introduction of direct cremation as a clearly identified and demarcated funerary option serves to legitimise the rejection of funeral norms and represents a disaggregation and sequestration of contemporary UK funerals. This disaggregation divorces the (hidden) disposal of the deceased's body from a simultaneous and communal funeral service, shifting public ritual to commemoration behind closed doors. The establishment and uptake of direct cremation in the UK thus supports Mellor and Shilling's (1993) sequestration thesis, as organisers privatise the funeral through the bypassing of its public components. Aided by a declining importance in the fate of the

deceased's body (Davies and Mates, 2005) – or at least publicly witnessing its committal to the flames – means that the significance of 'saying goodbye' to the bodily remains of the deceased on the day of its incineration is replaced by the potential for cloistered and personalised creativity post-cremation with the ashes (Prendergast et al., 2006).

As to the long-term effects of the impact of direct cremation on funeral ritual(s), we can only speculate. What we do know, however, is that wedding rituals have already gone through profound change in the last 50 years, in terms of their purpose, size, scope, creativity and distinctiveness (Carter and Duncan, 2017). The same is now beginning to occur for funerals and is a trend that can, and will, include *not* having a public funeral service. Writing this article during the pandemic, it is possible to venture that a rethinking, shrinking and disaggregation of funeral services is likely to be accelerated by COVID-19, as public health measures have restricted the size of funeral congregations and, for a period of time in 2020, meant that in some areas of the UK funeral services were not permitted at all (BBC, 2020). Certainly, the most recent statistics indicate that during the pandemic direct cremations have risen in number (SunLife, 2021). However, a critical question as to whether this will be sustained is the extent to which organisers feel that they have control over funeral services, and whether direct cremations during COVID-19 are characterised in the future as an agentic choice or imposed upon organisers.

Importantly, this article shows that direct cremation is much more than an issue of cost and affordability as is typically claimed. The data does not tell us about the experience of not being able to attend a funeral service for would-be attendees however. Do people feel deprived by not being able to attend a physical, public funeral service? Have they lost the (assumed) possible psycho-social benefit of attending, and the potential for social support from others? These questions, and others about the purpose and function of funeral attendance in the 21st century, need further scholarly attention. There is much to be gained too from examining contemporary wedding trends and how these are being mirrored (or not) in contemporary funerals. Our data has shown that it is also an issue of values and beliefs, conviction, consistency, compromises and control.

## Conclusion

This article has drawn on interviews with people who had organised a direct cremation to show that compromise, consistency and control are key driving factors in these funeral arrangements. In rejecting funeral norms and sequestering commemoration, funeral organisers are reflecting trends that have already occurred within contemporary weddings, towards smaller invite-only events that prioritise an individual's beliefs and values. The findings suggest that it is no longer possible to unproblematically assume that funeral services derive psycho-social benefit or social support for organisers and attendees, and that through the establishment and rise of direct cremation we are witnessing the start of the disaggregation and privatisation of the contemporary public funeral ritual. Whether this is accelerated by the events of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures remains to be seen, but certainly there is much more to be learnt about the utility of UK funeral services and attendance in the twenty first century.

## Author's Note

The research question was formulated in collaboration with Dignity Funerals. The content of this report has been written fully independently of the funding agency. Co-author YS of Dignity Funerals facilitated the study by providing necessary data-access (confidentiality observed), but did not participate in the design, analyses or interpretation of the data.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the individuals who completed and returned the surveys and the participants who generously shared their experiences with us in interviews. Thanks too go to the reviewers for their constructive feedback on the early draft of this article.

## Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Dignity Funerals, UK, a national provider of funeral arrangements. We are grateful to Dignity Funerals for funding this project and especially to Simon Cox, Head of Insight and External Affairs of Dignity Funerals, for facilitating this research project.

## ORCID iD

Kate Woodthorpe  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0642-2832>

## References

- Bailey T and Walter T (2016) Funerals against death. *Mortality* 21(2): 149–166.
- BBC (2020) *Coronavirus: Co-op Funeral Chief Criticises Leeds Crematorium Rules*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-52556405> (accessed 7 May 2020).
- Birrell J, Schut H, Stroebe M, et al. (2020) Cremation and grief: Are ways of commemorating the dead related to adjustment over time? *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying* 81(3): 370–392.
- Birrell J and Sutherland F (2016) *Funeral Poverty in Scotland: A Review for Scottish Government*. Edinburgh: Citizens Advice Scotland.
- Burrell A and Selman LE (2020) How do funeral practices impact bereaved relatives' mental health, grief and bereavement? A mixed methods review with implications for Covid-19. *Omega – Journal of Death and Dying*. Epub ahead of print 8 July 2021. DOI: 10.1177/0030222820941296.
- Carter J and Duncan S (2017) Wedding paradoxes: Individualized conformity and the 'perfect day'. *The Sociological Review* 65(1): 3–20.
- Caswell G (2011) Death as a fateful moment? The reflexive individual and Scottish funeral practices. *Sociological Research Online* 16(3): 1–10.
- Competition and Markets Authority (2020) *Funerals Market Study*. Final report. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fdb557e8fa8f54d5733f5a1/Funerals\\_-\\_Final\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fdb557e8fa8f54d5733f5a1/Funerals_-_Final_report.pdf) (accessed 16 January 2021).
- Corden A and Hirst M (2015) *The Meaning of Funeral Poverty*. York: University of York.
- Cremation Society (2019) International Statistics. Available at: <https://www.cremation.org.uk/international-cremation-statistics-2018> (accessed 7 May 2020).
- Cullen LT (2006) *Remember Me. A Lively Tour of the New American Way of Death*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Davies D and Mates LH (eds) (2005) *The Encyclopaedia of Cremation*. Aldershot: Ashgate.



- Day B (2017) Cremation and New Techniques. In: Woodthorpe K (ed.) *Death, Dying and Devolution*. Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath, pp.92–96.
- Elias N (1985) *The Loneliness of the Dying*. London: Continuum.
- Fletcher S and McGowan W (2020a) ‘You despicable beasts’: Dignity funerals and commodified death in the spotlight. *Corporate Watch*, 10 June. Available at: <https://corporatewatch.org/you-despicable-beasts-dignity-funerals-and-commodified-death-in-the-spotlight/> (accessed 16 January 2021).
- Fletcher S and McGowan W (2020b) The state of the UK funeral industry. *Critical Social Policy* 41(2): 249–269.
- Gorer G (1965) *Death, Grief and Mourning*. London: The Cresset Press.
- Harper S (2010) The social agency of dead bodies. *Mortality* 15(4): 308–322.
- Holloway M, Adamson S, Argyrou V, et al. (2013) ‘Funerals aren’t nice but it couldn’t have been nicer’. The makings of a good funeral. *Mortality* 18(1): 30–53.
- Hoy W (2020) Funerals and memorial practices. In: Gu D and Dupre ME (eds) *Encyclopaedia of Gerontology and Population Aging*. Switzerland: Springer Nature.
- Illouz E (2012) *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jacobsen MH (ed.) (2020) *The Age of Spectacular Death*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- James N and Field D (1992) The routinization of hospice: Charisma and bureaucratisation. *Social Science and Medicine* 34(12): 1363–1375.
- Jones R (2020) No frills cremations: How coronavirus is changing funerals in Britain. *The Guardian*, 18 April. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/apr/18/no-frills-cremations-coronavirus-changing-funerals-britain> (accessed 16 January 2021).
- Kellaheer L, Hockey J and Prendergast D (2010) Wandering lines and cul-de-sacs: Trajectories of ashes in the United Kingdom. In: Hockey J, Komaromy C and Woodthorpe K (eds) *The Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.133–147.
- Lawton J (1998) Contemporary hospice care: The sequestration of the unbounded body and ‘dirty dying’. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 20(2): 121–143.
- Mellor PA and Shilling C (1993) Modernity, self-identity and the sequestration of death. *Sociology* 27(3): 411–431.
- Mitford J (1963) *The American Way of Death*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Mitima-Verloop HB, Mooren TTM and Boelen PA (2019) Facilitating grief: An exploration of the function of funerals and rituals in relation to grief reactions. *Death Studies*. Epub ahead of print 11 November 2019. DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2019.1686090.
- Natural Death Centre (2013) The rise of direct cremation: ‘Just pick me up and get it over with’. *More to Death* 1: 9–11.
- O’Rourke T, Spitzberg BH and Hannawa AF (2011) The good funeral: Toward an understanding of funeral participation and satisfactions. *Death Studies* 35(8): 729–750.
- Prendergast D, Hockey J and Kellaheer L (2006) Blowing in the wind? Identity, materiality, and the destinations of human ashes. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12(4): 881–898.
- Royal London (2019) *Change on the Horizon? National Funeral Cost Index Report 2019*. Available at: <https://www.royallondon.com/siteassets/site-docs/funeral-plans/national-funeral-report-2019.pdf> (accessed 11 May 2020).
- Rugg J and Jones S (2019) *Funeral Experts by Experience: What matters to them*. Available at: <https://fullcirclefunerals.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/FINAL-REPORT-Funeral-Experts-by-Experience-1.pdf> (accessed 11 May 2020).
- Schafer C (2007) Post-mortem personalisation: Pastoral power and the New Zealand funeral director. *Mortality* 12(1): 4–21.

- Seale C (1998) *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stanley L and Wise S (2011) The domestication of death: The sequestration thesis and domestic configuration. *Sociology* 45(6): 947–962.
- SunLife (2020) *Cost of Dying Report*. Available at: <https://www.sunlife.co.uk/funeral-costs/> (accessed 7 May 2020).
- SunLife (2021) *Cost of Dying Report*. Available at: <https://www.sunlife.co.uk/siteassets/documents/cost-of-dying/cost-of-dying-report-2021.pdf/> (accessed 16 January 2021).
- Turner N and Caswell G (2020) A relative absence: Exploring professional experiences of funerals without mourners. *Omega – Journal of Death and Dying*. Epub ahead of print 16 September 2020. DOI: 10.1177/0030222820959960.
- Walter T (2007) Three ways to arrange a funeral: Mortuary variation in the modern west. *Mortality* 10(3): 173–192.
- Walter T (2017) Bodies and ceremonies: Is the UK funeral industry still fit for purpose? *Mortality* 22(3): 194–208.
- Walter T (2019) The pervasive dead. *Mortality* 24(4): 389–404.
- Woodthorpe K (2017) Family and funerals: Taking a relational perspective. *Death Studies* 41(9): 592–601.
- Woodthorpe K and Rumble H (2016) Funerals and families: Locating death as a relational issue. *The British Journal of Sociology* 67(2): 242–259.

Kate Woodthorpe is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Bath. Over the last two decades she has conducted funded research on funeral practices and costs, cemetery usage and mortuary work. A leading academic in this area, she has published extensively and advised UK Government on funeral policy for many years.

Hannah Rumble is a long-serving research fellow at the Centre for Death and Society, University of Bath. She is currently researching the experience and outcomes of participation by bereaved people at Inquests and in the Coronial process more generally, with colleagues at the Institute for Crime and Justice Policy research, Birkbeck, University of London. Dr Rumble sits on the Editorial Board of the journal *Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying* and is an Associate of the Centre for Death and Life Studies, Durham University.

Anne Corden is a former honorary research fellow at the University of York.

John Birrell is an independent bereavement consultant and trainer based in Perth, Scotland, and is a visiting research fellow at the Centre for Death and Society. He is a member of the International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement.

Henk Schut is a clinical psychologist and Associate Professor of Clinical and Health Psychology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His research interests cover processes of coping with loss and the efficacy of bereavement care and grief therapy. Henk works as a trainer for professionals dealing with bereaved people and supervises post-academic clinical psychologists in research projects. He is co-author of scientific and professional articles and books on grief, bereavement and death (e.g. *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice* (2009), with Maggie Stroebe, Wolfgang Stroebe and Bob Hansson and *Complicated Grief: Scientific Foundations for Health Care Professionals* (2012)), with Maggie Stroebe and Jan van den Bout.

Margaret Stroebe is Professor Emerita (Utrecht & Groningen Universities, NL). She has long specialised in the bereavement research field. With Henk Schut she developed the Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement. Her books include *Bereavement in Later Life* with Robert Hansson and the *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice*, with Robert Hansson, Henk Schut and Wolfgang Stroebe. She edited *Complicated Grief: Scientific Foundations for Health Care Professionals* with Henk Schut and Jan van den Bout. Her honours include an Honorary Doctorate (University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium), Scientific Research Award (ADEC, USA) and the title: Officer of the Order of Orange Nassau (NL).

Cate Newsom is a mixed methods researcher currently employed in the private sector. She has a PhD in clinical psychology from Utrecht University, a Master's in medical anthropology from University of Amsterdam and film degrees with a focus on the ethnographic documentary from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts / GSAS and Yale University.

Yvette Smith has managed a wide range of research projects within the commercial sector. At Dignity, Yvette shaped and coordinated research looking at quality and standards in the funeral sector and crematoria. Yvette's current work for the Greater London Authority involves opinion research with Londoners.

**Date submitted** May 2020

**Date accepted** June 2021