



Mortality

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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cmrt20>

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To cite this article: Jennifer Riley, Vikki Entwistle, Arnar Arnason, Louise Locock, Rebecca Crozier, Paolo Maccagno & Abi Pattenden (20 Jun 2023): Why does funeral attendance matter? Revisiting 'configurational eulogies' in light of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, *Mortality*, DOI: [10.1080/13576275.2023.2225029](https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2023.2225029)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2023.2225029>



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Published online: 20 Jun 2023.



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Why does funeral attendance matter? Revisiting ‘configurational eulogies’ in light of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK

Jennifer Riley ^a, Vikki Entwistle ^b, Arnar Arnason ^c, Louise Locock ^d,
Rebecca Crozier ^e, Paolo Maccagno ^c and Abi Pattenden ^f

^aSchool of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK; ^bHealth Services Research Unit and School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK; ^cSchool of Social Science, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK; ^dHealth Services Research Unit, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK; ^eSchool of Geosciences, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK; ^fFreeman Brothers Funeral Directors, Sussex, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper uses disruption to norms of funeral attendance experienced in the UK during the COVID–19 pandemic as a lens to illuminate why and how funeral attendance can matter. It draws on an extensive qualitative dataset, gathered through semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of 68 individuals who were bereaved and/or worked or volunteered in death care during the COVID–19 pandemic. It first examines interviewees’ concerns about the insufficiency of funerals when gatherings were restricted. Second, it depicts the range of additional and alternative ways people found to pay tribute to the deceased and to offer and seek support when conventional funeral attendance was limited. Third, it explains why, for some, the smaller funerals necessitated by pandemic restrictions were welcome experiences. These findings support a development of Bailey and Walter’s influential theorising concerning ‘configurational eulogies’: while a ‘well-attended’ funeral still matters to many, mourners contribute to configurational eulogies through a diverse and evolving range of activities. The shifts in funeral gatherings and activities prompted by the COVID–19 pandemic can be understood as part of dynamic processes of reconfiguring eulogistic repertoires in changing social contexts.

KEYWORDS

Funerals; COVID-19 pandemic; eulogies; United Kingdom; funeral attendance

Introduction

The COVID–19 pandemic, and measures introduced to reduce COVID–19 transmission, had profound consequences for UK funerals and other death rites. As Conway frames it, a sudden shift took place from funerals being ‘based more on social, religious and cultural customs than formal rules of law’ to being framed by state intervention and subjected to restrictions for the sake of public health (Conway, 2020, p. 3). Between March 2020 and March 2022, limitations were placed on the number of people permitted to gather in

CONTACT Jennifer Riley  jennifer.riley@abdn.ac.uk  School of Divinity, History, Philosophy and Art History, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

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person for funerals. The number varied considerably, ranging from 5 to 200 at different times, and depending on location and specific organisational policies. Gatherings were also subject to varied and changeable conditions, including: social distancing between households/social 'bubbles'; being outdoors; Lateral Flow Device testing; vaccination status; and submitting contact details for 'Track and Trace'. Wakes and travel were also variously prohibited and limited. Some who might have attended funerals in person during these times were unable to because they were unwell, self-isolating, shielding, or otherwise concerned about infection. There was a widely-shared sense that these restrictions were challenging and difficult, even as many also understood the public health motivations behind them – not least those who had lost a loved-one to COVID-19 (Bear et al., 2020, p. 7). The sudden and dramatic curtailment of funeral attendance invited unfamiliar questions about which and how many people should and could attend, and how.

This paper contributes to the literature by using the COVID-19 pandemic as a lens through which to interrogate why funeral attendance matters, and what 'good' funeral attendance looks like, in the UK today. It explores what people felt was lost and gained when familiar funerary formats and norms were disrupted. It draws on an extensive dataset of qualitative interviews conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic with a broad range of individuals, including bereaved family and friends; funeral directors; and officiants. Reflecting the diversity of the UK population, it offers new illustrations of how practices and evaluative judgements shifted. It supports an ongoing need for recognition, in policy and practice, of the plurality and changeability of beliefs and practices associated with 'good' funerals (as emphasised in existing literature examining funeral provision in different religious, cultural and socioeconomic contexts). Our analysis particularly brings findings into fruitful conversation with Bailey and Walter's (2016) influential theorising regarding 'configurational eulogies', suggesting both expansion and refinement of their conclusions by looking beyond in-person funeral attendance to other ways in which mourners compose tributes to the deceased.

The first section of findings shows that many interviewees were concerned that funerals with restricted congregations did not adequately reflect the deceased or facilitate the exchange of support. This concurs with Bailey and Walter's core argument that, for many, the congregation is 'crucial' for a good funeral (2016, p. 163). Bailey and Walter's emphasis upon authenticity illuminates the fact that, for some, these small funerals were nevertheless meaningful provided certain individuals who reflected or represented core aspects of the deceased's relational identity could be present (2016, pp. 158–159, p. 163). The creative development of new and alternative activities through which people sought to mark people's deaths in place of (or, in some cases, in addition to) attending a funeral service are set out in the second section of the findings. These provide reason to expand upon Bailey and Walter's theorising, looking beyond the funeral service for congregational eulogies. Finally, focussing upon those interviewees who described positive aspects of smaller funerals, we highlight the importance of recognising that, for some, large funerals may be difficult, where smaller funerals can provide both meaningful reflections of the deceased and support for the bereaved. While we do not think these findings are indicative of a dramatic approaching shift towards smaller, invitation-only funerals, they do reinforce the importance of acknowledging continued variation and development in what represents 'good funeral attendance' in the contemporary UK, and circumstances which might affect the extent to which this can be realised.

Background and literature

Death practitioners and scholars have long been concerned with the 'good funeral'. In 'Funerals – and How to Improve Them', Walter (1990) emphasised the socially-constructed nature of death rites and funeral traditions, highlighting the power people hold to challenge the forms they take. In a later chapter, 'Death and Bereavement Across Cultures', he argued that amid secularisation it is no longer tradition which holds value, but integrity: customs and inherited norms will help build a 'good' funeral only insofar as they are seen to authentically reflect the deceased's identity or wishes (Walter, 1996, pp. 170–176, 183). Hoy (2013) also emphasises the complexity of funerals, which draw upon and reflect myriad cultural values, symbols and traditions, variously combined, refined and transformed by individuals in diverse contexts (pp. 4–5, 10, 13–16. See also Parkes, 1996, p. 233). Within that complexity, Hoy posits five common elements of death rituals across time and locations, including 'gathered community': funeral ritual in its many and diverse forms is typically social (2013, pp. 4–5).

Holloway et al. (2013) also found that in the early 21st century, UK funerals might quite commonly draw on religious traditions and specific beliefs despite not being allied to any formal religious or philosophical belief system. To be 'good' the resulting funeral must be meaningful – but Holloway et al stress that such meaning is sought and created, rather than simply adopted from 'handed-down beliefs' (p. 50). Like Hoy, they note the 'steady expansion of the types of funeral and options available' (Holloway et al., 2013, p. 30) from which unique, meaningful funerals can be constructed. That death rituals are changed and given new formats through agency and creativity – whether constructed from available 'scripts' or 'options', or generated anew where such 'scripts' do not work or are unavailable – is a significant theme in existing literature.

The 'good funeral' is also often allied to the purposes such rites are understood to fulfil. These purposes might be variously categorised and subdivided but include so-called 'social' functions. Durkheim's (1915) work provides an important foundation here, illustrating the significance of ritual for community integration, and the role of funerary ritual in helping society rebound following death and loss. Davies draws upon Durkheim in 'Death, Ritual and Belief' in which he proposes the idiom 'words against death' to 'encapsulate a theory which views death rites as an adaptation to the fact of death' across human societies and thus for individuals (2017, p. 4).

The premise that funerals perform social functions underpins Bailey and Walter's widely-cited paper 'Funerals Against Death' (2016), whose title evokes Davies' idiom. Arguing that 'if the funeral is to work as a social rite against death, it must work for all, not just for the closely bereaved', Bailey and Walter studied 'the congregation rather than the principal mourners' (2016, p. 151, p. 149). They drew on extensive qualitative data from a UK Mass Observation study, but acknowledge that the sample consisted predominantly of older, female, middle-class, white funeral-goers in south east England, which meant that the funerals captured typically consisted of a 'service or ceremony in [a] chapel/hall [or] church' led by 'a church minister' or 'a celebrant independent of any religious organisation', increasingly popular 'life-centred' funerals significant among them (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 154).

Consistent with much of the broader literature, Bailey and Walter argue that a good funeral will 'confront death with hope', a multifaceted purpose which can entail bringing

'comfort to the grieving', proclaiming or presenting religious and other forms of meaning in death, and 'celebrat[ing] the deceased's life' and the 'human values' it embodied (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 154). They note mourners' perceptions that the value of attendance lies in 'confirming the value of the deceased [and] sustain[ing] other mourners' (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 163). Linking these sustaining and celebrating functions, they note that both 'close family' and 'other mourners' feel 'supported by the congregation' (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 163). They propose two forms of eulogy which both contribute to these interrelated ends: spoken and configurational. Their participants consistently highlighted the importance of spoken eulogies' accuracy, authenticity and performance: the most powerful eulogies were accurate portrayals, delivered bravely and without succumbing to emotionality by someone who knew the deceased well (Bailey & Walter, 2016, pp. 155–161). The 'configurational eulogy' describes how the funeral congregation becomes a representation:

of the deceased person's affections, interests and activities [and] can combine to represent the deceased's life [...] [t]hese constellations of people were experienced by correspondents as a kind of configurational eulogy to the person who had died, highlighting the **relational** aspects of the deceased person's identity rather than, or in addition to, the biographical. Mourners saw the congregation as a tribute to the value of the life that was being commemorated. (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 162 – emphasis original)

A configurational eulogy operates both qualitatively (through who was there) and quantitatively (through how many were there). For many respondents:

A large attendance at a funeral was considered [...] one of the most important factors in a 'good' funeral precisely because it was taken to signify the value of the one who had died [...] By the same token, a poor attendance could lead to a 'bad' funeral. (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 162)

Qualitatively, as for the spoken eulogy, an effective configurational eulogy was also bound up with authenticity:

not only mourners' roles in relationship to the deceased person which constitute[d] a 'good' attendance, but their familiarity with the deceased person, and their authenticity as mourners whose affirmation of the deceased person's value can be taken to be reliable. (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 163)

Correspondingly, some participants were sheepish about attending funerals at which their presence was or might not be 'merited' (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 163). Bailey and Walter suggest these findings show that 'the funeral "audience", the congregation, is crucial' for a good funeral (2016, p. 151) and confirm 'the power of collective assembly in the face of death' (p. 163). However, their conclusion briefly alludes to ways in which mourners might contribute to a configurational eulogy beyond gathering in person for a funeral, namely: 'writing condolence letters and in books of remembrance, by talking to the family at the post-funeral tea' (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 164).

Bailey and Walter's paper has been influential, both in its original UK context (Woodthorpe, 2017; Woodthorpe et al., 2021) and internationally, in Europe (Schmidt, 2021) New Zealand (Long et al., 2022) Africa (Kgatle & Segalo, 2021) and Latin America (Dantas et al., 2020) underlining the broad resonance of both its functional premises (Frost, 2018; Gould et al., 2021; Knopke, 2020; Nansen et al., 2021; Prickett & Timmermans,

2022; Rennard et al., 2019) and its findings (Bruin-Mollenhorst, 2020; Turner & Caswell, 2020). Others have explored 'configurational eulogies' at funerals with few or no attendees (Caswell, 2021; Caswell & O'Connor, 2019; Turner & Caswell, 2020; Yardley & Rolph, 2020). While some scholars contest the idea that leaving a death unmarked, with no opportunity to form a configurational eulogy at somebody's funeral, should not always be considered a 'major societal wrong' (Yardley & Rolph, 2020) they also typically recognise that such scenarios sit at odds with majority views.

Recently, Woodthorpe et al. (2021) have suggested that the growing popularity of Direct Cremation in the UK challenges what they present as the widespread scholarly 'assumption that public rituals have psycho-social benefit for organisers and attendees' (p. 1, 13– see also Burrell & Selman, 2020). Indeed, they 'venture' that funerals will continue to 'shrink' following the COVID–19 pandemic (Woodthorpe et al., 2021, p. 14). Woodthorpe et al highlight, however, that direct cremations are often related to a collective gathering, albeit one held at a different time and location to the cremation itself. 'Commemorative events' may still take place, but primary mourners take greater control over their timing, nature and attendance (Woodthorpe et al., 2021, p. 11). As such, while Woodthorpe et al diagnose a 'waning need for social support' this is specifically allied to 'public, communal funeral services', and not to other forms of collective gathering or activity following someone's death. Direct cremation need not preclude people's ability to congregate and speak in tribute to the deceased. Importantly, as Woodthorpe et al note, their 'data does not tell us about the experience of not being able to attend [...] for would-be attendees' (2021, p. 14).

The COVID–19 pandemic, which brought with it sudden and dramatic limitations on how many people could gather for funerals in the UK, offers a fresh, unique opportunity to critically evaluate the importance of attendance at such rites by examining people's experiences, practical responses and reflections when norms were disrupted.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews concerning funerals during the COVID–19 pandemic in the UK were conducted with a diverse sample of 68 individuals between April 2021 and April 2022. The study views funeral attendance from multiple perspectives, considering its importance for or effects upon: the deceased; funeral professionals; and mourners, both 'primary mourners' (to borrow Bailey and Walter's term) and the 'broader' circle of mourners. Table 1 summarises the sample demographics.

Ethical approval was granted by the [committee name removed for blind review]. We shared calls for participants via: local television; an online newspaper; a university press release; and social media (Twitter; Facebook). We also approached relevant organisations via email, online contact forms and post, inviting people to express interest in participating in an interview by replying to these communications. Some professional participants helped to identify and share study information with further potential interviewees. We monitored the emerging sample for multiple demographic characteristics – gender, age, nation, Index of Multiple Deprivation (defined by postcode), religion and ethnicity – identifying areas where purposeful recruitment might bolster representation or balance. Those who expressed interest were sent participant information and a consent form and offered an opportunity to discuss the study before deciding whether to take part.

Table 1. Sample demographics at time of interview.

Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%) of sample (/68)
RECRUITMENT CATEGORY*		
Bereaved	39	
Funeral directors	19	
Celebrants and officiants	21	
GENDER		
Male	46	67.6
Female	22	32.4
Other/prefer not to say	0	-
Not reported	0	-
ETHNICITY		
White	40	59
Mixed	1	1.5
Black/Black British	2	2.9
Asian/Asian British	7	1.3
Not reported	18	26.5
DEPRIVATION DECILE**		
1 (most deprived)	5	7.4
2	5	7.4
3	6	8.8
4	5	7.4
5	5	7.4
6	4	5.9
7	5	7.4
8	8	11.8
9	11	16.2
10 (least deprived)	9	13.2
Not reported	5	7.4
NATION		
England	39	57.4
Scotland	23	33.8
Wales	1	1.5
Northern Ireland	5	7.4
Not reported	0	-
AGE		
18–30	4	5.9
31–45	12	17.6
46–60	34	50
61–75	14	2.6
76+	1	1.5
Not reported	3	4.4

* Some participants fell into multiple categories.

**Where 1 indicates the most deprived, or least well off, areas, as determined by government statistical analyses based on postcode.

Interviews took place online or by telephone. We received informed consent verbally (recorded) or in writing (by email).

This paper incorporates within ‘funerals’ diverse formal or semi-formal ceremonies, practices and rituals which typically see people physically gathering together following someone’s death. In this study, these rites and ceremonies stemmed from a variety of religious (e.g. Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Zoroastrian) and cultural (e.g. Northern Irish, Scottish highland, African-Caribbean).

Four researchers conducted the interviews. After broad opening questions, they followed participants’ conversational leads while covering key topics, including: interviewees’ experiences of funerals during the pandemic; what they found challenging about these funerals; and what made a funeral ‘good’ or otherwise. Interviewers wrote

fieldnotes, summarising and noting key impressions from each interview, and capturing any information provided 'off tape'. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by an external company, then checked for accuracy and anonymised by a member of the research team. For this paper, we have removed names and identifying personal details, in favour of pseudonyms.

The wider research team reflected upon and discussed selected transcripts and fieldnotes at weekly meetings, elaborating and building upon preliminary analyses. One team member was a working funeral director, whose practitioner perspective enabled the team to sense-check emerging ideas. Several team members also drew reflexively on personal experience of UK funerals both before and during the pandemic. Qualitative analysis was supported by thematic coding in NVivo12. Four researchers generated initial codes inductively from a diverse sample of fieldnotes and interview transcripts from all three participant groups. Multiple researchers trialled these codes on further transcripts and fieldnotes, noting difficulties or concerns, and comparing their applications to help refine the code list. This testing sequence was used three times before finalising a list of 43 codes grouped under 5 headings, and an accompanying rubric used across the dataset. Several codes provided instructive starting points for the analyses in this paper: Care, Dignity and Respect in funerals; Choice and personalisation in funerals; Doing things differently on account of COVID-19; Funeral purposes; Funeral services; Good funerals; Memorialising; Online funeral services; Other practices of mourning/condolence; Pandemic restrictions and their impact(s); Postponing. Coding reports for each of these were read closely by team members, and additional sub-coding performed in places.

Why funeral attendance matters

Interviewees had a lot to say about funeral attendance – both why it was important, and why the COVID-19 pandemic limitations were difficult. [Table 2](#) summarises the themes raised, with supporting data.

Attendance as fitting tribute

Precisely what constituted a 'well-attended' funeral varied considerably. Many interviewees felt that attendance limitations had meant that the funerals they had experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic were not well-attended. Often, 'well-attended' was connected to 'large', though precisely what constituted a large funeral also varied. Closely echoing Bailey and Walter's theorising in *Funerals Against Death* (2016, pp. 162–163), interviewees also considered well-attended funerals fitting tributes to the deceased, and often judged the small and restricted funerals experienced during the pandemic to be inadequate representations of the deceased's value and relational identity. Such sentiments lay behind funeral director Catriona's description of someone who deserved 'a full funeral' but did not 'g[et] what he deserved in the way of a send-off' and Cynthia's assertion that having just 20 present at her father's funeral was an 'insult' to him. Others recalled wistfully well-attended funerals they had experienced in the past: for example, funeral director Joseph suggested that 'in normal times [some funerals] would have 300 people' present.

Table 2. Reasons why interviewees felt attending a funeral mattered.

Attending A Funeral Matters Because	Illustrative Quotes
A well-attended funeral is seen as a fitting tribute to the deceased	<p>Cynthia – ‘[H]aving twenty people at a funeral was an insult to my dad and he deserved so much more [. . .] He knows everybody, everybody’ll want to be there’.</p> <p>Funeral director Catriona – ‘[H]e was such a great guy and he’d had such an interesting life and not to have had a proper [. . .] full funeral, it was tough [. . .] I don’t think he got what he deserved in the way of a send-off’.</p> <p>Christian minister Sandra – ‘[T]here were people who had been very well known and very popular in life and outside of COVID times they would probably have had a funeral that would’ve been attended in person by many, many people, in part that’s because it’s a reflection of how many people would feel they wanted to say goodbye in part a function of I suppose networking and where you work, but also in part reflecting in a way that’s [. . .] a meaningful reflection of who they were in life’.</p>
The presence or absence of particular people can have social and/or religious significance	<p>Zara – ‘My husband and two sons couldn’t come to [the interment], quite last minute [. . .] That was tough; not having them there for that but them being at the funeral was hugely important for them as well’.</p> <p>Hindu celebrant Harshan – ‘The prayers are made by close members of the family. That would be the last respect [. . .] All relations, particularly blood relations [. . .] are very important [. . .] The presence of children is absolutely important because we are talking about the continuity of that cycle, the immortality of that life [. . .] your genetic code [. . .] That’s why the presence of close family members is important’.</p> <p>Celebrant Mary – ‘[The funeral] wasn’t particularly fitting because his friends should have been there’.</p>
Being excluded from attending can feel wrong and be harmful	<p>Imam Imran – ‘[T]hat’s where all the mental health [concerns] [. . .] come in, where people cannot attend’.</p> <p>Christian minister Barbara – ‘[T]he lady who died had 11 children but we’d only let 10 of them into the cemetery so the other one had to wait outside and watch as best they could through the gates [. . .] [I don’t know] what that does to families at a time of intense grief’.</p>
It allows mourners to interact with one another and share memories (which can be experienced as therapeutic)	<p>Esther – ‘I think there was over 100 people [viewing the live stream of my grandad’s funeral] [and] it would have been a really nice thing to kind of meet all of them and meet probably a lot of people that I hadn’t met before and you know obviously that didn’t happen, that is the bit that I feel sad that I missed out on. [At my grandmother’s funeral] I got a lot of closure [from] being able to speak to [her] friends [. . .] after the funeral’.</p> <p>Erica – ‘Usually people would have been in the house, you’d be providing food and drinks to people, memories would be coming up, but that couldn’t happen. [At other funerals,] because of your memories and your family and your friends and . . . you do move on quicker [. . .] You’re celebrating their life and talking about them and you remember your memories, and that obviously didn’t happen’.</p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Attending A Funeral Matters Because	Illustrative Quotes
Funeral gatherings are opportunities for giving and receiving support	<p>Funeral director Robert – ‘[When funeral attendance is limited, n]obody gets the opportunity to stand shoulder to shoulder with you, nobody gets to give you the support, to remember together’.</p> <p>Hindu celebrant Zeshan – ‘[Normally,] people are always around [. . .] being supportive of the family and even after the funeral [. . .] a continuous process of getting in touch with them, asking them if they need anything’.</p> <p>Funeral director Bilal – ‘[A]s a Muslim, we have an expectation that when we die we will get a strong community to pray for us when we pass’</p>
It bestows merit or benefit upon the attendee and/or the deceased	<p>Yasmin – ‘[In Islam] you are rewarded for every funeral you attend and every funeral prayer you attend’.</p> <p>Imam Imran – ‘[T]he prophetic saying is that, ‘One who attends the funeral prayer gets a reward as well as one who attends a burial as well gets a reward’.</p>

Interviewees’ reflections can be further illuminated by Bailey and Walter’s suggestions regarding the ways in which a congregation – and particularly specific members of it – can qualitatively contribute to a funeral (2016, p. 163). Amid COVID–19 restrictions, the presence or absence of certain individuals took on enhanced significance. On the one hand, it was considered particularly distressing when certain people could not be present, and the congregation could not therefore reflect the deceased’s ‘affections, interests and activities’ and relationships fully or satisfactorily (2016, p. 162). For example, Deborah’s mother’s funeral had just five people in attendance. While those five people represented many of her mother’s closest family and friends, she said it nevertheless ‘felt so wrong’ because key individuals were missing: ‘[m]y sister should have been there, [Mum’s] brother should have been there’. Strict limitations were also often accompanied by unpleasant decisions about which significant individuals would not be able to attend in person. Several professional interviewees recognised how difficult the unfamiliar task of allocating funeral ‘invitations’ had been. Celebrant Richard described deciding ‘who you invite and therefore [who] you don’t’ as ‘a real burden’ and ‘really troublesome’. Similarly, Christian minister Brenda said it had been ‘very hard’ on those organising funerals ‘because they’ve had to decide who counts and who doesn’t, and if you have several grandchildren and you’ve got a limit [. . .] how do you decide, because implicitly that’s what we’re saying isn’t it, “You’re not important enough to come”’.

On the other hand, while by no means true for all, some participants found solace when particular individuals could be physically present despite attendance limits. For example, while Zara found a 20-person limit for her mother’s funeral very difficult, she was reassured by her sense that ‘Mum would have been happy with just that, given the circumstances’ because ‘even though it was really small, everyone that my mum would have needed to be there was there’. Some mourners specifically incorporated ‘representatives’ of the deceased’s interests and networks into small physical pandemic funeral gatherings. For example, Christine felt her father:

would have liked that we managed to [. . .] get representatives of most parts of his life, shall we say? [. . .] Because we had friends, we had relatives, we had one of my cousins [. . .] I felt

that [his friends] should be there because they were the people who [...] towards the end of his life [...] really supported him.

Both Zara and Esther were reassured that having particular people physically present meant their relatives' funerals were still meaningful 'given the circumstances'. They felt that these small in-person congregations nevertheless sufficed to give a suitably authentic depiction of the deceased's relationships, affections, interests and activities (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 162).

Sharing memories and support

Bailey and Walter draw attention to the giving and receiving of 'comfort to the grieving' and 'sustaining other mourners' as markers of a good funeral service (2016, pp. 151, 154, 163). Interviewees felt that pandemic limitations detracted from funerals' capacity to facilitate these comforting, sustaining functions, for many were denied opportunities to interact with other mourners and share memories. Thus funeral director Robert described people being unable to 'stand shoulder to shoulder' and 'remember together'. Humanist celebrant Rosa referred to 'the family' feeling more supported when 'the wider community is there for them', and noted that restrictions on gathering and interaction limited such demonstrations of support. Esther and Erica missed opportunities to meet with other mourners and find 'closure' in exchanging stories and memories. Hindu celebrant Zeshan spoke richly about the ways in which Hindu communities ordinarily show support to the bereaved amid a familiar sequence of rituals:

[F]amilies begin to go to the home of the deceased, just to show that here we are [...] here to grieve with you [and] to support you if you need anything from us, you let us know and we'll be here for you [...] if you need me to bring some food [...] if you need anything which we can provide in terms of your physical wellbeing, then we are here to support [you]. [...] [P]eople are always around [...] being supportive of the family and even after the funeral [...] a continuous process of getting in touch with them, asking them if they need anything [...] this collectivist behaviour is very much evident.

He had found it very difficult that these forms of 'care' were 'absolutely not there' on account of limitations on household mixing. This concern was echoed by other study participants from a range of backgrounds who would have expected, under normal circumstances, to find themselves supported by a group or community of people when bereaved.

By way of compensating for funerals which they felt had not enabled mourners to gather, support one another, and pay tribute to the deceased, some participants described plans to host larger memorial gatherings when pandemic restrictions were lifted. For example, Meghan, who lost both her mother and sister during the pandemic, planned a celebratory gathering to give them the well-attended send-off they 'deserved', and to offer friends and relatives an opportunity to share memories:

We're going to do a joint celebration of life next year [...] all [their] friends will come and it will be about happiness [...] my mum just wasn't given the funeral she deserved and [my sister] didn't get the send-off that she deserved. It was only 20 people there, so we're going to do the joint celebration of life for them both [...] Just because it has to happen, I need to know it's going to happen, and I need 70 more people to be able to come. They have to come, they

have to. Because they deserve their- we just want to share the memories [...] no one got to share the memories.

Unfortunately, others reported that plans to host postponed events were foiled by continued pandemic restrictions. Funeral director Samantha described one family:

[who said] 'We will have a night in celebration of her 50th [birthday] and we will raise money for Marie Curie. We will celebrate her life and the large numbers that would have been at her funeral will get the occasion to meet, to talk about her and give a celebration of her life'. Sadly, November came, December came, and there was no acknowledgement in the true sense.

Alternative and additional configurational eulogies

As noted above, the idea that funerals are constructed in conversation with cultural traditions is significant in death studies literature. While much of this literature concerns innovations made in response to perceived inadequacies, inauthenticity or insufficiency of usual 'options', exploring the alternative and additional ways people found of marking people's deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic serves to remind us that finding expected ritual formats curtailed or unavailable can also stimulate creativity. We heard about numerous alternative and additional gatherings and activities, some of which represented the revival and adaptation of relatively old traditions.

Gathering outside

Planning a subsequent memorial event was one of several activities which interviewees presented as alternatives to, or compensation for, the small funerals hosted amid COVID-19 restrictions. Several other activities relied upon the fact that gathering outside was typically subject to fewer constraints than gathering indoors. These were often linked to the transportation of the deceased to the place of burial or cremation. Christine, for example, appreciated the way that people gathered outside her father's house before his funeral. '[They] were all there [...] it was lovely. There was actually loads of people there'. This allowed her to feel she had given her father a 'good send-off despite the circumstances'. Funeral director Shirley also described making arrangements such that:

[T]he hearse would pull up outside the house and all the street both sides, everybody who wanted to pay their respects (which was usually 40 or 50 or 60 people) would come over and we would park there for half an hour, so that people could come and see the coffin with the flowers and pay their respects.

Many interviewees had appreciated seeing people lining the routes taken by hearses and funerary corteges, interpreting this as adding to the value of the funeral, and particularly to the numbers paying tribute to the deceased. Some presented this as a 'renewed tradition' brought 'back into favour' by the COVID-19 pandemic. They observed strangers stopping, bowing or removing hats as hearses passed, adding expressions of respect and support without necessarily knowing who the funeral was for. More specifically though, there was apparently renewed interest in planning hearses' routes, and pre-advertising them so that people who knew the deceased

would know to come outside to witness their passing. To some extent, these initiatives concur with Hoy's analysis of funeral processions as reflecting the deceased's identity with 'stops along the processional route [...] at places of significance for the deceased [...] that] communicate a message that marries death to life as the corpse (death) stops at locations of significance (life)' (2013, p. 116). For example, as celebrant Edith explained:

[Y]ou would go past the places that had been significant to the deceased person: past where they lived, past where they worked [...] [P]eople felt very comforted by that, and of course the older traditions of standing at the side of the road respectfully as a hearse passed, that took on much more significance and the bereaved took a lot of comfort from that.

Additionally, however, we identified an emphasis on planning routes to enable mourners who might have wanted but been unable to attend a particular funeral ceremony to be somehow present and seen along the journey to it. This subtly different framing elevates the needs of the bereaved to mark someone's passing, and perhaps of the principal mourners to see their support, albeit often alongside the reflection of elements of the deceased's life in the locations chosen. For example:

[W]e made a route that could go past [my wife's] workplace so that people could come out socially distanced on the pavement [...] I think it's something that traditionally used to be done quite a lot [...] and Covid's brought it immediately back into favour. - Kevin

[My brother] would have had a lot of people wanting to go to his funeral, so they actually did a little sort of parade through the village with the hearse, so there was a couple of hundred people [...] that meant that a lot of people were able to come. - Christopher

Participants often presented outside gatherings as direct alternatives to pre-pandemic attendance at a funeral, and consistently ascribed positive significance to the number of people gathering along funeral routes. Christian minister Sandra described the funeral of someone 'so well-known and so loved and cherished [that] people lined the streets because they knew they couldn't come to the chapel'. Kevin suggested it was a 'mark of [my wife] as a person' that so many people travelled to gather outside in lieu of being able to attend her funeral. Funeral director Robert thought there was something 'really very special' about friends and neighbours, who would otherwise have gone to the church or crematorium, standing outside and clapping.

People's actions in gathering outside were consistently and clearly interpreted, as funeral director Donna put it, as intended 'to show their respect'. They were also widely appreciated. Even Cynthia, who was initially sceptical about arranging to enable people to pay respects outside, took comfort from the 'line up' which preceded her father's funeral:

I'm going to be honest with you, I thought [...] having line-ups in the street was a little bit tacky [...] He's not Princess Diana and I don't want folk cheering and that in the street. I hate that idea. But on the day, folk were taking off their hats and bowing at the car and stuff like that and it was just so comforting.

Some people also developed outdoor alternatives to the wakes or social receptions following a burial or cremation. For example, funeral director Shirley (also quoted

above) described how in communities of African-Caribbean origin, post burial receptions were:

done in people's cars. They still met up, but they just didn't go in the house [...] People would still bring food; everyone would be fed. [...] We couldn't meet in somebody's house, but [...] we would still have our celebration.

Attendance at online and hybrid funerals

In a similar way, participants also drew attention to the number of people engaging with funeral live-streams and recordings. While precisely what constituted a 'large' or 'good' number of viewers varied significantly (associated with reports of 40 to 3000 people) many participants were pleased where they felt that a funeral had been well-viewed. For example, Josephine noted that her husband's service 'had over 500 views [...] [So] I know it was very gratefully received'. Similarly, Calum explained that his mother's funeral recording 'was really good quality and I know by the views that [...] it was being well viewed on-line at the time, and then viewed afterwards'. Some interviewees interpreted a well-attended online funeral as a demonstration of support: funeral director Shirley explained that 'you could also see that the family had lots of support because there were so many people logged on'. Hindu celebrant Zeshan also described the sense of community that could be created when those joining a funeral online were able to both watch and, more actively, contribute by sharing comments and using 'chat' functions:

this facility of [having] the camera in the [...] crematorium [was] useful in the sense that [...] the community was there. [...] [Once there were] more than 300 people who were watching online and [...] making their presence felt and passing on messages.

We have written elsewhere about people's experiences and evaluations of 'hybrid' funerals, including the quality of online participation (Riley, Entwistle, Arnason, Crozier, et al., 2023; Riley, Entwistle, Arnason, Locock, et al., 2023). Although online engagement was often regarded as imperfect, participants widely recognised that joining online was better than being unable to engage with someone's funeral at all on account of pandemic restrictions. Some who would have been unable to travel to a funeral in normal circumstances because of illness, frailty or distance, were able to attend online via a livestream. Thus, some interviewees noted that some hybrid funerals hosted during the pandemic were witnessed by more people than would have been the case had the funeral taken place under 'normal' circumstances, and not been hybridised. Others described attending funerals online which they would have hesitated to attend in person, concerned their attendance was perhaps not 'merited'. This invites us to recognise that hybrid formats can not only reconfigure the quantity of people who might attend a funeral, but also invite new questions about the authenticity of attendance, and the circumstances in which people are welcomed, or feel able, to attend online or in person where both options are possible.

Condolence messages, tributes, gifts and donations

Interviewees also highlighted a range of other activities and actions undertaken in response to people's deaths amid COVID-19 restrictions. While in normal circumstances these might represent additional activities by which to express condolences alongside attending a funeral service, in the absence of normal opportunities for attendance, they took on particular importance. For example, several interviewees highlighted condolence posts shared via social media – posts which typically paid tribute to the deceased, their character, and the roles they had played in people's lives. As Isobel highlighted, this already-widespread practice acquired additional significance in the pandemic: '[M]ost of the [tributes] are actually on Facebook because obviously you put a post on Facebook, don't you, nowadays [...] all of these beautiful, beautiful words written about my mum and they just sum her up'. Gemma noted that:

[I]t was nice to be able to read [...] over 180 different comments from people [...] that's a nice thing [...] you still feel people are [...] sending their love, so to speak [...] all my friends sharing their memories from their time with Mum [...] [So people] commented on how sorry they were, but [also] with their personal tributes.

Others noted the importance of receiving letters, emails and flowers. Cynthia received emails from those who had attended her father's funeral online: 'people were writing to us from all over the world saying what a good service and how we're obviously a really strong family and things like that. That was comforting'. Luke considered the hundreds of letters his mother received following his father's death as a 'substitute' for people's presence at the funeral, and for paying tribute to him by sharing stories with one another in person:

My mother must have got [...] over a hundred letters and a lot of these letters came within three or four days of my father dying – beautiful letters, lots of phone calls [...] that was, again, very therapeutic for both of us actually. And lovely stories [...] The letters were important because they were the substitute [...] for the people who weren't at the funeral because at the funeral we'd have heard these stories.

Donations to charitable causes were another quantifiable demonstration of support: Matthew explained, 'I think that everybody who was at [my mother-in-law's] funeral or outside or watching [online] or donated [...] that showed that they cared'. Similarly, Josephine explained that her husband's funeral encouraged donations totalling 'just under £1900, so there's been a [...] lot of contributions [...] which is fantastic'.

While many were grateful for these alternative and additional activities, it is also important to acknowledge that they were not universally welcome or comforting. For example, the very volume of flowers, letters, phonecalls and other messages was burdensome to some interviewees. Margaret found receiving many flowers within a short time frame very overwhelming, and Priya recalled feeling that she and her family were 'trying to organise stuff, we're trying to grieve [but] we've got phone call after phone call' offering condolences. Both Priya and Margaret suspected that they would not have received so many gestures in such a short space of time if others had, instead, had the option of attending a funeral service in person. While humanist celebrant Rosa acknowledged it did 'mean that more people can be present', she felt that having people gather 'outside [...] in a car park' was 'not very satisfactory' by comparison to a funeral service.

Others felt that alternatives reinforced what the pandemic circumstances had denied to people: while Gillian was pleased to see some 100 people lining the route for a friend's hearse, this made her feel wistful, on account of her belief that 'all these people would have obviously come up to the graveside, but they couldn't'. Pleased as she was to see people gathering in this way, her assumption that in different circumstances they might all have more satisfactorily gathered in the cemetery for her friend's burial evoked the sense that the circumstances related to the pandemic were nevertheless difficult. Similarly, Nancy found the tributes left to her Mum on Facebook bittersweet, as they reminded her that 'all those people would have been at the funeral' had it not taken place during the pandemic. The number of people engaging online with hybridised funerals invited reflection on how their funeral might have looked or felt were it not for restrictions. Christian minister Sandra described the funeral of a well-known sportsman, saying:

I think it was about 3000 people logged in that day to watch that service. But that was heart-breaking for [the family] because they wanted everybody there from the [sporting] world and it was heart-breaking for us all because I knew him as well and it was really tough. But it was what it was; we just had to get on with it.

This section has captured multiple activities which people undertook in lieu of being able to attend somebody's funeral as they might otherwise have before the COVID-19 pandemic. In each case, quantity played a role: the number of people gathered along a hearse's routes, or of tributes posted, or of letters or donations received, was often appreciatively noted and reported. Interviewees also described deriving a sense that people 'cared', or 'comfort' from seeing others engaging in these activities, mimicking the role of the congregation at a funeral service as described by Bailey and Walter (2016). These findings should encourage scholars to look beyond in-person attendance at funeral services for meaningful configurational eulogies. Bailey and Walter (2016, p. 164) begin to move in these directions at the end of their paper, when they mention condolence letters, books of remembrance, and conversations at wakes. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects upon funeral gatherings, we have identified some additional practices of mourning, showing respect and offering condolence, indicating how they can 'work' as configurational eulogies in addition to, or in place of, a funeral service. Although in some respects this echoes Woodthorpe et al's suggestion that effective and meaningful commemoration and remembrance can take place beyond funeral congregations (Woodthorpe et al., 2021, pp. 11–12) we stress that the extent to which the events designed to complement direct cremation accommodate people beyond the 'principal mourners' may be limited.

As Bailey and Walter explain, funeral congregations are both actor and audience in configurational eulogies. Activities such as sending a letter or flowers are more mono-directional, and the sender primarily takes the role of actor. Moreover, several of the activities explored above consisted of eulogies in the more literal sense of speaking well of the deceased. Writing letters or tributes on social media, as well making use of 'chat' functions on some hybrid funeral platforms, enabled mourners to both find an alternative to congregating in person and to deliver words which articulated the deceased's value, or evoked their memory. As such, these activities, like the funeral services on which Bailey and Walter focus, worked because of people 'who knew the deceased congregating *and*

speaking' (2016, p. 149, emphasis original). In our study context, it becomes clear that they allow larger numbers to speak than would typically be facilitated within a service.

Appreciating smaller funerals

The above sections have shown many people missed gathering in person for funeral services amid the pandemic, and sought alternative ways of showing and receiving support and paying tribute to the deceased. Among these alternatives were those which allowed mourners to derive comfort from the number of people who took active steps to pay tribute to the person who had died. In contrast, some participants felt small funerals – such as those many had experienced during the COVID–19 pandemic – were 'good'. The reasons for this are summarised in Table 3 under two heuristic headings.

As Table 3 shows, some interviewees identified challenges with large funeral services that were mitigated in smaller funerals. These related to stress, interpersonal conflict and financial costs. For some, the presence of a large congregation may not be comforting or supportive, instead generating performative pressure and denying them the ability to grieve freely or fully. These insights echo Woodthorpe et al's suggestion that larger funerals may bring 'psycho-social harm' to some just as they may 'work' for others (2021, p. 13). These more difficult aspects of large funeral gatherings are not reflected in *Funerals Against Death*, but show that it is *not* the case for all that 'poor attendance could lead to a bad funeral' (Bailey & Walter, 2016, p. 162). For some, the presence of fewer people with the most authentic motives was better than – rather than a compensation for – a larger funeral. In this vein, funeral director Patricia suggested that because of attendance restrictions, some people 'came to the realisation that it is more meaningful to have a small gathering with just the closest family that were allowed'. She believed the pandemic had:

reminded people of what is actually important, which is remembering the life of the loved one, and the closest family being available to take part in that service. It's also reminded people that they don't have to have a great big gathering to make a funeral meaningful.

Table 3 also highlights the affordances of smaller gatherings which some identified when reflecting on the funerals they had experienced during COVID–19 restrictions. Some interviewees, for example, reflected that these smaller funerals were more 'intimate' and 'personal' than would otherwise have been achievable, qualities which sometimes fittingly reflected those who had died (just as some felt that the personality of a sociable, outgoing or gregarious person could only be authentically or adequately reflected in large funeral attendance). This reflects Bailey and Walter's concern with authenticity in funeral congregations and highlights the importance of not straightforwardly equating quantitatively larger numbers with 'better' attendance.

Some interviewees suggested smaller funerals also beneficially meant some people did not attend. These findings relate to Woodthorpe et al's observation that a desire to increase 'control over who attended' associated commemorative events can motivate people to choose direct cremation (2021, p. 10). Funeral director Donna suggested that attendance restrictions had 'not harmed the people coming because they thought they ought to come', implying a contrast with those who *actually* should come. Similarly, celebrant Mary explained:

Table 3. Reasons why smaller funerals might be considered advantageous compared to large, in-person funerals.

Smaller Funerals May be Considered Advantageous Compared to Large In-Person Funerals Because	Illustrative Quotes
Challenges associated with larger funeral attendance which might be avoided in a smaller funeral	Martha - 'there [was] less to go wrong [at Mum's funeral and it was] a lot less stress for me in some ways. [It] takes the pressure off feeling that you have to have a big thing. [For my Dad's wake] I hired a function room and loads of food and drink, and that... obviously, it was nice because people can chat afterwards, but it makes it all a bigger thing and more stressful'.
They could be less stressful to organise and host	Matthew - '[the funeral was] without tension [unlike others I have attended where] there has been some form of tension. Somebody who has an axe to grind or something that you're worried somebody will say [...] [T]his one didn't have that [...] [T]hat was a good thing'.
There could be less risk of interpersonal tension	Christian minister Sandra - '[I have] seen families [which] now they don't feel pressured to have the best flowers on top of the coffin, they don't feel pressured to have a wake that they can't afford, they don't feel pressured to invite everybody [...] [So] it does have a flip side'.
They could be less costly	Zara - '[I don't know] how we would have coped with having to do the niceties and have a wake [after Mum's funeral service]' Elspeth - '[I was] thankful [...] that it was just us, [because we could] grieve together without having to do the social elements'. Humanist celebrant Scott - '[It's] common over here after a funeral [...] for the family to stand there and everybody just proceed past them in a line [...] talking to them, almost going up one by one [...] with 100 to 150 people [and] it can be quite an endurance to go through the same thing over and over. Of course that hasn't happened [during the pandemic] and [...] that may not be a bad thing'.
There could be less performative pressure on primary mourners	Gemma - '[having the smaller numbers at Mum's funeral] made it more personal than maybe what it might be if you had a huge service'.
Affordances of smaller funerals which may be absent in larger funerals	Funeral director Thalia - 'Some people have told me they have been grateful for the regulations, if for example they wanted a small private service but would have felt pressured into more of a performative thing under normal circumstances. Some families were happy for the chance to have a more personal goodbye, and to be able to blame it on the regulations to avoid upsetting anyone'.
They could be more personal	Cynthia - 'I would have the same service for me by choice now. I would rather have small and intimate than crowds and crowds of people gawking us at all [...] like more of a family, small, intimate, really special celebration of [Dad's] life for us that people could be part of [...] rather than four or five hundred people sitting in a room that you don't know who half of them are'.
They could feel more intimate	

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Smaller Funerals May be Considered Advantageous Compared to Large In-Person Funerals Because	Illustrative Quotes
They sometimes better reflected the deceased's personality and preferences	<p>Calum - '[Mum was] quite private [and so we] could have decided to have a private funeral for my mum anyway.'</p> <p>Priya - 'Even though Dad was a popular man, he didn't really like a lot of our big Asian functions, he liked small gatherings [...] [because of the pandemic] he had the funeral [...] the way that he would have wanted it – small'.</p>
Those present might be more likely to be there for reasons deemed more acceptable	<p>Funeral director Catriona – '[At normal funerals] half of those [there] are really there because they feel they have to be [...] and they hardly knew the deceased at all [...] [So] for some people only having close family members has made it more intimate [...] not for everybody, but for some people I think that's been a big plus'.</p> <p>Celebrant Elaine - '[Before] you could have a chapel jammed to the rafters – 150/160 people all squeezed in cheek by jowl and from the front where I'm now standing I can look and I can see half of them are nebbing around at each other, oh, look, she's put weight on and, look at her hair, she wasn't with him last time I saw her [...] [By contrast, during the pandemic there was a] sense of privilege of being the ones who have been chosen to represent families [...] there was more presence there. And I think that has been a really good thing'.</p>

[I]n some ways, there's the good thing to having restricted numbers for some people because they say it's just the people we really wanted there, not Uncle Tom Cobbley and all [...] I've been to a lot of funerals where there's so many people there and [...] you do sometimes feel, 'Are you here to see who else is here?' You know, why?

Josephine, whose husband's funeral was held just as restrictions in England were changed to allow more than 30 people to attend, still 'kept it to 30 people', explaining that: '[the priest] said "Look, you can invite a few more people if you want to" and I said, "To be honest, Father, the important people that need to be there will be there".' Josephine's phrasing suggests that restricted attendance had helpfully whittled down attendees to those who really 'need' or 'ought' to be present.

These examples – some more explicitly than others – evoke some people's senses that certain people's attendance at a funeral is more justified or merited than others', perhaps because they have more appropriate motives. These examples also represent an important corollary to those above wherein the presence of particular individuals who could authentically reflect the deceased's personality, relationships and interests brought solace amid pandemic limitations on funeral attendance. Interviewees' concerns with authenticity not only meant concern that specific individuals be included, but also relief that others – whose motives or cause for attending were considered less legitimate, or less authentic – were excluded. This dual way of viewing mourners' presence, motivations and

authenticity echoes Bailey and Walter's suggestion that mourners' authenticity is an important factor in contributing to a good funeral, and their observation about concerns about attending funerals at which one's presence might not be – or be deemed – 'merited' (2016, p. 163). Assessments of people's 'authenticity' and 'merit' to participate in mourning activities are liable to be contested and may risk some people's exclusion and even oppression. While UK funerals are widely recognised to reflect more or less tacit hierarchies of mourners, often based on particular notions of 'family', decisions relating to in-person attendance during the COVID–19 pandemic highlight that concretising these into invitations can be fraught with difficulty. We explore these and other practical-ethical issues in the 'Care in Funerals Ethics Casebook' resource derived from this project (www.abdn.ac.uk/care-in-funerals-casebook).

It may well prove to be the case that experiences during the COVID–19 pandemic have altered some people's perspectives by affording the opportunity to experience and appreciate smaller funerals, encouraging them to reject the orthodoxy of a large funeral service going forwards. Woodthorpe et al. (2021, p. 14) recently speculated that the pandemic would 'likely accelerate' a 'rethinking, shrinking and disaggregating of funeral services' already in progress and evidenced by the growing popularity of direct cremation in the UK. Given that our findings have shown what many felt was lost in smaller funerals, we would not predict such a dramatic shift. However, smaller, invitation-only funerals may remain more popular than they were before the COVID–19 pandemic, particularly where large funeral gatherings are not culturally important. Comparative longitudinal research will be needed to monitor the popularity of smaller funerals in the coming decades, the contexts in which they do and do not become more significant, and why.

As Table 3 highlights, some interviewees also considered the lower cost of hosting a smaller funeral advantageous. This is particularly significant in a national context with rising funeral costs and corresponding rising rates of 'funeral poverty' (Competition and Markets Authority, 2019, p. 7). The early years of the COVID–19 pandemic were by no means the only contemporary circumstance influencing the development of funerals: financial resources play a significant role in shaping decisions about the size, scope and scale of funerals and elements thereof, and can function to limit the options available to those less able, or unable, to afford them.

Conclusion

The COVID–19 pandemic disrupted funeral attendance in the UK, resulting in significant regret at the loss of large gatherings and familiar rituals and ceremonies, but also creativity and adaptation. Using a substantial new qualitative dataset, this paper has highlighted the alternative ways people found of mourning and paying tribute to the deceased, and offering condolence and support to the bereaved, and examined what people felt was lost when familiar funerary formats were precluded or reshaped. We have illustrated how, when many of their 'usual' options were unavailable, people variously revisited 'old' and developed new practices. The findings suggest that while positive experiences of funerals held during the COVID–19 pandemic may lead some to opt for

smaller and invitation-only funerals, many people still value larger collective gatherings for funeral services and other mourning practices.

Our study affirms the ‘power of collective assembly in the face of death’ identified by Bailey and Walter (2016, p. 163) and others. In significantly restrictive circumstances many people keenly felt the loss of well-attended funeral services and rituals. By focusing on experiences throughout a period of disruption, we were additionally able to examine the range of adaptations made, and how configurational eulogies were reconfigured – or how the repertoire of configurations was extended – in response to new and evolving constraints. Extending Bailey and Walters’ original theorising to attend both to a broader range of ways of paying tribute to the deceased and offering support to mourners, and to the dynamic ways in which new variations in death rites can emerge, especially in times of constraint, can support nuanced investigations of diverse and evolving funeral practices.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Paul Kefford and Imogen Jones and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research and Innovation’s rapid response to Covid-19. Grant number: [ES/V017047/1].

Notes on contributors

Jennifer Riley - Research Fellow in Divinity and Religious Studies, School of Divinity, History, Philosophy & Art History, University of Aberdeen

Vikki Entwistle - Chair in Health Services Research and Philosophy, Health Services Research Unit and School of Divinity, History, Philosophy & Art History, University of Aberdeen.

Arnar Arnason, Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology, School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen.

Louise Locock, Professor of Health Services Research, Health Services Research Unit, University of Aberdeen.

Rebecca Crozier, Lecturer in Archaeology, School of Geosciences, University of Aberdeen.

Paolo Maccagno, Research Fellow in Anthropology, School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen.

Abi Pattenden, Manager, Freeman Brothers Funeral Directors.

ORCID

Jennifer Riley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2306-865X>
 Vikki Entwistle  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0856-4025>
 Arnar Arnason  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0806-7560>
 Louise Locock  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8109-1930>
 Rebecca Crozier  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5201-5760>
 Paolo Maccagno  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9304-6205>
 Abi Pattenden  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6703-4203>

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