

# Transitions and Transformations

3 December 2020, Virtual Symposium

## Abstracts

### **“Our Worst Fears”: Communal Burial, Social Marginalisation, and Memorialisation**

*Samuel Holleran (University of Melbourne)*

In April, as New York City’s Covid-19 death toll soared, a drone captured images of dozens of pine coffins being lowered into trenches. The pictures underscored the grim reality of a virus that, while just notional the month before, had started to kill hundreds per day. They made the accelerating fatalities real and spoke to a deeper fear of the loss of individuality in death. Interment at scale has long been associated with monumental breakdowns of the state, from London’s plague pits to the killing fields of Cambodia. In Western contexts, individualised burial is fundamental to affirming personhood via what Judith Butler calls “grievability” (2009). It is only the very poor, prisoners, and stillborn babies who are buried collectively (and, even then, shamefacedly). Mass death reminds us of the anonymity of passing that has always existed for those at the margins. Yet communal interment is a relatively common disposition form in some countries, notably Japan, where it provides an attractive means for individuals to secure continued posthumous care after the breakdown of traditional kinship structures. Some “death disruptors”—notably the U.S. start-up Recompose—have begun to challenge norms of individual burial through speculative projects for collective interment with an ecological bent, albeit with a mixed response from would-be clients. This presentation will draw on contemporary examples of communal interment that puzzle the distinction between individual and group memorialisation and build on ongoing research with death care workers to explore the impact of mass death from the Covid crisis on the funeral industry at large.

### **Death in the Time of Corona: Defining the Contours of ‘Normal’**

*Meghna Roy (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)*

Sociology, an empirical science cradled in modernity, had the normal and the pathological as its central concern during its inception when these concepts were largely investigated through functionalism and Positivism. They fell out of fashion as new theoretical paradigms flourished. The COVID-19 pandemic demands that this problematique be re-established as central to the discipline in order to understand the transitions unravelling at this moment. While a lot has

been argued in favour of adopting new modes of analysis to study social reality during these unprecedented times, little scholarly attention has been devoted to adapting our methodology to the pandemic. This presentation explores how death may be treated as a thematic prism to reimagine our notions of the normal. First, the 'normal' age of dying is problematised as the infection often claims lives of the youth. Second, the constant threat of death looms large on our heads as reinfections occur when biomedicine is yet to discover its cure; it is difficult to be restricted to the idea of homeostasis as the normal state of the body. Third, the constant news of daily death tolls in numerical terms has routinised death to the extent that normal life cannot be brought to a halt to mourn mass deaths. These observations lead us to ask: If we rely on numbers (averages) to ascertain the contours of the normal, is dying the new normal? This presentation will grapple with the philosophical assumptions which inform a 'science' of death. The notion of evidence is integral to this critique of science.

**Responses to death as a family and relational event in everyday contexts:**

**Disrupting research paradigms in a time of crisis**

*Jane Ribbens McCarthy (Open University & University of Reading), Kate Woodthorpe (University of Bath) & Kathryn Almack (University of Hertfordshire)*

The COVID-19 crisis has brought death and bereavement to the fore of public attention. In the process, taken-for-granted expectations have been disrupted, bringing into sharp focus the everyday contexts of people's experiences of, and responses to, death. And yet, as the death rate has risen, referrals to bereavement services across the board have been falling.

This raises the question of how people are making sense of death in their lives in their everyday relational contexts without professional support. Yet existing bereavement research has neglected this question, being very largely shaped by the (worthy) impulse for professional interventions. This impulse to intervention also shapes that marginal area of bereavement research that considers the relational context, theorised and operationalised through family systems approaches.

At the same time, family sociology has also failed to engage with the significance of death as a 'family' event. This is despite the burgeoning of qualitative research and theoretical developments in the sociology of families, relationships and intimacy in the last thirty years.

In this presentation we will explore the nature of this lacunae in current research and theoretical perspectives and consider what sociological resources may be available to help consider the contours of this terrain. This neglect of people's responses to death in their everyday relational contexts is all the more significant even as such contexts are disrupted during the pandemic. Drawing on insights from cross-cultural research, we argue for a transition in the current paradigm for bereavement research as it has come to dominate in affluent Minority worlds.

**Breaking Bad News: A Qualitative Study of Frontline Police Work with the Bereaved**

*Karen Lumsden (University of Nottingham)*

'Breaking bad news' to the bereaved is one of a frontline police officer's most difficult tasks. However, police education and training offer little formal preparation for this aspect of police work. In England, specially trained family liaison officers are used in some constabularies, yet the choice of officer often depends on resources available at particular times and in geographical locations. Despite these challenges, the experience of police officers remains unexplored in social scientific scholarship.

This paper presents findings from a British Academy / Leverhulme funded project which involved qualitative interviews with family liaison officers, road traffic officers, and investigatory officers. It explores their experiences of breaking bad news to the bereaved and of delivering the 'death notice'. Findings focus on the social, cultural and emotional aspects of breaking bad news (Charmaz 1975; Clark and LaBeff 1982; Glaser and Strauss 1965, 1968; McClenahen and Lofland 1976) in everyday police work. The paper also considers how Covid-19 has transformed these police interactions and relationships with the public.

**How The Climate Emergency Reframes Mortality**

*Tony Walter, University of Bath*

This paper discusses how the discourse of a climate and ecological emergency, as articulated in 2019 by Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Greta Thunberg, re-shapes mortality. The following are considered: the shift from personal death to species death, from a concern with *my* and *thy* death (Ariès) to a communal *future* death; the re-insertion of the individual's birth-death life course into a cosmic drama echoing earlier religious concepts of time; a shift away from respect for elders and ancestors; and the framing of ancestors and descendants as global rather than familial, local or national. Further, XR's symbolic death rites confront those who witness them with their mortality much more directly than does the death awareness movement. Finally, the climate emergency is compared with other major crises of our time; all prompt revisions of common understandings of mortality held by privileged inhabitants of the global North.

**Persistence in the Face of Death: Transformation of Burial Practices in Europe**

*Twila Petrie (Independent Researcher)*

Today's constant reminder of death due to the pandemic harkens back to the medieval and early modern period when regular epidemics could devastate a parish within a fortnight. The dead overwhelmed existing burial sites, which were already pushed to capacity, often leading to mass burials during plague years and unhygienic consequences. In response, a number of key European

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voices rose up during the early and late modern era and pushed for burial reform. Their concerns initially focused on the unhygienic and dangerous practice of burials within the church. This perception of danger was based on the belief of the time that the miasma emanating from the recently deceased led to illness in the living. In time the overcrowding of churchyards was added to the list of concerns. For centuries leaders of all levels in society vehemently opposed the traditional burial practices to no avail. However, societal movements such as the Enlightenment helped educate the public thus allowing the nineteenth-century voices to finally be heard and bring about reform. Today's burial practices in Western culture are based on those changes made in nineteenth-century Europe. The transition occurred in waves allowing the living to safely reside near the dead. In this session, I will talk about the events, the key voices, and the persistence that led to these social changes.