Handling the Stigma of Handling the Dead

Morticians and Funeral Directors

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As William Thompson observes in his 1991 article on the funeral profession, an individual's occupational status—and the role attached to that status—is central to his or her identity. How, then, do people who do work that others find repugnant manage things such that they themselves do not feel repugnant?

In a complex, industrialized society a person's occupation or profession is central to his or her personal and social identity. As Pavalko (1988) pointed out, two strangers are quite "... likely to 'break the ice' by indicating the kind of work they do." As a result, individuals often make a number of initial judgments about others based on preconceived notions about particular occupations.

This study examines how morticians and funeral directors handle the stigma associated with their work. Historically, stigma has been attached to those responsible for caring for the dead, and the job typically was assigned to the lower classes (e.g., the Eta of Japan and the Untouchables in India).1 and in some cases, those who handled the dead were forbidden from touching the living (Bendann 1930; Kearl 1989; Murray 1969). Today, the stigma has grown to new and potentially more threatening proportions for those engaged in the profession, for during the twentieth century Americans have become preoccupied with the denial of death (Becker 1973; Charmaz 1980; Fulton 1961; Jackson 1980; Kearl 1989; Moneyer 1988; Sudnow 1967).2 As Stephenson (1985, 223) noted, "In a society which seeks to deny the reality of death, the funeral director is a living symbol of this dreaded subject."

Two major problems faced by members of the funeral industry are that they make their living by doing work considered taboo by

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1The Eta were a people of Japan who—like the scheduled castes (or untouchables) of India—were regarded as ritually polluted. The distinction between Eta and non-Eta was officially outlawed in Japan in the nineteenth century, just as the distinction between the scheduled castes and others was outlawed in India in the mid-twentieth century. In both countries, however, the distinction continues informally.—Ed.


2The wholesale denial of death in contemporary American society has been seriously questioned by some. For example, Parsons and Lids (1967) eloquently refuted the "denial of death" thesis, indicating that "American society has institutionalized a broadly stable, though flexible and changing, orientation to death that is fundamentally not a 'denial' but a mode of acceptance appropriate to our primary cultural patterns of activism" (134). In a later article Parsons, Fox, and Lids (1972, 368) argued that "what is often interpreted as 'denial' is in reality a kind of 'apathy'." They insist that, in a religious sense, death must be viewed as "a reciprocal gift to God, the consummatory reciprocation of the gift of life" (431). Others counter, however, that death and funerals have become increasingly secularized and that although constantly confronted with the realities of death, most Americans choose to ignore and deny it as much as possible.
most Americans and that they are viewed as profiting from death and grief—a fact from which they must continually attempt to divert public attention. The “$7-billion-dollar-a-year American funeral industry” has received much criticism over the past 2 decades and widespread complaints have led to “congressional hearings, new trade practices rules from the Federal Trade Commission, and undercover sting operations by various consumer groups” (Kearl 1989, 271). Those in the funeral business were further stigmatized when it was revealed that 58% of the funeral homes studied by the FTC had committed at least one billing abuse against their bereaved clients, and public testimony revealed “horror stories” of inflated charges for funeral services neither required nor requested (Kearl 1989, 278).

Morticians and funeral directors are fully aware of the stigma associated with their work, so they continually strive to enhance their public image and promote their social credibility. They must work to shift the emphasis of their work from the dead to the living, and away from sales and toward service. As Aries (1976, 99) noted:

In order to sell death, it had to be made friendly... since 1885...[funeral directors have] presented themselves not as simple sellers of services, but as “doctors of grief” who have a mission...[which] consists in aiding the mourning survivors to return to normalcy.

Couched within the general theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, there are a variety of symbolic and dramaturgical methods5 whereby morticians and funeral directors attempt to redefine their occupations and minimize and/or neutralize negative attitudes toward them and what they do.

5You may recall that the concept of dramaturgical was introduced at the beginning of reading 14—it developed from the line of sociological analysis followed by Erving Goffman. —Ed.

Method

This study reflects over 2 years of qualitative fieldwork as outlined by Schatzman and Strauss (1973), Spradley (1979) and Berg (1989). Extensive ethnographic interviews were conducted during 1987–1989 with 19 morticians and funeral directors in four states: Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. The funeral homes included both privately owned businesses and branches of large franchise operations. They were located in communities ranging from less than 1,000 population to cities of over 1 million people.

First contacts were made by telephone, and appointments were made to tour the funeral homes and meet with the directors and morticians. Initial taped interviews ranged from 1½ to a little over 4 hours in duration. In all but two cases, follow-up interviews were used to obtain additional information about the individuals and their work.

Rather than limiting questions to a standardized interview schedule, the researcher soon discovered that, as with most ethnographic fieldwork (Berg; 1989; Spradley 1979), interviewees were much more comfortable and provided more information during casual conversation. Consequently, the structured portion of the interview focused primarily on demographic data, educational credentials, how they decided to enter the profession, how they felt about their jobs, and how they handled the stigma associated with their work. The questions were open-ended, and answers to one question invariably led to a variety of spontaneous follow-up questions.

Respondents

Interviewees included people from different age groups, both sexes, and both whites and nonwhites. There were 16 males and 3 females
interviewed for this study, ranging in age from 26 to 64 years. Most of the respondents were between their late 30s and early 50s. Fourteen of the males were both morticians (licensed embalmers) and licensed funeral directors. The other two males were licensed embalmers who were employed in funeral homes, but were not licensed funeral directors. None of the females had been trained or licensed to embalm. Two of the females were licensed funeral directors, and the other woman was neither licensed as an embalmer nor funeral director. She was married to a man who was licensed to do both, and she simply helped out around the funeral home—usually answering the phone and helping with bookkeeping. All the women admitted, however, that they often helped out in the embalming room and in making funeral arrangements.

Seventeen of the people interviewed were white. The other two were African-American brothers who jointly owned and operated a funeral home located in a city of approximately 150 thousand people. Only one was a licensed funeral director and licensed embalmer. They candidly admitted, however, that they both worked in the embalming room and arranged funeral services.

With only one exception, all of the morticians and funeral directors interviewed were more than willing to talk about their occupations. They were aware that the author was conducting research, and several of them commented that the funeral industry was much maligned and stigmatized, and they were anxious to get an opportunity to "set the record straight," or "tell their side of the story" about their jobs. As the interviews progressed, however, the author was struck by the candor with which most of the interviewees responded to questions and provided additional information. Only one of the funeral directors, a single 50-year-old white male, was reluctant to talk about his work, refused to be taped, and was extremely guarded throughout the interview. He attempted to answer as many questions as possible with short, cryptic responses, and on several occasions became quite defensive and asked: "Why did you ask that?" and "What are you going to do with this information?" Despite his defensiveness, his answers indicated that his experiences as a mortician and funeral director were very similar to the others interviewed. In fact, his reticence about answering some of the questions served to underscore the fact that he believed there was a great deal of stigma attached to his work and he wanted to be careful not to add to it (a point he made verbally during the interview).

Occupational Stigma

Erving Goffman (1963) defined stigma as any attribute that sets people apart and discredits them or disqualifies them from full social acceptance. This paper explores what happens when people are discredited (stigmatized) because of the work they perform, and how they attempt to reduce or eliminate the stigma.

People are most likely to be stigmatized because of their work if it is viewed as deviant by other members of society. George Ritzer (1977) cited three criteria, any one of which can cause an occupation to be considered deviant: (a) if it is illegal, (b) if it is considered immoral, and (c) if it is considered improper.

The first category of occupations, those that are illegal, has been widely studied by sociologists. Even a cursory list of studies on organized crime, prostitution, shoplifting, counterfeiting, confidence swindling, professional theft, and other illegal occupations would be voluminous. The second category of deviant occupations is less straightforward than the first. Although many occupations that are considered immoral also have been made illegal (e.g., prostitution), there is much less
agreement on the morality of occupations than on their legality.

The final category is a fascinating one, and perhaps the most ripe for sociological investigation. It includes those jobs that may not be considered "a proper or fitting occupation by society" (Polsky 1969, 32). In any society there are certain jobs that most people prefer not to do. These jobs often require little or no training, pay very little, rank low in occupational prestige, and involve "dirty work" (Garson 1975; Hughes 1971). As Hughes (1971, 344) pointed out:

... the delegation of dirty work to someone else is common among humans. Many cleanliness taboos ... depend for their practice upon success in delegating the tabooed activity to someone else.

Although the occupations of mortician and funeral director do not fit neatly into any of Ritzer's three categories, preparing the dead for funerals, burial, and/or cremation can be characterized as "dirty work." The stigma associated with these occupations is not so much that they are literally unclean, although embalming can be rather messy. It is, however, no more so than surgery—a highly prestigious profession. Rather, they are figuratively unclean because they violate social taboos against handling the dead.

THE STIGMA OF HANDLING THE DEAD

Ritualistic disposal of dead human bodies is a cultural universal (Bendann 1930; Habenstein and Lamers 1960; Huntington and Metcalf 1979). These ceremonies "... manifest the collective image of death—what the larger society thinks and feels about death" (Stephenson 1985). In American society, death is surrounded by mystery and taboos. David Sudnow (1967) pointed out that Americans shun the idea that death is a natural process begun at birth; instead, they view death as a very brief process or an act.

Until the turn of the century, in this country, people died at home and friends and family members prepared the bodies for burial (Lesy 1987). As medical knowledge and technology progressed and became more specialized, more and more deaths occurred outside the home—usually in hospitals. Death became something to be handled by a select group of highly trained professionals—doctors, nurses, and hospital staff. As fewer people witnessed death firsthand, it became surrounded with more mystery, and physically handling the dead became the domain of only a few.

Members or friends of the family relinquished their role in preparing bodies for disposal to an undertaker, "... a special person who would 'undertake' responsibility for the care and burial of the dead" (Amos 1983, 2). From the beginning, stigma was associated with funerary occupations because they were "linked to the American death orientation whereby the industry is the cultural scapegoat for failed immortality" (Keal 1989, 278).

To counter this stigma, undertakers (later to be called morticians) initially emphasized the scientific aspects of their work. Embalming and preparation for burial were presented as highly technical skills that required scientific knowledge and sophisticated training. Most states began licensing embalmers around the end of the nineteenth century (Amos 1983). These licensed embalmers did not enjoy the prestige accorded to the medical profession, however, and almost immediately were surrounded by mystery and viewed as unusual, if not downright weird. They were not family members or friends of the deceased faced with the unsavory but necessary responsibility for disposing of a loved one's body, but strangers who chose to work with dead bodies—for compensation. Although most welcomed the opportunity to relinquish this chore, they also viewed those
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who willingly assumed it with some skepticism and even disdain. Having failed to gain the desired prestige associated with the scientific aspects of embalming, and realizing that emphasizing embalming only served to increase what was perhaps the most stigmatizing aspect of their work (handling the dead), morticians shifted the focus away from their work on the dead body to their work with the living by emphasizing their roles as funeral directors and bereavement counselors.

In contemporary American society, those who routinely handle the dead have entered what Michael Lesy calls the “forbidden zone.” Lesy (1987, 5) points out:

In some cultures, the dead are ritually unclean and those who touch them must be ritually cleansed. In America, those who deal with the dead have social identities that shift back and forth like stationary objects that seem to move from left to right and back again as one eye is opened and the other is closed. Sometimes they look like pariahs and deviants, sometimes like charlatans. Other times they look like heroes or even adepts, initiates, and priests. Those who deal with death work at an intersection of opposites, tainted by the suffering and decay of the body, transfigured by the plight of the self and the destiny of the soul. The world never considers anyone who routinely deals with death to be “pure.”

Sudnow (1967, 51–64) underscored the negative attitudes toward people who work with the dead in describing how those who work in a morgue, for example, are “death-tainted” and work very hard to rid themselves of the social stigma associated with their jobs. Morticians and funeral directors cannot escape from this “taint of death” and they must constantly work to “counteract the stigma” directed at them and their occupations (Charmaz 1980, 182). Warner (1959, 315) described the funeral director as “a private enterpriser who will do the ritually unclean and physically distasteful work of disposing of the dead in a manner satisfying to the living, at a price which they can pay.” Fulton (1961) echoed this definition when he wrote, “In a word, the funeral director, by virtue of his close association with death, and by the ‘relative’ attitude he takes toward all funerals is, in a religious sense, ‘unclean’” (322).

Are morticians and funeral directors really that stigmatized? After all, they generally are well-known and respected members of their communities. In small communities and even many large cities, local funeral homes have been owned and operated by the same family for several generations. These people usually are members of civic organizations, have substantial incomes, and live in nice homes and drive nice automobiles. Most often they are viewed as successful business people. On the other hand, their work is surrounded by mystery, taboos, and stigma, and they often are viewed as cold, detached, and downright morbid for doing it. All the respondents in this study openly acknowledged that stigma was associated with their work. Some indicated that they thought the stigma primarily came from the “misconception” that they were “getting rich” off other people’s grief; others believed it simply came from working with the dead. Clearly these two aspects of their work—handling the dead and profiting from death and grief—emerged as the two most stigmatizing features of the funeral industry according to respondents. Pine (1979) noted that funeral directors cannot escape the “contamination by death,” and contended:

...people view individuals in such work as different... because they feel that they themselves could never do it and that there must be something “strange” about those who voluntarily choose to do it. (38)

Kathy Charmaz (1980, 174–206) discussed the stigma experienced by morticians, funeral directors, and others involved in “death work,”
and the negative impact that working with the dead can have on self-image. It is important from their perspective, she notes, that "who they are should not be defined by what they do" (174). This idea was confirmed by all the respondents in this study in one way or another. As one funeral director/embalmer noted, "I don’t want to be thought of as somebody who likes working with the dead—that’s morbid—I enjoy what I do because I like working with the living."

Managing Stigma

Erving Goffman wrote the most systematic analysis of how individuals manage a "spoiled" social identity in his classic work, Stigma (1963). He described several techniques, such as "passing," "dividing the social world," "mutual aid," "physical distance," "disclosure," and "covering," employed by the discredited and discreditable to manage information and conceal their stigmatizing attributes (41–104). Although these techniques work well for the physically scarred, blind, stammerers, bald, drug addicted, ex-convicts, and many other stigmatized categories of people, they are less likely to be used by morticians and funeral directors.

Except perhaps when on vacation, it is important for funeral directors to be known and recognized in their communities and to be associated with their work. Consequently, most of the morticians and funeral directors studied relied on other strategies for reducing the stigma associated with their work. Paramount among these strategies were symbolic redefinition of their work, role distance, professionalism, emphasizing service, and enjoying socioeconomic status over occupational prestige. This was much less true for licensed embalmers who worked for funeral directors, especially in chain-owned funeral homes in large cities. In those cases the author found that many embalmers concealed their occupation from their neighbors and others with whom they were not intimately acquainted, by using the techniques of information control discussed by Goffman (1963).

SYMBOLIC REDEFINITION

A rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but death work by almost any other name does not sound quite as harsh. One of the ways in which morticians and funeral directors handle the stigma of their occupations is through symbolically negating as much of it as possible. Language is the most important symbol used by human beings, and Woods and Delisle (1978, 98) revealed how sympathy cards avoid the use of the terms "dead" and "death" by substituting less harsh words such as "loss," "time of sorrow," and "hour of sadness." This technique is also used by morticians and funeral directors to reduce the stigma associated with their work.

Words that are most closely associated with death are rarely used, and the most harsh terms are replaced with less ominous ones. The term death is almost never used by funeral directors; rather, they talk of "passing on," "meeting an untimely end," or "eternal slumber." There are no corpses or dead bodies; they are referred to as "remains," "the deceased," "loved one," or more frequently, by name (e.g., "Mr. Jones"). Use of the term body is almost uniformly avoided around the family. Viewing rooms (where the embalmed body is displayed in the casket) usually are given serene names such as "the sunset room," "the eternal slumber room," or, in one case, "the guest room."4 Thus, when friends or family arrive to view the body, they are likely to be told that "Mr. Jones is lying in re-

4In this case the denial of death was symbolically enhanced by having the embalmed body lying in bed, as if asleep. The funeral director indicated that this room was used when families had not yet decided on a casket, thus allowing for viewing of the body in what he called a "natural, peaceful surrounding."
pose in the eternal slumber room.” This language contrasts sharply with that used by morticians and funeral directors in “backstage” areas (Goffman 1959, 112)⁵ such as the embalming room where drowning victims often are called “floaters,” burn victims are called “crispy critters,” and others are simply referred to as “bodies” (Turner and Edgley 1976).

All the respondents indicated that there was less stigma attached to the term funeral director than mortician or embalmer, underscoring the notion that much of the stigma they experienced was attached to physically handling the dead. Consequently, when asked what they do for a living, those who acknowledge that they are in the funeral business (several indicated that they often do not) referred to themselves as “funeral directors” even if all they did was the embalming. Embalming is referred to as “preservation” or “restoration,” and in order to be licensed, one must have studied “mortuary arts” or “mortuary science.” Embalming no longer takes place in an embalming room, but in a “preparation room,” or in some cases the “operating room.”

Coffins are now “caskets,” which are transported in “funeral coaches” (not hearses) to their “final resting place” rather than to the cemetery or worse yet, graveyard, for their “interment” rather than burial. Thus, linguistically, the symbolic redefinition is complete, with death verbally redefined during every phase, and the stigma associated with it markedly reduced.

All the morticians and funeral directors in this study emphasized the importance of using the “appropriate” terms in referring to their work. Knowledge of the stigma attached to certain words was readily acknowledged, and all indicated that the earlier terminology was stigma-laden, especially the term “undertaker,” which they believed conjured up negative images in the mind of the public. For example, a 29-year-old male funeral director indicated that his father still insisted on calling himself an “undertaker.” “He just hasn’t caught up with the twentieth century,” the son remarked. Interestingly, when asked why he did not refer to himself as an undertaker, he replied, “It just sounds so old-fashioned [pause] plus, it sounds so morbid.” As Pine (1975) noted, the special argot of the funeral industry performs an important function in reducing the stigma associated with the work and allows funeral directors to achieve role distance.

In addition to using language to symbolically redefine their occupations, funeral directors carefully attempt to shift the focus of their work away from the care of the dead (especially handling the body), and redefine it primarily in terms of caring for the living. The dead are de-emphasized as most of the funeral ritual is orchestrated for the benefit of the friends and family of the deceased (Turner and Edgley 1976). By redefining themselves as “grief therapists” or “bereavement counselors,” their primary duties are associated with making funeral arrangements, directing the services, and consoling the family in their time of need.

ROLE DISTANCE

Because a person’s sense of self is so strongly linked to occupation, it is common practice for people in undesirable or stigmatized occupations to practice role distance (e.g., Garson 1975; Pavalko 1988; Ritzer 1977; Terkel 1974; Thompson 1983). Although the specific role-distancing techniques vary across different occupations and among different individuals within an occupation, they share the common function of allowing individuals to violate some of the role expectations associated with the occupation, and to express their individuality

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⁵In keeping with his dramaturgical perspective, Goffman divided social settings between “front stage” (where the actor would interact with the audience) and “backstage” (where the audience was prohibited). —Ed.
within the confines of the occupational role. Although the funeral directors and morticians in this study used a variety of role-distancing techniques, three common patterns emerged: emotional detachment, humor, and countering the stereotype.

**Emotional Detachment** One of the ways that morticians and funeral directors overcome their socialization regarding death taboos and the stigma associated with handling the dead is to detach themselves from the body work. Charmaz (1980) pointed out that a common technique used by coroners and funeral directors to minimize the stigma associated with death work is to routinize the work as much as possible. When embalming, morticians focus on the technical aspects of the job rather than thinking about the person they are working on. One mortician explained:

When I'm in the preparation room I never think about who I'm working on, I only think about what has to be done next. When I picked up the body, it was a person. When I get done, clean and dress the body, and place it in the casket, it becomes a person again. But in here it's just something to be worked on. I treat it like a mechanic treats an automobile engine — with respect, but there's no emotion involved. It's just a job that has to be done.

Another mortician described his emotional detachment in the embalming room:

You can't think too much about this process [embalming], or it'll really get to you. For example, one time we brought in a little girl. She was about four years old — the same age as my youngest daughter at the time. She had been killed in a wreck; had gone through the windshield; was really a mess. At first, I wasn't sure I could do that one — all I could think of was my little girl. But when I got her in the prep room, my whole attitude changed. I know this probably sounds cold, and hard I guess, but suddenly I began to think of the challenge involved. This was gonna be an open-casket ser-

vice, and while the body was in pretty good shape, the head and face were practically gone. This was gonna take a lot of reconstruction. Also, the veins are so small on children that you have to be a lot more careful. Anyway, I got so caught up in the job, that I totally forgot about working on a little girl. I was in the room with her about six hours when —— [his wife] came in and reminded me that we had dinner plans that night. I washed up and went out to dinner and had a great time. Later that night, I went right back to work on her without even thinking about it. It wasn't until the next day when my wife was dressing the body, and I came in, and she was crying, that it hit me. I looked at the little girl, and I began crying. We both just stood there crying and hugging. My wife kept saying "I know this was tough for you," and "yesterday must have been tough." I felt sorta guilty, because I knew what she meant, and it should've been tough for me, real tough, emotionally, but it wasn't. The only "tough" part had been the actual work, especially the reconstruction — I had totally cut off the emotional part. It sometimes makes you wonder. Am I really just good at this, or am I losing something. I don't know. All I know is, if I'd thought about the little girl the way I did that next day, I never could have done her. It's just part of this job — you gotta just do what has to be done. If you think about it much, you'll never make it in this business.

**Humor** Many funeral directors and morticians use humor to detach themselves emotionally from their work. The humor, of course, must be carefully hidden from friends and relatives of the deceased, and takes place in backstage areas such as the embalming room, or in professional group settings such as at funeral directors' conventions.

This is a common practice among medical students who are notorious for using "cadaver jokes" and pranks to help overcome the taboos associated with death and to ease the tension experienced when dissecting cadavers (Hafferty 1986, 1988; Knight 1979).
The humor varies from impromptu comments while working on the body to standard jokes told over and over again. Not unexpectedly, all the respondents indicated a strong distaste for necrophilia jokes. One respondent commented, “I can think of nothing less funny—the jokes are sick, and have done a lot of damage to the image of our profession.”

Humor is an effective technique of diffusing the stigma associated with handling a dead body, however, and when more than one person is present in the embalming room, it is common for a certain amount of banter to take place, and jokes or comments are often made about the amount of body fat or the overendowment, or lack thereof, of certain body parts. For example, one mortician indicated that a common remark made about males with small genitalia is, “Well, at least he won’t be missed.”

As with any occupation, levels of humor varied among the respondents. During an interview one of the funeral directors spoke of some of the difficulties in advertising the business, indicating that because of attitudes toward death and the funeral business, he had to be sure that his newspaper advertisements did not offend anyone. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a pad with several “fake ads” written on it. They included:

“Shake and Bake Special—Cremation with No Embalming”
“Business Is Slow, Somebody’s Gotta Go”
“Try Our Layaway Plan—Best in the Business”
“Count on Us, We’ll Be the Last to Let You Down”
“People Are Dying to Use Our Services”
“Pay Now, Die Later”
“The Buck Really Does Stop Here”

He indicated that he and one of his friends had started making up these fake ads and slogans when they were doing their mortuary internships. Over the years, they occasionally corresponded by mail and saw each other at conventions, and they would always try to be one up on the other with the best ad. He said, “Hey, in this business, you have to look for your laughs where you can find them.” Gerson (1975, 210) refers to a line from a song from Mary Poppins, “In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun.”

Countering the Stereotype Morticians and funeral directors are painfully aware of the common negative stereotype of people in their occupations. The women in this study were much less concerned about the stereotype, perhaps because simply being female shattered the stereotype anyway. The men, however, not only acknowledged that they were well aware of the public’s stereotypical image of them, but also indicated that they made every effort not to conform to it.

One funeral director, for instance, said:

People think we’re cold, unfriendly, and unfeeling. I always make it a point to be just the opposite. Naturally, when I’m dealing with a family I must be reserved and show the proper decorum, but when I am out socially, I always try to be very upbeat—very alive. No matter how tired I am, I try not to show it.

Another indicated that he absolutely never wore gray or black suits. Instead, he wore navy blue and usually with a small pinstripe. “I might be mistaken for the minister or a lawyer,” he said, “but rarely for an undertaker.”

The word “cold,” which often is associated with death, came up in a number of interviews. One funeral director was so concerned about the stereotype of being “cold,” that he kept a handwarmer in the drawer of his desk. He said, “My hands tend to be cold and clammy. It’s just a physical trait of mine, but
there's no way that I'm going to shake someone's hand and let them walk away thinking how cold it was.” Even on the warmest of days, he indicated that during services, he carried the handwarmer in his right-hand coat pocket so that he could warm his hand before shaking hands with or touching someone.

Although everyone interviewed indicated that he or she violated the public stereotype, each one expressed a feeling of being atypical. In other words, although they believed that they did not conform to the stereotype, they felt that many of their colleagues did. One funeral director was wearing jeans, a short-sleeved sweatshirt and a pair of running shoes during the interview. He had just finished mowing the lawn at the funeral home. “Look at me,” he said, “Do I look like a funeral director? Hell, —— [the funeral director across the street] wears a suit and tie to mow his grass! —— or, at least he would if he didn’t hire it done.”

Others insisted that very few funeral directors conform to the public stereotype when out of public view, but feel compelled to conform to it when handling funeral arrangements, because it is an occupational role requirement. “I always try to be warm and upbeat,” one remarked, “But, let’s face it, when I’m working with a family, they’re experiencing a lot of grief—I have to respect that, and act accordingly.” Another indicated that he always lowered his voice when talking with family and friends of the deceased, and that it had become such a habit, that he found himself speaking softly almost all the time. “One of the occupational hazards, I guess,” he remarked.

The importance of countering the negative stereotype was evident, when time after time, persons being interviewed would pause and ask “I’m not what you expected, am I?” or something similar. It seemed very important for them to be reassured that they did not fit the stereotype of funeral director or mortician.

PROFESSIONALISM

Another method used by morticians and funeral directors to reduce occupational stigma is to emphasize professionalism. Amos (1983, 3) described embalming as:

... an example of a vocation in transition from an occupation to a profession. Until mid-nineteenth century, embalming was not considered a profession and this is still an issue debated in some circles today.

Most morticians readily admit that embalming is a very simple process and can be learned very easily. In all but two of the funeral homes studied, the interviewees admitted that people who were not licensed embalmers often helped with the embalming process. In one case, in which the funeral home was owned and operated by two brothers, one of the brothers was a licensed funeral director and licensed embalmer. The other brother had dropped out of high school and helped their father with the funeral business while his brother went to school to meet the educational requirements for licensure. The licensed brother said:

By the time I got out of school and finished my apprenticeship, —— [his brother] had been helping Dad embalm for over three years—and he was damned good at it. So when I joined the business, Dad thought it was best if I concentrated on handling the funeral arrangements and pre-service needs. After Dad died, I was the only licensed embalmer, so “officially” I do it all—all the embalming and the funeral arrangements. But, to tell you the truth, I only embalm every now and then when we have several to
Despite the relative simplicity of the embalming process and the open admission by morticians and funeral directors that “almost anyone could do it with a little practice,” most states require licensure and certification for embalming. The four states represented in this study (Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Texas) have similar requirements for becoming a licensed certified embalmer. They include a minimum of 60 college hours with a core of general college courses (English, mathematics, social studies, etc.) plus 1 year of courses in the “mortuary sciences,” or “mortuary arts.” These consist of several courses in physiology and biology, and a 1-year apprenticeship under a licensed embalmer. To become a licensed funeral director requires the passing of a state board examination, which primarily requires a knowledge of state laws related to burial, cremation, disposal of the body, and insurance.

All the respondents in this study who were licensed and certified embalmers and funeral directors exceeded the minimum educational requirements. In fact, all but one of them had a college degree, and three had advanced degrees. The most common degree held was a Bachelor of Science in mortuary sciences. Two of the males had degrees in business (one held the MBA degree), one male had a Bachelor’s degree with a major in biology and had attended one year of medical school, one male had a degree in geology, and one had a degree in music. One of the women had a Bachelor’s degree in English; another held a degree in business; and one woman had a degree in nursing. Although the general consensus among them was that an individual did not need a college education to become a good embalmer, they all stressed the importance of a college education for being a successful funeral director. Most thought that some basic courses in business, psychology, death and dying, and “bereavement counseling” were valuable preparation for the field. Also, most of the funeral directors were licensed insurance agents, which allowed them to sell burial policies.

Other evidence of the professionalization of the funeral industry includes state, regional, and national professional organizations that hold annual conventions and sponsor other professional activities; professional journals; state, regional, and national governing and regulating boards; and a professional code of ethics. Although the funeral industry is highly competitive, like most other professions, its members demonstrate a strong sense of cohesiveness and in-group identification.

Reduction of stigma is not the sole purpose for professionalization among funeral directors and morticians, as other benefits are reaped from the process. Nevertheless, as Charmaz (1980, 182) noted, membership in the professional organizations of coroners and funeral directors is one of the most effective ways to “counteract the stigma conferred upon them.” One of the married couples in this study indicated that it was reassuring to attend national conventions where they met and interacted with other people in the funeral industry because it helps to “reassure us that we’re not weird.” The wife went on to say:

A lot of people ask us how we can stand to be in this business—especially—because he does all of the embalming. They act like we must be strange or something. When we go to the conventions and meet with all of the other people there who are just like us—people who like helping other people—I feel normal again.

All these elements of professionalization—educational requirements, exams, boards, organizations, codes of ethics, and the rest—lend an air of credibility and dignity to the funeral business while diminishing the stigma.
associated with it. Although the requirements for licensure and certification are not highly exclusive, they still represent forms of boundary maintenance, and demand a certain level of commitment from those who enter the field. Thus, professionalization helped in the transition of the funeral business from a vocation that can be pursued by virtually anyone to a profession that can be entered only by those with the appropriate qualifications. As Pine (1975, 28) indicated:

Because professionalization is highly respected in American society, the word “profession” tends to be used as a symbol by occupations seeking to improve or enhance the lay public’s conception of that occupation, and funeral directing is no exception. To some extent, this appears to be because the funeral director hopes to overcome the stigma of “doing death work.”

“By claiming professional status, funeral directors claim prestige and simultaneously seek to minimize the stigma they experience for being death workers involved in ‘dirty work’” (Charmaz 1980, 192).

THE SHROUD OF SERVICE

One of the most obvious ways in which morticians and funeral directors neutralize the stigma associated with their work is to wrap themselves in a “shroud of service.” All the respondents emphasized their service role over all other aspects of their jobs. Although their services were not legally required in any of the four states included in this study, all the respondents insisted that people desperately needed them. As one funeral director summarized, “Service, that’s what we’re all about—we’re there when people need us the most.”

Unlike the humorous fantasy ads mentioned earlier, actual advertisements in the funeral industry focus on service. Typical ads for the companies in this study read:

“Our Family Serving Yours for Over 60 Years”
“Serving the Community for Four Generations”
“Thoughtful Service in Your Time of Need”

The emphasis on service, especially on “grief counseling” and “bereavement therapy,” shifts the focus away from the two most stigmatizing elements of funeral work: the handling and preparation of the body, which already has been discussed at length; and retail sales, which are widely interpreted as profiting from other people’s grief. Many of the funeral directors indicated that they believed the major reason for negative public feelings toward their occupation was not only that they handled dead bodies, but the fact that they made their living off the dead, or at least, off the grief of the living.

All admitted that much of their profit came from the sale of caskets and vaults, where markup is usually a minimum of 100%, and often 400-500%, but all played down this aspect of their work. The Federal Trade Commission requires that funeral directors provide their customers with itemized lists of all charges. The author was provided with price lists for all merchandise and services by all the funeral directors in this study. When asked to estimate the “average price” of one of their funerals, respondents’ answers ranged from $3,000 to $4,000. Typically, the casket accounted for approximately half of the total expense. Respondents indicated that less than 5% of their business involved cremations, but

Several studies have focused on how unscrupulous members of the funeral industry capitalize on the grief of their customers to reap enormous profits from the sale of caskets, vaults, burial clothing, grave markers, and a variety of unnecessary "services" (e.g., see Consumers' Union 1977; Fulton 1961; Harmer 1963; Mitford 1963).
that even then they often encouraged the purchase of a casket. One said, "A lot of people ask about cremation, because they think it's cheaper, but I usually sell them caskets even for cremation; then, if you add the cost of cremation and urn, cremation becomes more profitable than burial."

Despite this denial of the retail aspects of the job, trade journals provide numerous helpful hints on the best techniques for displaying and selling caskets, and great care is given to this process. In all the funeral homes visited, one person was charged with the primary responsibility for helping with "casket selection." In smaller family-operated funeral homes, this person usually was the funeral director's wife. In the large chain-owned companies, it was one of the "associate funeral directors." In either case, the person was a skilled salesperson.

Nevertheless, the sales pitch is wrapped in the shroud of service. During each interview, the author asked to be shown the "selection," and to be treated as if he were there to select a casket for a loved one. All the funeral directors willingly complied, and most treated the author as if he actually were there to select a casket. Interestingly, most perceived this as an actual sales opportunity, and mentioned their "pre-need selection service" and said that if the author had not already made such arrangements, they would gladly assist him with the process. The words "sell," "sales," "buy," and "purchase," were carefully avoided. Also, although by law the price for each casket must be displayed separately, most funeral homes also displayed a "package price" that included the casket and "full services." If purchased separately, the casket was always more expensive than if it was included in the package of services. This gave the impression that a much more expensive casket could be purchased for less money if bought as part of a service package. It also implied that the services provided by the firm were of more value than the merchandise.

The funeral directors rationalized the high costs of merchandise and funerals by emphasizing that they were a small price to pay for the services performed. One insisted, "We don't sell merchandise, we sell service!" Another asked, "What is peace of mind worth?" and another, "How do you put a price on relieving grief?"

Another rationalization for the high prices was the amount of work involved in arranging and conducting funeral services. When asked about the negative aspects of their jobs, most emphasized the hard work and long hours involved. In fact, all but two of the interviewees said that they did not want their children to follow in their footsteps, because the work was largely misunderstood (stigmatized), too hard, the hours too long, and "the income not nearly as high as most people think."

In addition to emphasizing the service aspect of their work, funeral directors also tend to join a number of local philanthropic and service organizations (F'ine 1975, 40). Although many businessmen find that joining such organizations is advantageous for making contacts, Stephenson (1985, 223) contended that the small-town funeral director "may be able to counter the stigma of his or her occupation by being active in the community, thereby counteracting some of the negative images associated with the job of funeral directing."

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS VERSUS OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE

Ritzer (1977, 9) pointed out that some jobs suffer from "occupational status insecurity." This

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1One funeral director estimated that he spent approximately 125 hours on each funeral, and performed on the average of 100 funerals a year. By his estimate, if he worked 24 hours per day, he would have to work 561 days a year!
clearly is the case with morticians and funeral directors. They are members of an occupation wrought with "social stigma...an occupational group which is extremely sensitive to public criticism, and which works hard to enhance its position in society" (Stephenson 1985, 225).

It seems that what funeral directors lack in occupational prestige, they make up for in socioeconomic status. Although interviewees were very candid about the number of funerals they performed every year and the average costs per funeral, most were reluctant to disclose their annual incomes. One exception was a 37-year-old funeral home owner, funeral director, and licensed embalmer in a community of approximately 25,000 who indicated that in the previous year he had handled 211 funerals and had a gross income of just under $750,000. After deducting overhead (three licensed embalmers on staff, a receptionist, a gardener, a student employee, insurance costs, etc.), he estimated his net income to have been "close to $250,000." He quickly added, however, that he worked long hours, had his 5-day vacation cut to two (because of a "funeral call that he had to handle personally") and despite his relatively high income (probably one of the two or three highest incomes in the community), he felt morally, socially, and professionally obligated to hide his wealth in the community. "I have to walk a fine line," he said, "I can live in a nice home, drive a nice car, and wear nice suits, because people know that I am a successful businessman—but, I have to be careful not to flaunt it."

One of the ways he reconciled this dilemma was by enjoying "the finer things in life" outside the community. He owned a condominium in Vail where he took ski trips and kept his sports car. He also said that none of his friends or neighbors there knew that he was in the funeral business. In fact, when they inquired about his occupation, he told them he was in insurance (which technically was true because he also was a licensed insurance agent who sold burial policies). When asked why he did not disclose his true occupational identity, he responded:

When I tell people what I really do, they initially seem "put off," even repulsed. I have literally had people jerk their hands back during a handshake when somebody introduces me and then tells them what I do for a living. Later, many of them become very curious and ask a lot of questions. If you tell people you sell insurance, they usually let the subject drop.

Although almost all the funeral directors in this study lived what they characterized as fairly "conservative lifestyles," most also indicated that they enjoyed many of the material things that their jobs afforded them. One couple rationalized their recent purchase of a very expensive sailboat (which both contended they "really couldn't afford"), by saying, "Hey, if anybody knows that you can't take it with you, it's us—we figured we might as well enjoy it while we can." Another commented, "Most of the people in this community would never want to do what I do, but most of them would like to have my income."

Summary and Conclusion

A person's occupation is an integral component of his or her personal and social identity. This study describes and analyzes how people in the funeral industry attempt to reduce and neutralize the stigma associated with their occupations. Morticians and funeral directors are particularly stigmatized, not only because they perform work that few others would be willing to do (preparing dead bodies for burial), but also because they profit from death. Consequently, members of the funeral industry consciously work at stigma reduction. Paramount among their strategies are symbolically redefining their work. This especially
involves avoiding all language that reminds their customer of death, the body, and retail sales; morticians and funeral directors emphasize the need for their professional services of relieving family grief and bereavement counseling. They also practice role distance, emphasize their professionalism, wrap themselves in a “shroud of service,” and enjoy their relatively high socioeconomic status rather than lament their lower occupational prestige.

Stephenson (1985, 231) pointed out an interesting paradox:

In spite of our current preoccupation with death, we have given it a taboo status that implies a great deal of underlying fear and anxiety. Anything that will ease our fears is used to protect us from death. We give millions of dollars to fight disease, we occupy our spare time with staying physically fit, and we blunt death’s awful impact with the use of the skills of the funeral director. While critics may consider such activities as barbaric or in bad taste, they are certainly in harmony with the basic values of American society.

Morticians and funeral directors are in a precarious social situation. They perform work that the majority of society believes is needed (Kastenbaum and Aisenberg 1973), and although their services are not legally required, they are socially demanded. Yet, their occupations place them in a paradoxical position of performing duties deemed by larger society as “necessary,” but “undesirable.” Try as they may, they cannot fully escape the stigma associated with their work.

All but two of the people in this study indicated that if they had it all to do over again, they would choose the same occupation. Yet, only one indicated that he hoped his children pursued the funeral business. And, even he commented, “… but, they need to understand that it’s hard work, and largely unappreciated.” All agreed that one of their major tasks was handling the stigma of handling the dead.

Handling the dead will not become any more glamorous in the future, and that aspect of the mortician’s work probably will continue to be stigmatized. However, if Americans become more comfortable with death and their own mortality, it also is likely that emphasizing morticians’ roles as bereavement counselors will no longer be sufficient to redefine their work. If that is indeed the case, how will morticians and funeral directors symbolically redefine their work in the future to neutralize the stigma associated with handling the dead and profiting from grief? This research suggests that there is a growing tendency for funeral directors to emphasize their roles as “pre-need counselors.” Since death is inevitable, and an aged population is more likely to recognize that, funeral directors may even more prominently tout themselves as akin to financial planners who can help in the advance planning and preparation of funeral arrangements. This could be important in neutralizing the two most stigmatizing attributes of their work. First, like previous strategies, it de-emphasizes the body work; secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it may alleviate some of the stigma associated with profiting from death and grief because they would be viewed as helping people to prepare for funeral needs in advance so that they might create a “hedge” against inflation and make important financial decisions at a time when they are not grief-stricken. Future research on the funeral industry should focus on this emerging role.

References
Questions

1. Thompson makes use of Goffman's concept of the back stage to explain how things work in the funeral home. Can you think of other settings that are divided between front and back stage?

2. Recall Goffman's notion of the "definition of the situation." What sort of definition of the situation do funeral workers want to create for their clients and potential clients—the live ones, that is?

3. What techniques do funeral workers utilize as they attempt to manage the stigma of their jobs? How successful are these techniques?

4. Thompson's review of the literature on death suggested that there is some dispute about whether Americans are in "denial" about death. How might this issue be studied empirically?

5. In your town's "yellow pages," what sorts of ads do funeral homes publish? How do these compare with the ones cited by Thompson?