

WHEN FUNERALS FAIL:  
FUNERALS THROUGH THE LENS OF INTERACTION RITUAL THEORY

by

CARSON DARRELL SCOTT

(Under the Direction of James Dowd)

ABSTRACT

In response to the growing concerns of funeral de-ritualization, this study utilizes a descriptive phenomenological approach in an attempt to understand the funeral experiences of a sample of black and white older and middle-aged adults, with a particular emphasis on under what conditions these rituals fail to produce the various positive outcomes established by the interaction ritual theory model, and to speculate as to why these breakdowns may have occurred. Breakdowns were found to occur among the conditions of bodily co-presence, barriers to outsiders, and shared mood. These findings suggest that much of the tension surrounding funerals may be tied to cultural and structural shifts that have occurred over the past century in the funeral industry as well as in the way Americans perceive and handle death.

INDEX WORDS: Funerals, Rituals, Older Adults, Baby-Boomers, Death

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CARSON DARRELL SCOTT

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by

Carson Darrell Scott

Major Professor: James Dowd

Committee: William Finlay  
Anne Glass

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

With few exceptions, biological death is considered a universal inevitability.

However, one of the most commonly occurring themes in the literature of death is that aside from its universal occurrence, almost everything else concerning it, from how we die to where we die to when we die, is historical and cultural (Emke 2002; McIlwain 2003). It is the diversity of experiences surrounding this often intensely-regarded, naturally-occurring phenomenon that makes the subject of death a central one in the study of cultural experience and explains its place of primary significance from the earliest recordings of human writing and philosophical investigation (McIlwain 2003). Just as universal as death itself, most anthropologists agree that there has been no civilization discovered and studied that has not, in some form, given social recognition of death through a process of activities, rites, and rituals associated with final deposition of the deceased's body (Leming and Dickinson 1994). Furthermore, just as the form of death differs across time and cultures, so, too, does this process of final deposition, as numerous anthropological and sociological studies have explored (Lock 1996; Emke 2002; Nesporova 2007; Bonsu and DeBerry-Spence 2008). As such, the focus of this study is the American process of final deposition, the funeral.

The funeral is a ritualized event that is generally considered to serve a variety of historically shifting human needs (Emke 2002). On an personal level, funerals can be a safe place to express sorrow, to acknowledge the individual's relationship with the deceased, and to confront the inevitability of his or her own death (Harrawood, White and Benshoff 2008).

Collectively, they can affirm communal bonds and strengthen the connections of those that survive the loss (Kastenbaum 2004; Collins and Doolittle 2006; Walsh-Burke 2006). Overall, funerals allow the bereaved individuals an opportunity to celebrate the life of a loved one, mourn his or her death, and/or receive the support of others (Hayslip et al. 2005). Along these lines, a vast body of research covers the psychological aspects of death, dying, and grief (Kübler-Ross 1969; Osterweis, Solomon, and Green, 1984; Stroebe et al. 2001). However, the progression of sociological research on the American funeral as a ritual has been largely insufficient and outdated, with the majority of work now at least 20 years old (e.g. Durkheim 1912; Radcliffe-Brown 1922; Mitford 1963; Mills 1969; Aries 1975; Blauner 1977).

As more and more research indicates a shift in societal views on death and grief over the last few decades (Kselman 1987; Irion 1991; O’Gorman 1998; Kastenbaum 2004; Hayslip and Peveto 2005; Corr, Nabe and Corr 2006), a number of recent studies and debates have highlighted a growing concern that funerals may be undergoing a process of de-ritualization, or a loss of ritual (Emke 2002; Alexander 2004a; Walter 2005; Vale-Taylor 2009, Petrucciani 2010). Ivan Emke, in his 2002 qualitative study of funeral directors, clergymen, and their evolving place in the funeral industry, reported that both groups expressed a great deal of concern over their perceptions of funeral de-ritualization. Emke, however, remains skeptical of whether these fears reflect the reality and posits, “the changes in funeral customs are not simply the result of a de-ritualization process or an increasing discomfort with death, but they mark a shift in the practices used in ritualizing death and in the people who are charged with that responsibility” (Emke, 2002:269). Jeffrey Alexander (2004a), on the other hand posits that as society grows in complexity the centrality and effectiveness of rituals decrease to the point that they become better characterized as a form of social performance rather

than a ritual. In order to gain some insight into this debate, research focused on the current state of the American funeral ritual and how its recent historical transitions may be affecting individual attitudes and experiences is clearly warranted.

This study is a qualitative attempt to understand the funeral ritual experience of a sample of black and white older and middle-aged adults. In response to the growing concerns of de-ritualization, this study is particularly concerned with the questions of under what conditions funerals fail to produce the various positive outcomes attributed to them as rituals and to speculate as to why these breakdowns may have occurred. This paper contributes to the development of "Interaction Ritual Theory," a strand of theorizing that was inspired by Durkheim's sociology of religion; founded by Erving Goffman; and grounded in the continued work of Randall Collins, who first developed the interaction ritual model (Collins, 2004). It is through this framework that this study defines its terms and orients its interpretations.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

This project is based on data obtained in a qualitative study conducted between May 2006 and May 2008 by Anne Glass and Linda Samuel, which consisted of a series of in-depth and open-ended interviews, in which respondents were asked about their past experiences with a variety of end-of-life topics. The sample population consisted of 50 adults living in Georgia and South Carolina identified through the use of a community-based snowball referral method of sampling.

Exactly half of the participants were selected from the baby-boom population with ages ranging from 42 to 63<sup>1</sup> and the remaining half consists of an older population whose ages ranged from 70 to 99. The sample contains an equal number of white and African-American informants, the interviewers having intentionally oversampled African-Americans to obtain sufficient data for comparison purposes (Glass and Samuel 2011). However, the sample does not contain an even distribution of males and females, with only 8 males in the baby-boomer set and 5 in the older set. There is some support in the literature that despite the gender differences in death rates and caregiver experience, when other variables were taken into account gender did not prove to be a significant variable concerning funeral experiences and attitudes (Hayslip et al. 2007; Harrawood, White and Benshoff 2008). Thus, gender, though noted, is not a main focus of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> There is some disagreement as to which birth years comprise the Baby Boom generation. Some researchers, such as William Strauss and Neil Howe (1992) in their book *Generations: The history of America's future, 1584 to 2069*, define it as those born between 1943 and 1960. The U.S. Census Bureau (2001), however, defines the demographic as those born between 1946 and 1964. For the purposes of this study, the parameters for

The resulting data was examined using NVivo software, in which the transcripts could be coded by themes. A descriptive phenomenological approach was utilized. This is a reflective method that seeks to capture not only the experience of the participant, but also the very essence of that experience, its conditions, and its implications (Ray 1994; Glass and Samuel 2011). This method of interpretation involves the processes of describing, comparing, distinguishing, and inferring to arrive at thematic patterns and then integrating relevant research findings from the greater body of literature to ground those themes in the larger realm of social observation (Ray 1994; Bordere 2008). The theories utilized in the present study were applied after the completion of these interviews and were not a guiding feature of the interview process.

## CHAPTER 3

### INTERACTION RITUALS

Rituals have long been considered a fundamental element of not only the culture of a society, but also as a necessary aspect for the constitution and the stabilization of all forms of social life (Rappaport 1999; Collins 2004). They vary in size and scope from the more mundane day-to-day interactions detailed in the work of Erving Goffman (1961), to the more large and intense rituals described by Emile Durkheim (1912) during the development of his concept of collective effervescence, and have even been theorized as the basis for the development of language and music (Bellah 2005). Ritualized practices play a significant role in providing meaning, focus and direction, and a sense of stability to social behavior. They can function as vehicles for emotions, as sites for expression, and as physical markers of community solidarity. Moreover, ritualization allows the handling and overcoming of crucial moments in the life of a society, such as in times of disaster and social disruption (Emke 2002, Alexander 2004, Thornburg, Knottnerus and Webb 2007, Petrucciani 2010).

As mentioned earlier, the funeral as a ritual has long been used not only for honoring the dead, but also as a source of social support and group cohesion. From a functionalist perspective, as depicted in the work of Radcliffe-Brown (1922), funerals are the means through which groups reintegrate after the loss of a member. Thus, they act as a way of maintaining social solidarity and stability in a time of great uncertainty. Jeffrey Alexander further underlines this point in his 2004 article concerning the events of 9/11. In this article he emphasizes the breakdown in everyday ritual processes that occurred immediately

following the terrorist actions but goes on to detail the unifying of the population through ritualized mourning practices and patriotic rhetoric that provided a “counter-reading” of the events and allowed the populous to overcome the bulk of that social instability.

As a ritual, funerals represent a structured reaction to an oftentimes-major life disruption. The aim of this study was to ascertain the conditions under which funerals fail to produce the social solidarity and therapeutic atmosphere that researchers claim they provide and to speculate as to why these breakdowns may have occurred, with regards to a sample of middle-aged and older adults. Thus, the first step was to establish the conditions and expected outcomes that comprise a “successful” funeral ritual.

In order to determine the criteria for how and when a ritual can be said to fail, I turned to the work of Randall Collins and his model of Interaction Rituals (figure 1.1). As previously mentioned, this model emerged from the theoretical traditions set forth by Durkheim and Goffman. Based on Collins’ interpretations of their work, he claims that while rituals are universal among societies to a point of saturation, they vary in the intensity of their experience as a result of variations across certain common components. These common components that Collins designates as “ritual ingredients” interact with and intensify one another to produce a number of specified results he refers to as “ritual outcomes.” Thus, this theory gives us an empirical mechanism that demonstrates the ingredients that go into making a ritual, the process by which a condition of collective effervescence or collective consciousness is built up, and the results or products of a ritual (Collins 2004).

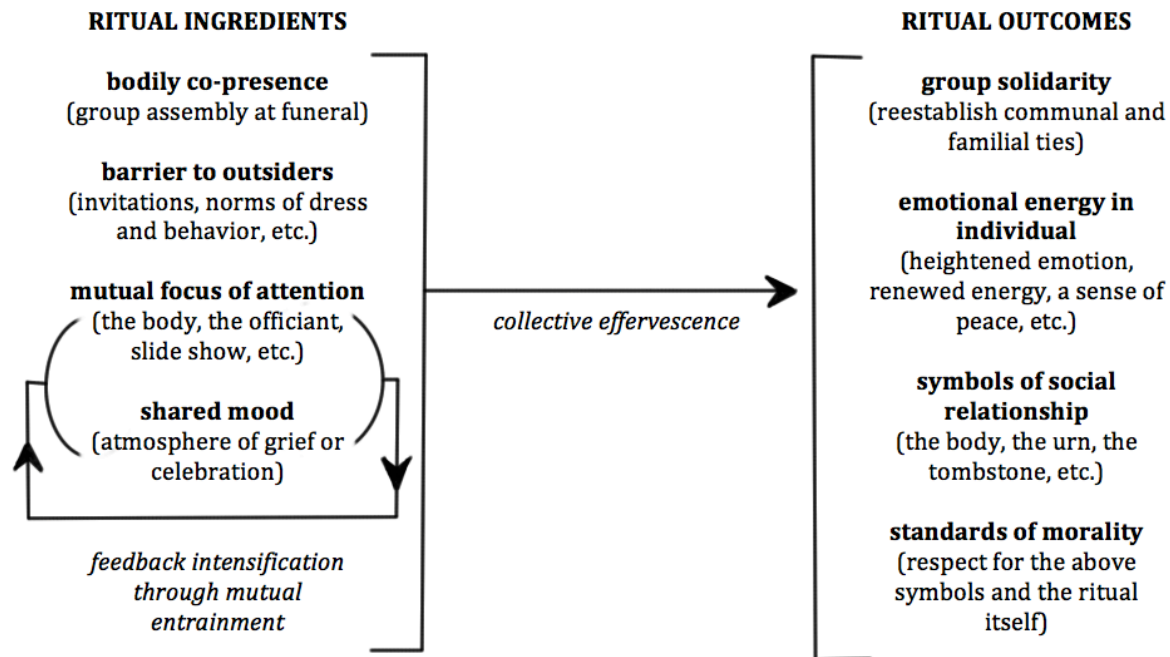


FIGURE 1.1: The Interaction Ritual Model

The first ingredient in the Interaction Ritual Model is “bodily co-presence.” When human beings gather together in the same place, “there is a physical attunement: currents of feeling, a sense of wariness or interest, a palpable change in the atmosphere. The bodies are paying attention to each other, whether at first there is any great conscious awareness of it or not” (Collins 2004:34). In the case of funerals, this would take the form of relatives and friends convening at some venue, such as church, the cemetery, the funeral parlor, et cetera. The second ingredient is what Collins calls the “barrier to outsiders.” These are boundaries that establish a sense of who is taking part in the ritual and who is excluded from the ritual, and these boundaries further act to enhance the feeling of unity and purpose within the group. The “barrier to outsiders” ranges from exclusions placed on who is allowed to attend

the ceremony (i.e. family only) to the norms of dress and behavior that define who belongs and who does not. The third ingredient is the “mutual focus of attention,” where those present focus their attention on a common object or activity and, at the same time, become aware of their shared focus, further enhancing the awareness of their co-presence. At funerals, the focus tends to be on the body, the officiant, or, in more recent cases, a picture or slide show of the now deceased. The fourth ingredient is what Collins refers to as “shared mood.” This is the intensification of emotion that results from the increased awareness derived from the aforementioned three ingredients. It is the awareness of a similar emotional reaction among one’s fellow participants, regarding the mutual focus that resonates with one’s own emotions, and it acts to reinforce and heighten the mood even further. This can be seen in funerals where a sad atmosphere persists and the participants are both aware of it and become increasingly susceptible to it, as seen in the following account of an African American baby-boomer detailing the loss of his mother and the emotional powder keg that erupted after he broke down:

Oh man it was utter chaos erupted. I think I led it off and the other kids were just, I mean bawling. I mean we were, if you think about it, eight children, oldest one being thirteen... Of course I guess we didn’t know how to act. We didn’t know how to respond other than just weeping. I change that, we were wailing. I mean we were bitterly wailing. (black male baby-boomer)

The awareness of shared emotion and its progressive, escalating nature is further exemplified in the following account:

I remember my son being very emotional, and that was very difficult for me, because I could feel his heart just crushing um and didn't realize how much of an impression it was going to be for him and that was as we were walking... And I remember my husband wanting him to,

"don't don't don't don't cry"... it may have been that he was afraid he might become more emotional too, that may have been it. I don't know, he was obviously very upset. But other than that, I mean everybody was tearful and sobbing a little bit but not a huge amount. I think it was more a progression. (white female baby-boomer)

The continual feedback and build-up of these four ingredients, leads to what Durkheim referred to as "collective effervescence," a fleeting moment of heightened emotional excitement resulting from moments of high intersubjectivity and emotional entrainment. Although this peak moment is only temporarily experienced, "it carries over into more prolonged effects when it becomes embodied in sentiments of group solidarity, symbols or sacred objects, individual emotional energy, and standards of morality" (Collins 2004:36). These four lasting effects comprise what Collins calls the ritual "outcomes." Thus, a successful ritual hinges on the presence of the four ingredients, and its strength can be measured in terms of the degree to which it is able to produce these four outcomes. Inversely, a ritual can be said to fail insofar as it lacks one or more of the necessary ingredients and it fails to produce the desired outcomes. For Collins (2004), when a ritual fails:

There is a low level of effervescence, the lack of momentary buzz, no shared entrainment at all or disappointingly little. There are further signs of failure on the output side: little or no feeling of group solidarity; no sense of one's identity as affirmed or changed; no respect for the group's symbols; no heightened emotional energy-either a flat feeling unaffected by the ritual, or worse yet, a sense of drag, the feeling of boredom and constraint, even depression, interaction fatigue, a desire to escape. (P. 51)

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Amongst the myriad of end-of-life topics discussed during these interviews, participants reported 263 self-identified significant experiences with the death of either a friend, relative, or acquaintance. Figure 1.2 gives a breakdown of these deaths by the race and generation of the respondent, and by the decade in which they occurred. It is interesting to note some of the patterns that emerge in this figure, both in terms of the greater number of deaths experienced by the baby-boomers (55%) versus the older adults (45%), as well as the noticeable swells in the ages at which deaths tended to occur, seeming to peak in the participants' late twenties, then recede only to rise again at around age 50. Of the 263 identified deaths, participants reported and described their attendance at 169 funerals and memorial services (Figure 1.3). Having established a working model for ritual success and failure, I turned to the transcripts of the interviews and found, almost immediately, an abundance of funeral experiences and anecdotes characterized by the same types of criticism, disappointment, and blasé reactions that Collins (2004) detailed in his description of failed rituals. The following findings exemplify the types of interaction ritual chain breakdowns and negative experiences characteristic of this sample.

#### BODILY CO-PRESENCE

Funerals, by their very definition, are social events that require the presence of at least a few participants (Leming and Dickinson 1994; Carlson 1998). Therefore, one of the most easily observed forms of funeral breakdown occurs when mourners either refuse to

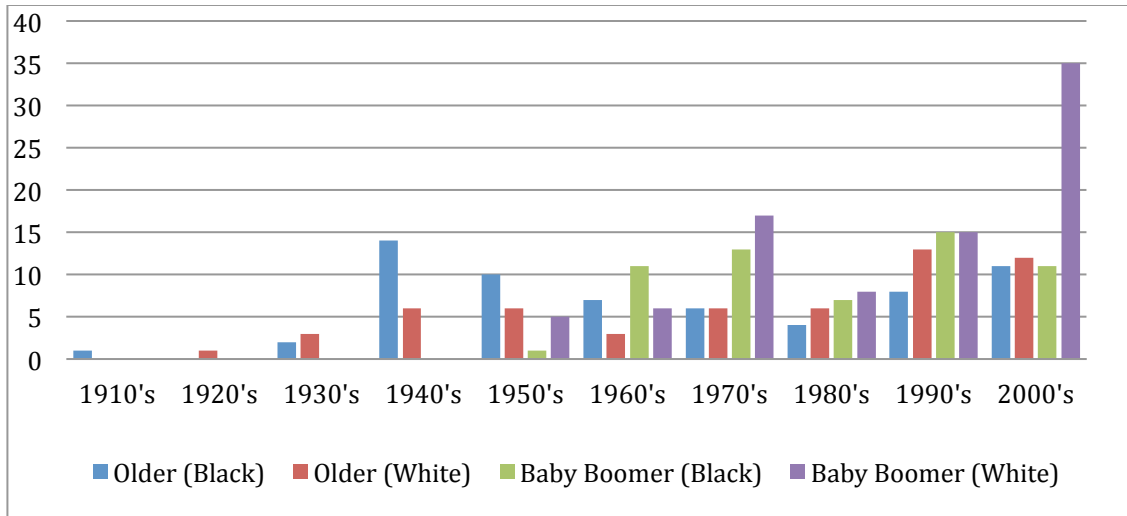


FIGURE 1.2 Significant Deaths Reported by Decade.

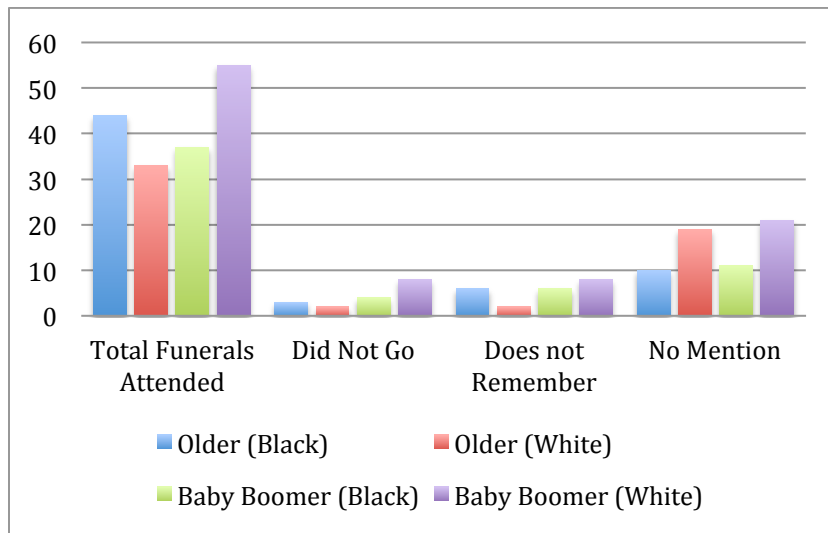


FIGURE 1.3 Reported Funeral Attendance.

attend or are unable to attend the funeral, subsequently resulting in a lack of the essential ingredient, bodily co-presence. The prevalence of this theme is reflected in the number of deaths experienced in which the respondent had no memory of attendance (6.1%) or distinctly remembered not attending (6.5%), as seen in Figure 1.3.

From the point-of-view of the one not attending, whatever benefits might have been had from their participation are forfeited, as is lamented in the following example:

I could not make myself go to that funeral. I didn't really know it until a friend called me I was in Stillwater and I was gonna drive to Austin and I got to Oklahoma City and I couldn't go any further...At that time in my life, I would have had a real hard time. I would regret to this day I didn't go to her funeral. (white male baby-boomer)

Another baby-boomer expressed her awareness of the negative emotional toll nonattendance can have on the group attending:

I didn't go to her funeral yesterday. I had these houseguests coming, and I used that as an excuse. It wasn't a valid one, but anyway ah I didn't go, but I normally would have, because in the first place so many of us have so few contemporaries left, and it's a hurt for the family not to see as many friends out. (white female baby-boomer)

Furthermore, several of the older respondents reported a growing cynicism towards funerals and reported a drop in their own attendance, as seen in the following statements and exchanges:

Yes, in the past, I used to go to funerals just if I knew you, I'd go, you know, but I don't do that anymore...I just don't care about going. (older white female)

I: You don't like them. So, you don't attend them?

S: Not if I can help it. (older black female)

Going to a funeral, it would tear my nerves up. So, if I could get around not going, I wouldn't go. (older black female)

I: So, you mentioned how you have had a lot of funerals at the church. Is that something you noticed as you got older that you had to go to a lot more funerals than you used to?

S: Well, I don't go to funerals.

I: You don't.

S: It's too (hot)...Yeah, I used to go, but I don't. (older white female)

In contrast to these incidences lacking in bodily co-presence, those funerals that displayed a clear sense of bodily co-presence were often accompanied by reports of greater positive experiences as well as expressed feelings of solidarity, as seen in the following accounts:

We also had what I call very fulfilling grieving experiences. {laughter!} Because you know both of my parents are from big families, and on my mom's side of the family, when her father died, and subsequently her mother a couple of years after that, just this huge gathering of family. My mom and her family had always been very, very close. Never argued. Just this wonderful, wonderful family and adored their parents. I mean just really revered their parents. And so we ah you know drive to kind of this backwoods area of Kentucky where several of her brothers and sisters still live. And ah just this huge gathering of 100 plus people, aunts, uncles, cousins, and everybody comes. (white female baby-boomer)

There's so much support and for us being a large close family, there was a lot of support and it sort of blends, your in-laws sort of blend, our in-laws anyway, sort of blend together, so my family came in just like it were their dad you know and so, I don't know, I think we have a phenomenal family support. (white female baby-boomer)

#### BARRIERS TO OUTSIDERS

Another ingredient of the Interaction Ritual Model, in which breakdowns resulted in a negative and un-gratifying funeral experience, were those in which the participants felt that

their groups' "barriers to outsiders" were, in some way, violated<sup>2</sup>. This is probably best exemplified by a middle-aged respondent detailing her traumatic experience at her father's funeral:

It was very public because here you are in Arlington Cemetery. So there's tourists and you know it was kind of strange...I was in a total emotional crisis and yet I had to be strong. I am in public with tourists taking pictures. It was like a weird...bizarre thing... and I just wanted to run away. I didn't care where, I just wanted to go anywhere but where I was. (white female baby-boomer)

These feelings were not limited to the encroachment of passersby but also extended to those attending the funeral that were felt to be insincere in their attendance and viewed as not part of the real ceremony. This can be observed in the following statements from two of the older white female respondents:

Oh, yeah, everybody in the public goes to a funeral just to sign the book. I really think that's what it's all about. Yeah, I was there, I signed the book. (older white female)

Yes, some people go just to see how you are put away. You'd be surprised at the people that just go to funerals just to see what kind of casket they put you in or how much money they spent. (older white female)

In these instances, when participants felt that their ritual was being impinged on or that the other participants were not sincere in their observation of the ritual, they became distracted from the mutual focus of the ceremony and did not report any sort of group solidarity taking place. In contrast, when there were no instances of barrier intrusion and

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<sup>2</sup> The struggle to maintain the boundaries to outsiders during funeral rituals is perhaps best highlighted in the series of funeral protests executed by the Westboro Baptist church and the attempts made by groups such as the Patriot Guard Riders, a motorcyclist group primarily composed of veterans, to shelter and protect the funerals from these protests at the request of the deceased's family (Lavandera 2006).

when all participants followed the forms and norms of the ritual, respondents reported much better outcomes, as seen in this baby-boomer's fond reminiscence:

And ah just this huge gathering of 100 plus people, aunts, uncles, cousins, and everybody comes. I remember my grandfather's funeral there was one cousin that couldn't make it and that was it. I mean everybody else was there. And it was a celebration of my grandfather's life. And ah that's really what the whole thing was about. My grandfather was, he laughed a lot, he had this great laugh and he loved the color red, and he especially loved Cardinals. So, at his funeral all of his children decided they needed to wear red to his funeral... Everybody that spoke had a very deep knowledge of you know my grandparents. (white female baby-boomer)

#### MUTUAL FOCUS OF ATTENTION

The third ingredient, the "mutual focus of attention," arguably consists of focus not just on a common object but also on a common activity. In the respondents accounts there was a great deal of variation in the funerals' object of focus (e.g. the body, photographs, the officiant, et cetera). Despite these variations in form, there appeared to be a consistent object of mutual focus amongst all the respondents' experiences. However, in terms of, the activity of mutual focus some breakdowns did occur. Perhaps the best example of these occurrences took place when the focus of the officiant's discussions would diverge from the desires of the family and the participants, particularly when preachers heading the ritual would place the focus on the saving of the audiences' souls instead of focusing on the life of the deceased. These instances prove to be frustrating for the families as seen in the following accounts:

- S: You know I am not real fond of even you know a white service where you aren't talking about the loss, you aren't talking about the person you know, have you ever been to one where they just try to save your soul?
- I: Yeah.
- S: And you know it's almost like oh incidentally there's a coffin up here? I just don't like that. I would prefer that we acknowledge why we are there...
- I: ...more personal.
- S: Yes. And you know if you want to bring faith into it fine, but the reason we are bringing faith into it is because we have lost somebody here. This is the person we've lost, and it doesn't have to be morbid or anything you know I think the family does the way they need to do it because it really is for the family. They are the main reason for the service. If you are not family, it's an important thing, but if it's not family, usually you can handle it without benefit of the service, but I think the family needs something. (white female baby-boomer)
- I: The traditional funerals that you went to and the minister spoke, was it directly about the person who had died or was it more about saving souls kind of things?
- S: Both. Ah, I insisted that, a lot of the funerals that I have attended (generally was), yeah. He was fine. You are the one we need to be worried about. Yeah. And I had, I despise that, really despise it whether that's right or wrong and so I did say to my mother you know when you are talking to him about, please say to him this is not a revival. This is a celebration of our father's life and that's the way it's gonna go. And if he wants to save people, then he can do that when we are leaving the gravesite. (white female baby-boomer)

## SHARED MOOD

Although breakdowns in the variables of “bodily co-presence,” “barriers to outsiders,” and “mutual focus of attention” occurred in numerous participants’ funeral experiences, it was the breakdowns in “shared mood,” namely the apparent disconnect between the types of emotions expressed during the ritual and the degree of expression considered appropriate, that proved to be the most common source of respondents reporting a lack of group solidarity, emotional fulfillment, or any of the other ritual outcomes. Upon analysis of the data, the most prominent emotional disconnects occurred almost exclusively along one of two lines. The first is characterized by a belief that the emotional expressions of the other participants were too intensely and openly sad and/or emotional, as in the following respondent’s case:

They used to have some really emotional people that would boo hoo at the funerals and it was like, "oh my gosh" and you're almost didn't, you were afraid what they were going to do the next time around because they were very melodramatic it seemed like and yelling, almost crying really out loud, you know, but those people are not around anymore...I remember early on, going to a funeral, and them bellowing out and it's like, 'oh no!' And I almost feel like it was an attention getting type of thing or something, you know or sorrowful. (white female baby-boomer)

Contradictorily, the other is characterized by a belief that the other participants were not acting sad enough; the atmosphere was too light or inappropriately celebratory, as exemplified in these responses:

I didn't particularly care about the atmosphere and the environment. It just seems like to me, it seemed as though they didn't take the situation serious, that my aunt was gone...There were some things, remarks made and I knew they meant them in jest, but saying things like how

she couldn't sing, and how she would be behind the preacher singing and off key and things like that...it didn't set well with me. (black male baby-boomer)

Well, you know we have had so many funerals at our church and to me it was more or less of a show than a funeral, and I don't like that. (older white female)

According to Collins (2004), the success of any ritual is, in part, dependent on the presence of a shared mood, in which a participant's emotions, through engaging in a common action or event, become increasingly entwined with those of their fellow participants, creating the experience of one's self as part of a larger, unified collective, or what Emile Durkheim calls the "collective consciousness." Thus, the ritual outcomes of group reintegration and emotional fulfillment are dependent not only on group assembly and a mutual focus, but also on a shared mood. Based on the observed emotional disconnect occurring in the various accounts of those interviewed, as well as an analysis of the history of funerals in America, I propose that funerals are in a state of emotional transformation punctuated by instances in which traditional expectations clash with the more modern concept of death.

#### HISTORICAL DIVERGENCE OF THE FUNERAL RITUAL

Upon examining the earliest experiences of the older adult participants and, to a lesser extent, the older participants from the middle-aged sample, the most common themes concerning the experience of death and funerals were the outward projection of grief and the confrontation of death. The usual place of death was in the home, both in terms of the actual dying as well as the body preparations following that death. Third parties (i.e. funeral directors) played only a small, supplementary role in the preparation of the dead and in the arrangement of the funeral itself, as the family performed most of these tasks at home

(Leming and Dickinson 1994; O’Gorman 1998; Lundgren and Houseman 2010). These themes are evident in the following respondents’ statements:

No, when my, when my, when I was a child, back there when people died they just, uh, we were children like in the 40’s cause we moved from Lake City up here in 1940, and I was seven years old when we moved up here. And, like people died back then, they just bring them and wash them off and lay them at the house. At night, you know, people sit up all night. And the next day they take them to the church and have the viewing then, that’s all. You know that’s all there is...Yeah, wash them up and put their clothes on, what they are going to bury them in. And they call it laying them on a cooling board...It was just like a table, like a long table and they, that’s what they put the dead people on, lay them on until they got ready to put them in the box...it was in the house. On the table. (older black female)

Then, you know, family, old people took funerals a whole lot different. They took them a whole lot harder than what we do today. I can remember my grandmother and her sister having a hard time dealing with it at the funeral. They were really distraught over the death. (older black female)

It was when they buried people back then, they actually put them in the ground and threw the dirt on them in front of your face and my brothers, we were all crying cause they were busy throwing dirt on the coffin and my little brother waved at him and said, “Bye granddaddy.” And, oh everybody just hooped and hollered, just hooped and hollered, it was the most gut wrenching experience I have ever had. (older black female)

They just they, the preacher would just talk over them at the cemetery and then the person and their friend who digged the grave themselves, then they would have a plow line they stick up under there and they stand two for one on one end and on the other and they let the thing down in the grave and they dug the grave. Way back yonder, you see, they didn’t have, the undertaker didn’t dig the grave, the person would dig the grave and their friend would go out

there and dig it. And then some of them, made the caskets, lot of them caskets was made.

(older black male)

In these respondents' accounts, death was depicted as clear, confronted, and mourned. But upon examination of the more recent accounts, particularly within the middle-aged sample, new funeral themes emerge, namely the celebration of life and the denial of death:

I guess you're not old enough to know but back then it was more mournful, you know...Yeah, you know like peoples crying and weeping. Feelings now are different from feeling back then. You go to a funeral now you hardly ever see peoples cry...You know they just sit there. You might see a few tears roll down, but back then it was like [laughs] people would scream and holler and fall all on the casket and all that kind of stuff. But now they don't do that. And with my husband it was like, it was more like you was just sittin' in church on a Sunday morning enjoying a rejoicing service. Like celebrating his life, not his death. (older black female)

The term "celebration of life" appeared in a number of the participants' most recent descriptions. They report an increase in laughter or humor at the funeral such as during the eulogies. There was more mention of informal story swapping, and an increase in the use of personalized touches in the ceremony, such as the inclusion of pictures or favorite songs.

I mean it was a, but it was the kind of funeral that where everybody celebrated her life. There was no weeping and wailing other than the fact that they had lost this person (older white female)

At the end of his funeral, his son, who is also a musician played "When the Saints Go Marching In" and the entire song came through the entire congregation marched out. So, again it was a celebration of their life. Not a big somber you know you are going to a better place (older white male)

It is not a sad time. It used to be I do remember a little bit about earlier funerals where you never heard laughter. Everybody was very droopy, down in the mouth kind of thing. (older white male)

My youngest daughter actually sat with my sister and went over the Internet and picked out three songs. One that a friend had wanted her to do, which was My Old Friend by Tim McGraw and one was ah LeAnn Rimes doing, oh, I can't think of the song now. My mind went blank. It was a very popular song, I want to say it's Amazing Grace, she did Amazing Grace in a cappella, and then there was the other song was a song that came from my sister's church. It's a song about now I'm okay you know, don't worry about me, I'm okay. And all three of those songs were put on a CD and played. And everybody commented on how great the funeral was. (white female baby boomer)

Sharing and laughter about some of the funny things. The one that ah, which was it where the, well Woods, they told just funny things that their mother had done and the congregation was laughing and enjoying it as if they had been there when this happened you know. And I think, I think more and more I think ministers are perhaps better you know the idea of the old, you know minister with the gloom on his face and the, everything draped in black and all of that I think is, I see other nationalities for instance you know where the women are tearing their hair and all of this stuff. I don't know how much, I don't see that trying to, sitting for days you know, with the body and so on. I think we are much more relaxed. (older white male)

In a 2008 study, Tashel Bordere reports finding a similar celebratory atmosphere in her examination of a Louisiana post-death ritual known as the second-line. Second-lines entail a group of musicians who lead a procession of the deceased's friends and family past all of the deceased's formerly favorite local spots. It is generally an upbeat ceremony filled

with laughter and songs. Emke (2002), in his study of Canadian funeral rituals, and Collins and Doolittle (2006), in their reflections on the experiences of African-American Kentuckians, report similar observances.

There were also several trends that indicate an increasing denial of death. There was a decrease in the prevalence of open-caskets and a greater insistence that they only occur when the body appears more life-like as opposed to instances in which it has been clearly ravaged by disease. The primacy of the body during the ceremony has also appeared to decrease with more recent accounts introducing the use of photos depicting the person engaging in their various life activities as the focus or the participation in memorial services in which the body is not even present. (Aries 1977, O’Gorman 1998) These responses exemplify this emerging preference:

Ah, not really. I am not a, I would prefer a memorial service without the body there. (white female baby-boomer)

The best I have seen is a guy at work that died. He was a chemist. His family was there, his girls, but he had pictures and things like that. I think the casket was open, but it wasn't like the main focus of the funeral. The main focus was the series of five or six pictures of him, alive as a student. He went to Stanford. They had a couple of write-ups about him when he was going to school and it was things that most of us didn't really know about him and that was, I thought that was a great job of the family to do that. So, I think from that standpoint if I look at funerals, I like the ones that celebrate life; they seem to be the best where it's a celebration of someone's life and what they did. (white male baby-boomer)

Well, he had that heart trouble which made his face swell and his neck come down over his collar, but see that was from heart. So, when the body came to the funeral home up here, I told them I said Paul I don't want the casket open. (older white female)

I: Was it an open casket funeral?

S: Uh-huh. You know at that time that's what they had, it was open casket, you know. I said never [chuckles] you know once we got out. It's closed now; we don't do that anymore.

I: Your family doesn't do that anymore – open caskets? It's always a closed casket funeral?

S: Yeah. And once we come in that's it, you know. (older black female)

Perhaps the most implicative element is the removal of death from the setting of the home and the clear increase in the presence of and the reliance on third parties (hospitals, funeral homes, etc.) in the preparation and handling of the body, as well as during the planning of the funeral. Instead of taking place in the home, as in the case of many of the older participants' early experiences, the viewings increasingly were held in either the hospital or the funeral home. Thus, death has been effectively removed from one's sight and personal responsibility. In a 2010 study, Sanders reports that this reliance has grown to the point that funeral homes now have a hegemony over funeral rites, in which they have become the public's source of information on "how to dispose of their dead, how to memorialize and remember the dead, and how to celebrate death with others in the community" (P. 50). The following comment exemplifies the now more prevalent route which bodies take post-death:

If you want to see him before you know he gets to the funeral home or anything because the lady said you know you could come back to the hospital and she could see him....Yeah. Even though you know he would be in the morgue there at the hospital she still got to see him.

(black female baby-boomer)

One possible explanation for the observed shifts in the respondents' experiences with death and funerals is that the type of death has a significant effect on the nature and level of emotions experienced and, thus, the form of the funeral. Parkes (2001) reports that an individual's response to a loved one's death varies significantly depending on a number of factors, such as the cause of death, the age at the time of death, or the quality of the relationship between that person and the deceased. In the following examples, deaths which can be categorized as accidental, violent, premature and/or sudden (Acute), invoke a much different emotional response and subsequent funeral experience than ones that can be categorized as "natural" or prolonged (Chronic). The first examples consist of responses concerning deaths that were accidental, violent, premature and/or sudden (Acute) and are accompanied by strong feelings of sadness and loss:

I was 19 years old when my mother died. She was a diabetic. She wasn't that sick. We had went downtown Saturday night. She was sitting on the step with my oldest son, and she had a diabetic attack, and it just took her right on then...And when they had the funeral, she died and she had the funeral and it was a very sad funeral because all six of us children was living, and I just thought we couldn't make it without her. (older black female)

He had committed suicide so it was kind of out of the blue and the daughters were throwing themselves on the casket at the end so it was very, very emotional and sad. (white female baby-boomer)

And so when someone died, they had gone on to a better place and their suffering was over and those kinds of things. When I was 16 was probably when I had my first death that didn't fit that belief system. My mother's younger sister died at 27. She had lupus, and she left two children who were four and six. That didn't fit. That didn't fit the going on to a better place

and being out of your misery and all of that, although she had had a horrible time with that illness. That one didn't fit that belief system then and it doesn't fit that belief system now.  
(white female baby-boomer)

Now, that time I think has a lot to do with why I chose, and I say chose not to remember dates so much because of the death of my brother because that crushed me spiritually, emotionally. It did a lot to me because I witnessed his death. He was killed due to a stray bullet fired by a gentleman in the street, and my brother and I were on the front porch of my neighbor's house at the time, and unfortunately, the gentleman who held the gun in his hand, he spent what you would call the chamber on the gun, you know, that holds the bullets, he spent the chamber on the gun that the gun fired and the bullet struck my brother in his heart... he was younger than me... I got angry with God on that one. I felt like God had let me down. (black male baby-boomer)

In contrast, the following excerpts reflect the more typical responses to deaths that can be categorized as “natural” or prolonged (Chronic), especially when death occurs after a prolonged episode of dementia:

That was the first time I experienced somebody's death as more of a celebration of a life rather than a tragedy, rather than you know just a gut wrenching shocking, you know horrible event, you know what I mean? I mean, I missed her you know, but ah, yeah. I mean you can hardly call 102 a tragic death. {laughter!} (white female baby-boomer)

Another person died who was much older and, you know, a more natural kind of timely death.  
(white female baby-boomer)

[Concerning an uncle with dementia] His funeral I thought was very odd. Just from the fact that I wasn't seeing his children grieving like I had seen my mom and my aunts and uncles and all of us at my grandparent's funeral, and I actually asked my cousin about it, and she said

you know he's been gone for a couple of years. I mean this was really just...the end of a long dying process that they were all grieved out by the time he died. (white female baby-boomer)  
[Concerning a husband with Alzheimer's] I had had time to grieve all these years that he was really, he wasn't home for four years, and I had time to grieve so I wasn't in tears then. (older white female)

The work of O'Gorman (1998) suggests a possible explanation for these reactions to the deaths of loved ones who had dementia, in her description of a contemporary phenomenon known as social death. Social death entails that in our modern, highly medical-oriented society, a person who has received a label of "terminally ill" undergoes a process of increasing isolation and dispossession of their roles as if they were dead already.

If it is in fact true that the type of death greatly influences the experience of death and the form of funerals then one could hypothesize that the observed shifts in funerals as a whole may be in part the result of an overall shift in how we die.

The experience of death in America has changed over the past century in both its timing and its form (Leming and Dickinson 1994). For example, life expectancies (See Table 1.1) have increased dramatically over the past century. Between the years of 1909, the year in which this study's oldest respondent was born, 1943, the year in which this study's oldest baby-boomer was born, and 2006, the time in which these interviews began, the life expectancy of each group increased exponentially, with the black male life expectancy more than doubling (Arias 2011).

According to the President's Council on Bioethics (2005), a growing percentage of the population is living through longer periods of dependence and disability, including and especially, long periods of dementia. "In 1900, most people died from accidents or infections

TABLE 1.1: Life Expectancy by Race and Gender.

	White Female	White Male	Black Female	Black Male
1909	54.2	50.9	37.3	34.2
1943	65.7	63.2	56.1	55.4
2006	80.6	75.7	76.5	69.7

Source. Arias, Elizabeth. 2011. "United States Life Tables, 2007." National Vital Statistics Reports. 59(9):1-60.

without suffering a long period of disability. In 2000, people suffered, on average, two years of severe disability on the way to death. Acute causes of death (such as pneumonia, influenza, and septicemia) are in decline; prolonged causes of death from age-related degenerative diseases (such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and emphysema) are on the rise" (P. 12).

In 2003 researchers at the Rand Corporation sought to explain and quantify the various trajectories of death in an effort to describe how the character of aging and dying has changed over the past decades. They report that the largest and fastest growing group now dies only after prolonged dwindling, usually lasting many years, as is the typical course of death from dementia or generalized frailty. This trajectory is characterized as gradual, with steady decline, enfeeblement, and growing dependency, often lasting a decade or longer. According to their findings, roughly forty percent of all deaths currently are classifiable as this type, highlighting a dramatic and socially significant change in how Americans die (Lynn and Adamson, 2003). These trends coincide with the increasing mention of "celebration of life" funerals observed in the sample and might, thus, be a potential source of this observed change in the funeral ritual and the subsequent emotional disconnect between groups whose experiences and expectations for funerals have been more aligned with an emotionally

charged traumatic or sudden death versus those who have predominantly experienced more expected and “timely” deaths.

### EXCEPTIONS

Although the “denial of death” was an increasingly common theme in the subjects’ responses as well as in numerous other studies, in some of the most recent respondents’ accounts, there are themes that appear to counter this observation. For instance, some respondents reported a growing acceptance in the need for and the use of counseling and communication about death:

Our parent's generation is something that, and it's not just death, I don't think they communicate it the way we do about a lot of things and death being one of them. They were almost from my experiences with my family is, you know, if you don't talk about it then... my generation is quite different, I think, at least I am, and the people that I know are about ah expressing your feelings and talking about things. (white female baby-boomer)

So, he worried about his self because people were dying...So, it was a challenge for a while, and you know we talked to him about it and took him to a pediatrician who sit down and you know had a good conversation with him... The pediatrician advised us you know and did a good job of having conversations with him, and it seemed to have done well. (white female baby-boomer)

It was during a period where I, in retrospect, I've come to understand that, you know cancer used to be like AIDS, people didn't talk about who had cancer and he was dying of cancer, but we were not privy to the information. It was not until he was like at his deaths door that, I think my parents found out. (black female baby-boomer)

No one had ever talked to me and until this day no one had ever asked, well, I shouldn't say to this day, but up until about a year ago, no one had ever asked me what was my brother's last words. No one had ever approached me. (black male baby-boomer)

I: Did you ever, I mean, was it suggested to talk to somebody like counseling or anything like that?

S: No, no, no.

I: They didn't do that that much in those days.

S: No, that was in 1960 and that hadn't really been, you were supposed to just, you didn't talk to anybody about it. You were expected to survive. It wasn't proper. (older white female)

In a 1996 study, Lock emphasized a reemergence of death as a topic of discussion citing the recent media coverage and debates concerning topics such as euthanasia.

Another observed theme that counters the denial of death trend is the apparent growing backlash to the third party takeover of death. Respondents' report an increasing dissatisfaction with funeral home policies, as well as increasingly seeking alternatives to the formal funeral. These responses echo many of the concerns of Jessica Mitford (1963, 1998) as well as the findings of Bert Hayslip, Jr. (2007)

And then when they tell you how much money you gotta pay. I mean this is crazy. This money could be given to my husband's grandchildren, why am I doing this stupid thing?  
(older female black)

That was where my grandmother and my granddaddy and my ah several of my, I mean everybody that's everybody in my family has used this funeral home. Well, after my sister's death my mother said do not let them bury me. We had a bad experience you know. My mother actually went in and talked to the man that she had always talked to about you know she didn't have insurance and we need to, is there any way we can pay a little along? And he

said you know we'll just do what we can. Well, when my niece went back over with my brother-in-law to sign the stuff, ah they had changed all of that, and he said no we need all the money by the end of the month. Yeah, just come up with the money however you can, and I think it hurt my mother's feelings to the point she does not wanna be buried. Right. And that was the thing. We had used them probably 15 times or 10 times and you know. (white female baby-boomer)

George did not want a big funeral, he did not want a memorial service. He was adamant about it. So, he wanted to be cremated, but finally Peter, the oldest, came the next day and Lucy came the next day. So, we didn't do much except talk, and they went to collect his ashes. They went to sprinkle them where George wanted them, and they offered, don't I want to come? I said oh, you do it because I thought they needed some time with him. It was a very low key ending, but that's what he wanted. (older white female)

Perhaps most surprising, the inclusion of children proved to be a big change with time. Much of the literature on death and dying supports the notion that in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people were surrounded by death and experienced it as a part of their daily lives (Leming and Dickinson 1994, the President's Council on Bioethics 2005). However, according to the older respondents, children were often excluded or shielded from the funerals and viewings, and many of these older respondents did not report any experiences with funerals until well within their twenties or thirties:

Because they didn't believe in taking children to the funeral then. Now, they take them all ages (older white female)

But back then, I didn't know, children back then we didn't have the knowledge of caskets and stuff like children do now. (older black female)

Cause back then I don't think they allowed children to view bodies back then, 'cause I don't remember viewing a body. I remember we all was sittin' on a bench together. (older black female)

Well, my parents never allowed me to see a person dead. I saw my first dead person when I was 21. (white male baby-boomer)

However, many of the respondents reported attempts to include their own children more, such as in the following female baby-boomer's account:

Ah, my brother-in-law had an open casket who died a few months ago, and I asked my son if he wanted to see him... I left that open for Adam as an option. You go see Uncle Michael, you can go up to the casket if you want to, but if you don't want to, that's okay. You don't have to. And he thought about it and then he decided that [wouldn't]. (white female baby-boomer)

## CHAPTER 5

### DEFENSE OF THE MODEL

A point of contention has arisen in the literature concerning the use of the term “shared mood.” In a recent study by Heider and Werner (2010), which sought to apply the interaction ritual model to Sacred Harp Singing, they proposed that the Interaction Ritual Model should forgo the use of the term “shared mood” on the premise that:

It is not necessary that everyone present experiences the same emotional response to a given song. A room full of tear-streaked faces is not an index of identical emotions. A text about death may sharpen the grief felt by those who have recently lost a loved one, but others may experience joy at having been healed of a deadly disease. A text about sin may induce an experience of fresh guilt in some singers and forgiveness in others. The texts of other songs seem quite beside the leader’s point in calling them: sometimes the words and music go together so energetically as to bypass articulate meaning altogether in favor of rhyme, rhythm, and harmony. (P. 89)

They cite the works of two noted anthropologists of ritual, David Kertzer (1988) and Roy Rappaport (1999), in an attempt to back their claim. The thrust of their argument is that despite symbols possessing a strong emotional effect, the individual interpretation varies and it is not the invisible, ambiguous, private sentiment but rather the visible, explicit, public act of acceptance that proves to be socially and morally binding. Furthermore, they postulate that emotion is, by its very nature, not fully describable, and if this is the case, then, “how can anyone know if another feels as he or she does? It is likely that everyone responds emotionally to a particular object or event rather differently, for each person brings a

uniquely conditioned emotional and rational constitution to it. What is important is that the work elicit a response of some sort.” (Heider and Werner 2010:90)

However, in their analysis, they may be misinterpreting the concept of shared mood. It would appear, based on the examples they provide to support their claim, that they are not discussing the emotions elicited by the bodily co-presence and the true mutual focus of the ritual. What is important is not a fleeting emotional response to a single song or piece of text, but, rather, the emotions elicited by the overall experience of being together and, in this case, the act of creating something together. If the overall mood prevalent is one of recreation and joy, then it is this mood that will create the outcomes of the Interaction Ritual Model. The emotional disconnect between the traditionalist and modernist funeral ritual observed in this sample further highlights the point that when a group is emotionally divided, it not only affects the shared mood of the group, but also the bodily co-presence and the feelings of group unity. When respondents interpreted another participant’s emotional reactions as inappropriate, those participants became an “other,” one who did not conform to the norms comprising the barriers to outsiders.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study largely echo the work of Jeffrey Alexander (2004a).

In his study, Alexander theorizes that as societies become more complex, the centrality of ritual processes becomes more displaced, or less like traditional rituals and more like social performances. As a result of an increasingly divergent, heterogeneous, educated, and critical population, ritual practices have become increasingly de-fused, seeming artificial and contrived. "Contemporary societies revolve around open-ended conflicts between parties who do not necessarily share beliefs, frequently do not accept the validity of one another's intention, and often disagree even about the descriptions that people offer for acts" (P. 528) This de-fusion is viewed as an inevitable side-effect of the ongoing societal "processes of 'complexification,' 'rationalization,' and 'differentiation'" (P. 537) However, despite this tendency toward de-fusion, ritual-like processes still thrive. This is what Alexander describes as re-fusion, a temporary recovery of ritual-like behavior that overcomes societal fragmentation by creating flow and achieving authenticity, but the collective effervescence of such practices is short-lived. Ultimately, for Alexander, rituals are incompatible with a complex modern society and have transformed to social performances, which live or die by their ability to induce a sense of authenticity.

In this study, I examined the funeral experience of a sample of black and white middle-aged and older adults. Utilizing Randall Collins' Interaction Ritual Theory, I sought to explain under what conditions these rituals failed. Based on the data, evidence of

breakdowns in all of the four ritual ingredients was documented (i.e. bodily co-presence, barriers to outsiders, mutual focus of attention, and shared mood). However, out of the four “shared mood” proved to be a particularly vulnerable ritual ingredient, shadowing Alexander’s claim that as society becomes more complex and beliefs become more diversified, those with dissenting beliefs question the validity of one another’s intentions. When participants with a more traditional orientation to funerals encountered the more modern, celebratory form, they viewed it as farcical and inappropriate. When those with a modern orientation to funeral encountered the more traditional, emotional, and mournful funerals, they found them to be uncomfortable and questioned the validity of the emotions displayed. Precisely as Alexander predicted, as society grows and becomes increasingly heterogeneous, the potential for de-fusion (ritual failure) also appears to increase. Thus, ritual success and failure are tied to the history and development of their society’s culture, and it was to that larger history that this paper turned for insights into how these diverging orientations to funerals emerged.

Based on the reported histories of the respondents, as well as the larger body of research, this study represents several potential historical shifts that might account for these different orientations. First, as advancements have emerged in the health and medical industries, death has changed in its form and timing. Respondents identified fewer instances of sudden, acute causes of death and more chronic, debilitating ones. They also reported fewer “too young” deaths and more older and “timely” deaths. These different types of death appear to evoke, in most cases, different emotional responses and different funeral expectations. Based on the literature, historical shifts in individual mobility and in the strength and form of social ties could also be potential variables affecting the form and

success of funerals (Ruggles 1994, Leming and Dickinson 1994, the President's Council on Bioethics 2005). Although these types of shifts were not largely reflected in the responses of this particular sample, future studies should not neglect them.

The increased reliance on third parties in the funeral process further emphasizes Alexander's own findings in what he described as the move from ritual to theater. For Alexander, rituals have become increasingly separate from their participants; they tend to be led increasingly by social "actors" who may or may not themselves be directly involved, such as in the case of funeral directors and/or clergy, who may or may not have known the deceased or the deceased's family but have been given leadership over the ceremony. If they fail to appear authentic in their performance, the ritual itself will seem artificial and contrived, as was sometimes the case in several respondents' recollections. Alexander argues that when they do achieve a sense of authenticity, a process of re-fusion takes place, though with more temporary results than the rituals of a simpler society. For Alexander, modern societies cannot return to a system of rituals, but rather evolve to utilize ritual-like social performances.

It is here that the present study's findings diverge from those of Alexander. Despite a growing divergence in beliefs and a greater reliance on third party coordinators and "actors," this study also uncovered a growing countertrend, in which families are reclaiming pieces of the death experience and becoming more involved in the planning and execution of the ritual. In these instances, there is less questioning of authenticity, and the rituals again become immersed in the lives of their participants'. With greater communication about death and an increasing rejection of third party control, I believe that funerals have the potential to remain viable rituals. In fact, the present study supports previous findings, such

as those of Emke (2002), which suggest that funerals are not necessarily undergoing a process of de-ritualization but, rather, are undergoing a process of change to conform to the new needs of the bereaved.

Due to the nature of the sampling method, as well as the size of the sample, the present study is limited in terms of its generalizability. However, despite its limitations, this study supports the growing body of research on historical shifts that funerals have undergone and, more importantly, demonstrates some ways in which those shifts might prove to be potentially harmful to the personal utility of the funeral ritual, especially when traditionalist values clash with more modern ones. Of course, studies of greater focus and generalizability are needed in order to clarify and validate these claims. Furthermore, the present study demonstrates the utility and applicability of the Interaction Ritual Theory in the study of funeral rituals and supports the established framework of the Interaction Ritual Model, which has been the subject of recent debate. In terms of practical applications, this study suggests that through the diligent examination of cultural and generational diversity, as well as the conditions under which funerals can be said to succeed or fail, social workers and those in the funeral industry can come to better serve the diverse population and ensure that no one is lacking in the support that facing death so strongly requires.

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