Senior Theses and Projects   Student Scholarship

Spring 2017

Caskets, Closure and Cash: Explorations of Funeral Director and Client Relationships

Haley R. Thompson
Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut, haley.ray.thompson@gmail.com

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

CASKETS, CLOSURE AND CASH:

EXPLORATIONS OF FUNERAL DIRECTOR AND CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

A thesis presented by:

Haley Ray Thompson

To:

The Trinity College Department of Sociology

in partial fulfillment for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in Sociology

Advisors:

Tanetta Andersson

Stephen Valocchi

Trinity College

Hartford, Connecticut

Very special thank yous…

To Professor Stephen Valocchi for encouraging me to write a thesis, helping me making sense of my data, answering my numerous questions and everything in-between. This thesis truly could not have happened without you and my time at Trinity College would have been a lot less fun.

To Dr. Tanetta Andersson for sharing her experience in researching the sociology of death as well as the insight and guidance over the course of this project.

To Rachael Barlow for having me enroll in Professor Valocchi's class during my first-year and being a constant source of support throughout the past four years.

To the funeral directors that participated in this research and the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association for advertising my thesis.

And to Kate Marinchak for her incredible support throughout my time at Trinity College. You have helped me to better understand myself and gave me the courage to turn a tough and conflicting experience into a productive academic work.
I will never be able to thank you enough.

For my family, thank you for endless love and resilience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

With over 2.4 million funerals taking place each year, the United States funeral industry is estimated to be worth $20.7 billion. The aging population is also growing and it is estimated that 76 million Americans will be age 60 or older by 2020, an increase of 19 million since 2013 (PBS 2013). The average funeral director's salary ranges between $32,000 and $56,000, and the total employment of the funeral industry increased from 106, 263 people in 2007 to 108, 473 people in 2012, a 5.3 percent increase (U.S. Census Bureau 2012; PBS 2013). On average a funeral typically costs between $8,000 and $10,000, though in the course of my research I have heard as much as $18,000 (PBS 2013). Thus, there is clearly money to be made in the funeral industry and because death is inevitable, there will always be a market. Yet, the industry is changing. Women are making a steady return to the industry as funeral directors and 14 percent of funeral homes in the United States are corporate-owned, which are distinctly different funeral homes than the traditional family-owned funeral homes that began the industry (PBS 2013; Rontondaro 2011). Additionally, the cremation rate is at an all-time high of 41 percent (PBS 2013). With a changing industry, it becomes important to understand the ways in which funeral directors are reacting to the changes in order to keep themselves and their funeral homes in business.

While I believe that the economics of the funeral industry justify the research to follow on funeral directors and client relationships as it relates to closure, this research is also incredibly personal to me. I believe that death is an incredibly important part of our lives, yet it is not often talked about because of a fear of our own mortality. At the age of 22, I have experienced seven close deaths in my life; my great-aunt, my four grandparents, my cousin and my father. While I had grieved somewhat differently for each loved one I lost, it was following the death of my father that I became intimately connected with Arlie Russell Hochschild's concept of feeling

rules. Professors asked me how I was back in class just two weeks after his death, a dean of the college was surprised that I had no interest in joining the support group for grieving students, and friends often did not know how to react when I was angry, sad and relieved, all at the same time. They were projecting societal expectations of how to feel following the death of a loved one, especially a father, onto my especially personal experience. However, I also projected feeling rules onto the people in my life- I was upset when I did not receive sympathy cards or flowers, or when friends did not rearrange their schedule at a moment's notice to have lunch with me. While we were all making use of feeling rules, they were contradictory and upsetting.

Throughout my grief, I was also seeking something to make sense of these losses. I was seeking something attainable, something that would help me move forward in my life without the recurring pangs of sadness. According to the funeral directors in this study, I suppose I was seeking "closure." Yet, as the weeks and months went by, I was not finding what I had hoped. The funeral directors in this study would most likely attribute this to the fact that I did not attend my father's funeral, but I do not believe a funeral would have helped me. I attended his mother's funeral and saw a plastic sandwich bag filled with my father's ashes, this was both shocking and unsettling, certainly not "closure." I believe that whatever this 'thing' that I was seeking after these deaths is not actually attainable, rather it is a constructed term to provide an answer and an end to something that rarely has an end or an answer.

The following research is an exploratory study of six Connecticut funeral directors. This study analyzes the relationships between funeral directors and their clients, focusing on the construction, mobilization and exploitation of "closure." I argue that funeral directors assert their professional status as being uniquely qualified in helping their clients accomplish "closure," while insisting on an open-ended and extremely personal understanding of it. This research is

5

distinct as it frames funeral director's mobilization of "closure" as strategic in the face of a changing industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Death and Durkheim

Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) is cited as one of the earliest social constructionist approaches to emotions. For his study of religion, Durkheim studied Australian indigenous people, or aboriginals as they were viewed at the time, as an elementary form of social organization which displayed more emotional expressiveness than their civilized counterparts (Fisher and Koo Chon 1989; Turner and Stets 2005). Specifically, Durkheim observed and analyzed the rituals of the society evoking the ". . . classic definition of formal rituals as involving rules of conduct about how to behave towards sacred things" (Seale 1998:30). In these rituals which were meant to separate the sacred from the profane, there were increased amounts of social interactions which resulted in a heightening of emotions. It is this heightened emotional arousal that Durkheim termed "collective effervescence." As collective effervescence grew, the Aboriginals began to believe in a power that was external to them and attributed this to "mana" which was symbolized by totems and other sacred objects (Turner and Stets 2005). To summarize Durkheim's findings, ". . . as Aboriginals worshiped their gods, they were in reality worshipping themselves and their society because the power of the gods as manifested in effervescence and mana is nothing more than the power arising from their own interactions" (Turner and Stets 2005:72). Thus, as the ritual is sacred, society is sacred within itself and is continually strengthened through rituals.

Durkheim also looked specifically at funeral services for the Australian aborgines. From this, Durkheim concluded that 'mourning' is not a natural movement of private feelings wounded

6

by a cruel loss. Rather, it is a ritual attitude adopted in respect to traditional customs and not necessarily reflective of the mourner's emotional state (Fisher and Koo Chon 1989). Mourning, then, is less about the dead, but about alive individuals that are engaged in mourning social practices. The common loss and subsequent mourning also renews the solidarity of the group, producing a collective effervescence (Fisher and Koo Chon 1989). In Clive Seale's (1998) analysis of Durkheim's study he writes,

> To participate in the drama in which good triumphs over evil and life is seen as preferable to death, religious societies demand regular participation in these activities which renew emotional commitment to the core values of society, supplying both priests and ordinary participants with the powers that enable successful management of the problems of everyday living (P. 30).

Though Durkheim's study was of Australian aboriginals in 1912, it is applicable to American funerals in modern times as they are frequently viewed as being for the benefit of the living individuals. Additionally, death announcements in newspapers often give the logistical details of the services. This allows community members to attend that otherwise might not have known, producing a similar collective effervescence.

From Durkheim's study, it is reasoned that all elements of culture have a similar ability to control various activities and arouse emotions within individuals (Turner and Stets 2005). Furthermore, it is the worship of the sacred that is a symbolic worship of the values of a society (Seale 1998). Rituals create a conforming nature and produce a ". . . rhythmic synchronization of body movements and talk. . ." (Turner and Stets 2005:73). However, when conformity or the rhythmic synchronization are violated within a ritual, individuals become upset and the sacredness suffers. This also supports the constructionist approach to emotions as certain emotions and their displays are directly linked with specific occasions (Fisher and Koo Chon 1989). Durkheim's study of rituals lays the foundation for the social constructionist approach to emotions which later theorists expand dramatically. Approaching funeral practices as social

facts, there are functions of this ritualized service that cannot merely be reduced to the individual interests of the mourners or funeral directors.

Grieving with Goffman

Erving Goffman is largely recognized as the founder of the dramaturgical approach in which he applies notions of theatre as an analogy to everyday life. In his essay "Presentation of Self" Goffman writes that his analysis is, ". . . concerned with the structure of social encounters— the structure of those entities in social life that come into being whenever persons enter one another's immediate physical presence" (Lemert 2013:257). Goffman goes on to explain that essential to this approach is maintaining a single definition of the situation that is taking place. Once defined, theatre notions can be applied to understand the ways in which individuals engage in performance to interact in their daily lives (Lemert 2013).

At the center of the dramaturgical approach as explained by Goffman is the understanding of individuals as performers or actors whose performance will be judged by an audience. As Goffman explains (Goffman in Lemert 2013),

> The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited (P. 256).

Just as actors in a theater production, performers in Goffman's analysis make use of costumes, props, scripts, movements and expressions to provide a convincing performance. Also essential to Goffman's dramaturgical approach are the notions of backstage and front stage. He writes, "There will be a back region with its tools for shaping the body, and a front region with its fixed props" (Lemert 2013:256). The backstage is private and separate from the audience such that the actor may prepare and practice their performance. This contrasts with the public front stage

where the audience is situated and the performance takes place. As Goffman stated, it is in the front stage where there are props for the performance.

In their performances, Goffman's actors manage the audience's impressions, not their inner feelings (Hochschild 1979). By engaging in surface acting in which the performers manipulate their external expression, the performers are also acting as strategists (Turner and Stets 2005; Hochschild 1979). If the actor is successful in providing a convincing performance, the performance will seem as if it is natural within the individual and not a performance at all (Lemert 2013). Performers often make use of structured rituals to maintain smooth social encounters and ensure that nothing goes awry (Turner and Stets 2005). Goffman's dramaturgy theory has been influential in examining the social interactions that individuals engage in during their daily life or specific social events.

Ronny E. Turner and Charles Edgley (1976) applied Goffman's dramaturgy theory to American funerals. In their analysis, the funeral director is the main actor that stages the performance. Like live shows, there is only one opportunity for a funeral performance and thus the funeral director must ensure that their audience feels sincere, respectful and concerned about the death (Turner and Edgley 1976). The success of a funeral director is determined by their reputation which relies on the funeral being both appropriate and respectful of the decedent's memory. As such, the funeral director must separate themselves from the emotional aspects of death in order to perform their job well (Turner and Edgley 1979). Much of this separation is done through the backstage and frontstage work that funeral directors engage in appease their clients and perform a successful funeral.

The backstage is private and clients do not have access to it. It is here that the funeral home staff touch and move the body, as that is nearly forbidden in the presence of a family

member (Turner and Edgley 1976). A large portion of this work takes place in the preparation

room. As Turner and Edgley (1976) write, "Here [the preparation room] the corpse is washed,

shaved, sprayed with disinfectant, sliced, pierced, creamed, powdered, waxed, stitched,

manicured, dressed, and positioned in a casket" (p. 287). Performing these tasks in the backstage

allows the family and friends of the dead to remember them just as they were, easing the

transition from life to death.

Also occurring in the backstage is the use of different words and terms about the dead.

For example, bodies are often given nicknames in the backstage based on their cause of death,

such as "Mr. Crispy" who died in a fire (Turner and Edgley 1976:289). Preparing the body is

termed "restorative art" and caskets are referred to as coffins (Turner and Edgley 1976). Use of

this sort of language in the front stage has damaging potential as clients may feel that their loved

ones are not being respected and withdraw their business from the funeral home. Additionally,

this language separates the decedent's body from the identity of the individual, and the

decedent's identity is what the performance hopes to maintain and honor.

Accessible to the public, the front stage is where the show takes place. For the funeral,

the front stage is quite literally set with curtains, décor, flowers and memory boards among many

other props (Turner and Edgley 1976). It is also here that public-approved language is used,

referring to death as sleep and the corpse as a loved one. As mentioned earlier, there is a "one-

shot nature of the funeral service" (Turner and Edgley 1976:286). As a result, the funeral director

must monitor the performance of the funeral and make sure that everything goes as planned and

the dead are honored. Funeral directors are often proactive in this process, thus it is common for

them to speak with ministers prior to the funeral such that they do not go off script during the

eulogy (Turner and Edgley 1976). Furthermore, what is perhaps most distinct about the front

stage are the supporting actors, the grievers. While on stage, the behavior of the grievers is judged and most of the grievers are aware of this (Turner and Edgely 1976). In attending a funeral the griever must perform grief as not only they understand it, but what will also be understood by their castmates.

Though Turner and Edgely find a dramaturgical analysis to be quite helpful in analyzing and understanding the American funeral, they also note the potential dangers of these notions. Turner and Edgely (1976) write, "Although one of the consensually stated objectives of funerals is the acceptance of death by the family, the rhetoric of the front stage as well as the social and physical setting of the funeral service itself tends to contradict such claims" (p. 294-295). In honoring the dead and performing the funeral, individuals can be left denying the death due to the emphasis on ritual performance and front stage discourse (Turner and Edgely 1976). Left with denial, individuals may begin to reevaluate what purpose the funeral ultimately served. Thus, insights of Goffman's dramaturgical theory should be applied to the potentially conflicting understandings of the purpose of a funeral for both the mourners and funeral directors.

Feeling Rules with Hochschild

Extending elements of Goffman's dramaturgy theory, Arlie Russell Hochschild (1975; 1979; 2012) analyzes emotion culture as it applies to social interactions. Hochschild contends that the cultural scripts that Goffman's actors engage do not provide gratification to the actor, rather the scripts are stressful as they must be performed convincingly as to not cause embarrassment or shame. For Hochschild these scripts are a result of a larger emotion culture which is composed of emotion ideologies, meaning the socially held ideas of how individuals should feel in a particular situation (Turner and Stets 2005). In her analysis of emotion culture

and supporting ideologies, Hochschild argues this is governed by feeling rules that socialized

individuals participate in.

Simply stated, feeling rules are the commonly held notions of the emotions that

individuals should feel and experience in a particular situation including the intensity, direction

and duration of an emotion (Hochschild 2012). Hochschild presents two approaches to

understanding the experience of emotions: primary emotions and secondary acts. Primary

emotions are social factors which influence how an individual feels, whereas secondary acts are

how social factors influence how an individual thinks about the way that they feel (Hochschild

1979). Through assessment and management, feeling rules are what guide individuals in

reconciling what they feel and what they should feel (Hochschild 1979; 2012). Within feeling

rules, Hochschild argues that there are also display rules which dictate how emotions should be

displayed within a situation. For Hochschild, display rules are similar to Goffman's expression

rules whereby they represent, ". . . conventions guiding the display (or masking) of feelings that

actors must adhere to in situations" (Turner and Stets 2005:37). By engaging in and adhering to

socially prescribed feeling rules, situations in which feeling rules are disobeyed become

incredibly problematic.

For example, Hochschild considers how feeling rules manifest themselves in grief and

during funerals. Hochschild (2012) writes,

> . . . the ritual [funeral] usually reminds the bereaved of the finality of death while
> at the same time offering a sense of safety and comfort in this realization. In
> response, the bereaved generally senses that this is the right time and right place
> to feel grief and not much else (P. 63).

While the funeral is seen as the right time and place to grieve, feeling rules may be violated here

if an individual's feelings are seen as inappropriate. Hochschild explains that there are three

types of appropriateness of feelings: clinical, moral, and social-situational. Clinical

appropriateness is determined by what would be expected of a normal individual, whereas moral appropriateness is determined by moral legitimacy (Hochschild 1975). Social-situational appropriateness differs in that it, ". . . refers to what is called for by the norms specific to the situation. . ." (Hochschild 1975:291). All three of these types of appropriateness may be considered at a funeral, as displaying too much or too little grief, too much or too little stoicism, resentment, relief, or ambivalence may all be viewed as 'misgrieving' by those in the audience (Hochschild 2012). In attempts to prevent inappropriate feelings and misgrieving, individuals may take a conscious approach to their emotions. For example Hochschild (1975:290) states, "Often we not only feel sad at a funeral but we also try to feel sad there. . .".

Presenting emotions that are in accordance with the feeling rules of a particular situation is not an easy task, thus Hochschild terms this emotion work. Hochschild further contends that when emotion work is done for a wage, this is emotional labor (Turner and Stets 2005). Though Hochschild analyzes employees in the service industry with a specific focus on flight attendants, Hochschild does not consider funeral directors as engaging in emotional labor and profiting from the emotion work of their clients. However, several of Hochschild's theoretical concepts discussed above offer promising analytical insights into the funeral industry, specifically the negotiation of feeling rules between clients and funeral directors.

Contemporary Sociologists and Funeral Directors

While it might seem obvious, it is important to state that death is what separates the living from the dead. Biological deaths and deaths occurring from a chronic disease are viewed as a normal occurrence and thus society often has a very little role to say about it (Ritzer 2007). Hochschild characterizes this as dying socially, as the death comes gradually and of no surprise (Hochschild 2002). In contrast, chance and violent deaths are topics of conversation in society

and much meaning is applied to them (Baudrillard 1993). Regardless of the type of death, because as a society we are generally uncomfortable speaking about death, its impacts are wide-reaching and long-lasting despite efforts made by individuals and institutions to prevent them.

Overwhelmingly, the dead are completely separated from the rest of society through various rituals and institutions (Baudrillard 1993). Jean Baudrillard (1993) contends that every society has their own form of "sarchophagic rituals," drawing upon historical evidence and beginning with the ancient Egyptians (p. 181). The etymology of the word "sarcophagus" comes from the Greek word "sarkophagos," meaning limestone. The Greek word for limestone can be broken down further to mean "flesh eating" (Merriam Webster). While flesh eating limestone might be good for coffins, it is largely speculative whether this was truly believed. Nevertheless, this is important for Baudrillard's sarchophagic rituals as these rituals are focused on removing the body from society completely. In modern society, these sarchophagic rituals most commonly take place in the form of funerals.

Immediately following the death of an individual, the body becomes cold and begins to stiffen. Within a few days, the body begins to deteriorate, become discolored and releases an odor (Edmonds 2009). However, these effects do not show on the body at a funeral as funeral homes maintain the appearance of life even though the individual is dead. There is much meaning that can be found into how the dead appear at their funerals and Baudrillard (1993) examines this meaning using symbolic exchange theory. In funerals with open caskets it is important that the visitors are able to see the dead similarly to how they would have when they were living, as for the moment the dead have yet to be removed from the symbolic circulation of society. The separation between the living and the dead is temporarily blurred as the dead are presented as peacefully sleeping like normal an individual would (Forsyth, Palmer, Simpson

14

2006). This kind of liminal state is done through the clothing, smiles, skin maintenance, makeup, lighting and position of the dead (Baudrillard 1993; Forsyth et al. 2006). Funeral directors often speak of this as having to achieve perfection (Forsyth et al. 2006). If the appearance of the dead is successful in making the visitors feel at ease and allowing them to honor the dead, the dead can then be properly disposed of and removed from the symbolic circulation of society. Baudrillard (1993) writes that in the removal of the dead from society, they become irrelevant and placed into one of the original types of ghettoes, cemeteries.

The perfection of the body's appearance is just one aspect of the funeral that the funeral director must closely consider. In his study of funerals Baudrillard (1993) writes, ". . . American funeral homes where death is immediately shielded from mourning and the promiscuity of the living in order to be 'designed' according to the purest laws of standing, smiling and international marketing" (p. 180). While funeral directing is their profession and thus funerals are routine for them, funeral directors must consider that for their clients and other attendees the funeral is a unique and emotional experience (Forsyth et al. 2006). Although this is a regular conflict, the funeral industry is an industry of personalization that markets itself on making each funeral unique to meet the needs and desires of what will most honor the memory of the dead (Forsyth et al. 2006). Sometimes this manifests itself in that the wishes of the living, and paying, take precedence over the prearrangements made by the dead as there is a commonly held belief in the funeral industry that, "Dead people don't sue" (Forsyth et al. 2006:124). As funeral directors choose to satisfy or ignore the requests of the living, they are putting their professional reputation at stake based on their perceived level of accommodation during this difficult time. Additionally, meeting certain unordinary requests, such as positioning a casket vertically, may be viewed as offensive to attendees and other individuals involved with the funeral (Forsyth et al.

2006). This also jeopardizes their reputation as they may seem as dishonoring the dead. This is of course not good for the funeral director's business and is often avoided. Yet, it is not possible for the living to make all decisions regarding the funeral thus out of necessity they must rely on funeral directors to make decisions to properly dispose of the dead (Forsyth et al. 2006).

While the family relies on the funeral director out of necessity, their judgment is legitimized as funeral directing is largely a licensed profession (Forsyth et al. 2006). In many states, funeral directors must pass a state board examination in order to receive their license and typically hold a college degree (Thompson 1991). Funeral directors are often also embalmers, in which there are even more requirements. Typically, a licensed embalmer must complete sixty hours of college, including a core general curriculum, one year of courses in the mortuary science and a one year apprenticeship under a licensed embalmer (Thompson 1991). As with many professions, there is also a variety of conferences, journals and conventions within the industry to further the professionalization of funeral directors (Thompson 1991).

Applying a dramaturgical analysis, the emphasis on professionalism among funeral directors takes place in the front stage while there is a completely different attitude in the backstage. As previously mentioned, funeral directors often meet certain unique requests of the family to ease their process of grieving. For one funeral director in Forsyth et al.'s (2006) study, this took the form of an around the clock wake such that family members that were traveling would have an opportunity for visitation. While this request was met politely by the funeral director, the funeral director also described it as "a three day circus" (Forsyth 2006:127). Making judgments and offensive comments behind closed doors, or the back stage, is not uncommon in the funeral industry. In fact, many funeral directors exchange stories of mishaps, difficult clients or morbid jokes (Forsyth et al. 2006; Thompson 1991). Funeral directors are aware of this notion

of the frontstage and backstage of their work. In Thompson's (1991) study, one funeral director

commented on this change in behavior stating, "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" (p. 418).

This comment demonstrates the knowledge of the frontstage and backstage of funeral director's

work, while highlighting the professionalization of their careers and dedication to service.

Berns' Critique of Closure

In her book *Closure: The Rush to End Grief and What It Costs Us* (2011), Nancy Berns

examines the social construction of closure which has been a dominant term in today's society

when talking about death. Berns (2011) writes, "In today's world, a tragedy does not happen

without someone suggesting how people can find closure (p. 7). But what is closure? Varying

definitions over time indicate that closure has been socially constructed. Closure has become a

frame to understand and respond to the pain that an individual feels after experiencing a loss.

Yet, there is no universally agreed upon definition of closure (Berns 2011). For example,

"Closure has been described as justice, peace, healing, acceptance, forgiveness, moving on,

resolution, answered questions, or revenge" (Berns 2011:2). However, the prevailing definition

of closure implies that there has been some sort of ending in which an individual can move on

from (Berns 2011).

Exploring notions and discourses of closure, Berns discovered six different types of

closure talk in their storytelling of their experience with grief. Exemplified by the rituals of

funerals, viewings and burials was the closure talk of closing a chapter. In closing a chapter, the

ritual was finished and things could be wrapped up before continuing on (Berns 2011).

Accompanying closing a chapter, are the conflicting closure talks of remembering and forgetting.

Remembering helps to end the fear of forgetting an individual, whereas forgetting consists of

leaving reminders in the past that are seen as getting in the way of closure. The remaining types

of closure talk are getting even, knowing, and confessing (Berns 2011). From these, Berns

(2011) concludes that, ". . . all six types imply that closure exists and carry the assumptions that

closure is (1) possible, (2) good, (3) desirable, and (4) necessary" (p. 28). Furthermore, these

types of closure talk support the idea that grief is bad and that it must come to an end.

Due to the fact that closure is socially constructed with a variety of meanings, Berns

continued her study of closure in understanding how individuals themselves understand notions

of closure. In discussions with individuals on the subject of closure, Berns conceptualized the

"walking wounded" and the "myth slayers." The walking wounded believe in and desire closure,

yet believe that they cannot personally obtain it. This is often a result of individual believing that

they cannot grieve normally, typically in situations of divorce, adoption, missing people, or

being wounded in wars (Berns 2011). In contrast, myth slayers do not believe that closure exists.

While many believe that the pain will lessen over time and hold hope for healing, they contend

that the pain never goes away completely. Additionally, myth slayers believe that closure

promises a false hope which is not conducive to the grieving process (Berns 2011).

Though Berns conceptualizes six different types of closure talk and two groups of

individuals, she maintains that each individual's experience with grief and closure are unique.

Berns (2011) writes,

> Each person's grief is uncharted territory. People's experience with grief is
> affected, and thus made distinct, by many things, including the circumstances of
> death, relationship to the deceased, characteristics of the bereaved individual,
> quality of social support, and cultural differences in mourning rituals and
> expectations (P. 32).

This is why Berns condemns notions of a particular set of steps in handling grief and achieving

closure, especially as failing to do so is labeled as unhealthy grieving. Moreover, Berns warns

against medicalizing grief as it ignores the normalcy of grief. She cites psychiatrist Allen Frances

as saying, "Medicalizing normal grief stigmatizes and reduces the normalcy and dignity of the

pain, short circuits the expected existential processing of loss, reduces reliance on the many well

established cultural rituals for consoling grief. . . " (Berns 2011:35). Medicalizing grief furthers

the societal expectation of reaching closure by limiting the time period of grief and reinforces

feeling rules of acceptable grief.

Despite the various views on closure, closure remains dominant in the discourse of loss

and grief. In studying the funeral industry, Berns (2011) concluded that closure is used as a

marketing tool to sell their services. She explains,

> Embalming and viewing has been marketed as necessary for closure, even if
> family members choose cremation as the final disposition. Such efforts from the
> funeral industry help shape one of the most dominant feeling rules about grieving-
> you need a formal viewing complete with embalming in order to gain closure (P.
> 57).

In Berns' research, she found that most funeral homes will not allow a public viewing of

the body unless it has been embalmed. The emphasis placed on embalming strengthens

the funeral industry as it requires a professional to perform the embalming, especially as

it is considered an art to make a dead body appear as if it was alive and sleeping.

Furthermore, embalming and holding a public viewing allows the family to feel as if they

have done everything they possibly could to attain closure (Berns 2011). Thus,

embalming provides physical closure for the dead and emotional closure for the living

resulting in the commodification of closure (Berns 2011).

The implication of Berns'(2011) research on closure is that, "The closure frame limits the

possibilities for how we think about grief and fails to capture the experience of many who face

death or some other loss" (p. 161). Specific to the funeral industry, "The commodification of

closure implies that you need money to grieve "properly"" (Berns 2011:164). Ultimately, the

individuals that promise closure, such as funeral directors, do not have the ability to make sure

that closure is actually attained. Thus, it becomes incredibly important to understand how funeral directors are using notions of closure in their client relationships.

Research Question and Study Aims

While the sociological field of death studies is still growing, there have been significant contributions. These contributions have cemented death as a crucial area of study in sociology and have approached the subject from various angles. However, the notion of closure in relationships between funeral directors and their clients has been largely unexplored. This has led me to ask the question: In the funeral industry, how do funeral directors mobilize and exploit "closure" or resolution of their clients' grief?

RESEARCH METHODS

To examine how funeral directors employ notions of closure in managing their clients' grief, six funeral directors were interviewed. Qualitative data obtained through interviews was essential to this study as it allowed funeral directors to more fully explain their experiences and opinions regarding relationships with their clients. Furthermore, the qualitative data gave me a more nuanced understanding of how these funeral directors understood the complexities in their role of managing their clients' grief and the use of closure within this role.

The sample for this study was collected by a combination of purposive and snowball sampling of funeral homes in Connecticut. An initial sample of funeral homes in the greater Hartford, Connecticut area were selected using a telephone directory, which included a mix of family- and corporate-owned funeral homes as determined from their websites. This sample was then mailed a signed recruitment letter (see Appendix A) that outlined the reasoning behind the study and the parameters of questioning. In cases where the funeral home's website listed their funeral directors' names, recruitment letters were addressed to those specific individuals.

Additionally, the recruitment letter asked that funeral directors contact me directly by email or cell phone to offer their participation in the study. This initial recruitment yielded two participants. Three weeks after the mailing of recruitment letters, I called the funeral homes from the identified sample directly asking to speak with any funeral directors about their potential participation (see Appendix B). While I left messages at these funeral homes that were often never returned, these phone calls resulted in an additional two participants.

In addition to mailing recruitment letters to funeral homes identified by the telephone directory, I contacted the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association (CFDA). The CFDA is a professional organization that offers endorsements, partnerships, continuing education seminars, discounts as well as networking opportunities. After contacting the CFDA, they agreed to send out a "members only" email on my behalf. The subject line of the email was, "Request to Participate in Study Survey," and included a short description of my research of which they headlined, "Trinity Student Seeks Information on Working with Grieving Families" (see Appendix C). Also included in the email was the CFDA mission statement, a save the date announcement for an upcoming seminar, and two employment opportunities. Two funeral directors contacted me from this announcement and both were interviewed.

The final sample for this study consisted of six funeral directors. Two of the six participants identified as women, the remaining four identified as men. One participant identified as black, while the others identified as white. Five of the funeral directors interviewed are middle aged, ages 48 to 64, the other participant was 27 years old. Four participants identified as middle class and two identified as upper middle class. Only one funeral director specifically mentioned their religion, which was Judaism. Half of the funeral directors interviewed worked for, and often owned, a family funeral home. The other half of the participants worked for a corporate

funeral home. Within the context of this study, a corporate funeral home is defined as a funeral home that is part of a larger conglomeration of funeral homes. Two of the participants in the group of corporate funeral directors work for Service Corporation International (SCI), which is a large network of funeral industry businesses. SCI funeral homes are typically structured as traditional bureaucracies with an internal hierarchy. One SCI funeral director is the manager for five different businesses, whereas the other SCI participant is the head funeral director at their specific funeral home. The other participant in the group of corporate funeral directors has begun his own conglomeration of funeral homes, as he has bought two funeral homes in addition to the funeral home he originally began. He hopes to expand his business even further, implementing his services in each funeral home he purchases.

Interviews were conducted over the phone and in person at the participants' funeral homes, ranging in length from 54 minutes to two hours. It is worth noting that an advantage of conducting in-person interviews allowed me not only to establish a better rapport with the participant and observe their body language, but also allowed me to physically see the funeral homes and various objects within them. I was shown the range of keepsakes that can be made with ashes or fingerprints, a memorial blanket, a selection room of caskets, a model hearse, pamphlets and a poem about the profession of funeral directing. Additionally, the interviews often took place in the same rooms in which funeral directors meet with families which gave me a first hand experience of the arrangement process. Of the six interviews, three were conducted in-person while three were conducted over the phone.

All of the participants that were interviewed in person were presented with a written informed consent form, whereas participants that were interviewed on the telephone were read a consent script. Consent was obtained from each participant. The interviews were open-ended

following the semi-structured interview script (see Appendix D) and included additional probe questions. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked about their background in the funeral industry, general business practices and goals, closure as it applies to being a funeral director, and their thoughts on the future of the funeral industry. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to complete the self-identification demographic form (see Appendix E). Interviews were digitally recorded and then later transcribed. In a few instances, the interview recording became inaudible which resulted in missing parts of transcriptions. However, these instances were minimal and had low impact on the data collected. The transcriptions of the interviews were then de-identified in order to maintain the participant's confidentiality. Lastly, the transcriptions were coded (see Appendix F) for analysis.

FINDINGS

Understanding "Closure"

In the mobilization and exploitation of "closure," funeral directors must construct an understanding of "closure" themselves. As the following accounts demonstrate, the construction of "closure" is understood to be incredibly open-ended. Also open-ended is the possibility for achieving "closure" and these nebulous notions and understandings are insisted upon by funeral directors. For these reasons, I use quotation marks around "closure" for emphasis.

The understanding of "closure" for the funeral directors in this study is composed of two elements, the first being an end to prolonged sickness. In discussing what he hopes his clients receive from a funeral Daniel explains, "That it brings… it brings closure to a drawn-out sickness and it is the beginning of the road to emotional recovery." Peter's understanding echoes this notion as he explains that after a death from a prolonged illness, "They're [the family] relieved and the funeral really is the closure of that piece." This first understanding of "closure"

is fairly simple, "closure" is the result of a terminally sick loved one taking their last breath. However, the second understanding "closure" is much more open-ended and is generally defined as the acceptance of a death and the transition to a life without your loved one. As Michael explained, "I would define closure as acceptance that the death, I mean I would use, I think those are kind of the same thing. You're getting closure, you're accepting that this death has occurred." Elaborating on the transitional aspect Mary stated,

> There's life before that happened then there's life after. Because it's just *such* a big event, so I guess… how about it [closure] means that we're putting it in perspective, we're putting it in it's place. The perspective is that we have to get, the new reality is that I'm going on without this person in my life.

Broadly, these six funeral directors understand "closure" as an end, acceptance, acknowledgement and transition.

While each funeral director explained their understanding of "closure," they often shared conflicting feelings towards the word itself. After explaining his understanding of "closure" as the end of a drawn-out sickness, Daniel followed up his explanation saying, "lack of better phrase." Additionally, Jeremy expressed his dislike of the word "closure" and shared the concept he favors. He stated, "It's cliché and I don't think about it like closure, I think about it as restoration, you're learning how to accept reality and live it. And um, I don't think it's closure." Similarly, Elizabeth shared, "I kind of hate it and love it *laughs.* Because it's so cliché, but I think there's a truth to it and I don't think closure's the right word, but I don't think we've come up with one more fitting." Although these funeral directors expressed conflicting feelings towards "closure," finding it to be cliché and constraining, they nevertheless reaffirmed that something exists and "closure" is the popular discourse for it.

The funeral directors of this study also expressed that "closure" is incredibly personal which determines whether or not, and on what level, an individual has the potential to

accomplish "closure." Peter explained, "There's many stages of grief so there's many stages of closure and it's different for everybody." Later he stated,

> Some people say that they have closure because they don't deal with their emotions, some people say that they have closure because they mask their emotions or suppress their emotions. Some people really do walk through the grief process for three days so to speak, and they walk through the grief process for three days, they really are starting that process to recover.

As Peter's comments demonstrate, "closure" is understood to be deeply personal. In contending that some individuals may simply say that they have "closure" because they are not working through their emotions, Peter reaffirms the possibility of achieving "closure" especially for individuals that "really do walk through the grief process." Michael also reaffirms this possibility through offering the concrete example that, "By going through the pictures [for a memory board at a funeral service] you're recognizing what you're losing and you find, you're able to make closure." Yet, the insistence on "closure" being an open-ended process manifests itself in contradictions within funeral directors themselves. Elizabeth initially talked about "closure" stating that, "You know, there's never closure. But there's value in the process because there has to be some end." However, later on in the interview when reflecting on her own experience Elizabeth explained, "I have closure because I have grieved and we did the ceremony." Elizabeth's own contradiction on the possibility of closure furthers the understanding of "closure" as being both personal and open-ended.

This insistence of a nebulous "closure" also manifests itself in conversations between funeral directors and clients. When asked if clients ever bring up "closure" in discussing their wishes or goals for the service, Elizabeth responded,

> Oh yeah, and if they do, because they want closure, I don't care. I'm not going to argue with that. If you feel like you need to do this, or mom wanted to do this, or she wanted this in her casket for closure, for me, *totally* valid. You've just got to read people.

In this conversation, Elizabeth validates the client's desire for "closure," despite her own conflicting understandings. This emphasis on the personal aspect of "closure" seemingly allows for all understandings of "closure" to be valid. Additionally, Peter shared, "I think that closure is that, as people have told me, customers, you know clients, families that I have dealt with, closure is very personal." Thus, the funeral directors in this study do not share their conflicting understandings and feelings towards "closure." Rather, they mobilize an open-ended and personal understanding of "closure" that can be adapted to each individual client.

Accomplishing "Closure"

In the mobilization and exploitation of "closure," funeral directors assert that a funeral service is the client's best opportunity to achieve "closure." Daniel stated rather simply, "I really do believe that funerals play a vital role in our lives." He went on to say, "This might sound trite, but it is absolutely one of life's major events. Birth, bar mitzvah, confirmation, graduation high school, graduation college, becoming a doctor, getting married, having children, whatever it is." As vital life events, funeral directors contend that funerals serve as a marker of transition. Mary further demonstrates this in her comments on death being the end of a chapter. She explained, "As we move a house, as we graduate from elementary school or college, or as we go through these stages of life, this is a stage of life but since that person is gone, yes we're acknowledging the life but to me as the survivor, it's that ending." Daniel and Mary's characterization of funerals as vital life events that serve as social markers of transition, also characterization funerals as a method of accomplishing "closure."

Yet, these six funeral directors spoke at length about the specific aspects of funerals that create the possibility for the clients to accomplish "closure." Michael explained,

>I think viewing the body, whether it's in the casket or at the hospital or at home in a hospice situation, physically seeing someone dead, I think there's something concrete about that. I mean you're coming to terms with the fact that someone has died and I think that helps you accept that. I mean so I think that that's important, especially where our society is scattered like having, having a funeral or something of that nature allows people from out of town to come in and come to terms with the death, so that's one part of it. The other part is I think, the funeral is kind of society's time when they can come and say "I'm sorry" and express their condolences. And I think the second function is to allow for that, and there has to be a time for that.

Michael's comment illustrates the funeral's potential to allow clients to accept the death by physically viewing the body. Additionally, it allows for the transition to life without their loved one as the community acknowledges their loss. "Closure" is composed of both of these aspects which are possible as a result of a funeral service. However, the accomplishment of "closure" through funerals is still incredibly personal. Mary said, "Depending on the family's perspectives on this, certainly to acknowledge a life. Certainly that, to acknowledge a life that has been lived." To acknowledge a life that has been lived, is to accept that an individual is no longer living and that life moving forward will forever be without them. It is to accomplish "closure."

Lastly, "closure" is mobilized and exploited as funeral directors differentiated between healthy and unhealthy grieving. Jeremy explained,

>What I hope families get out of a funeral service is, I hope that they've one, addressed their grief. Because I do believe, I don't believe that a lot of us address our grief and that crosses the color barrier, although I think white people are more apt to go and get help. I don't think black people are, but I hope that they will be willing to address their grief.

Embedded within Jeremy's comment is the classification of addressing grief as healthy grieving and not addressing grief as unhealthy grieving. Peter shared this view stating that in his opinion if you do not have a funeral, "Then people miss the normal progression of steps." Later in the interview, Peter explained that clients often believe that cremating their loved one and not having a service is quicker, easier and better. However, he warned against this,

> Really, all of that emotion is still there it's just unaddressed. So then people may become, more often than not, become emotional dysfunctional. Which can lead to divorce, substance abuse, um, depression, all different sorts of things. And it's proven, it's not, that's not even my opinion, that proven, that if people don't deal with their grief they can get stuck right there and not move forward emotionally in their life in one way, shape or form or another.

In not dealing or addressing their grief, "closure" is unattainable. Funeral directors like Jeremy and Peter mobilize and exploit "closure" as healthy grieving, cementing the importance of funerals in accomplishing this.

Funeral Directors, Profession, Uniqueness

As "closure" is understood to be open-ended and best accomplished by having a funeral service, funeral directors position themselves as uniquely qualified professionals that are essential in the accomplishment of "closure." Jeremy expressed, "I wish people would know that this is hard work, it's valuable, and people would value us more and not try to reduce us to a commodity." Similarly Elizabeth stated, "I think that what we do is very important." They understand their job as being particularly important as well as undervalued by individuals outside of the industry. Mary expanded this importance and said, "I'm there as psychologist, mediator, business person, adviser, um so, and at the worst possible time in their lives." As Mary's comment demonstrates, the funeral directors in this study understand their profession as being incredibly important. They also understand their profession to be unique because of their work with grieving clients and the many roles that are encompassed within their job. In their understanding of and identification as funeral directors, they position themselves as being uniquely qualified in their profession.

Just as with other professions, funeral directors are extensively trained in school. In Connecticut, funeral directors typically complete a two-year degree program and complete an apprenticeship. As Mary explained,

So I did my embalming, anatomy, biology, chemistry, restorative art, embalming classes, like the sciences if you will. And then I took, in those days, so then I sat for my national boards and I had to embalm 50 bodies before I could take my Connecticut license, because you take a national board and then a state board.

Later in the interview, Mary explained that she has been intensively trained in all aspects of embalming and funeral directing, knowing every corner of her funeral home. Moreover, she is legally licensed to be a funeral director. Peter also talked about the legality of being a funeral director. He commented, "By law, you have to have a funeral director for the burial of human remains, or human remains in a cemetery." These comments reaffirm the professional nature of being a funeral director through education and legal licensing. Furthermore, it is this training that allows funeral directors to have knowledge of different types of services. Jeremy explained that while his funeral homes are, "designed to serve African-Americans, black people, Protestant based for the most part. We can run Catholic services, we run Islamic services all day long, we can run a Buddhist service. We're trained." Their training is viewed as essential to their profession.

These funeral directors also identified as being uniquely qualified because of their constant availability. Five of the six participants directly mentioned the nature of their availability. Daniel stated,

Doctors are on call, well the one's around here are on call once every three, four weeks. Well I'm on call every night. It's how I have chosen by the way to do it. I'm not complaining. We don't have hours or days, even on certain days by Judaism laws you can't have a funeral, doesn't mean people don't die on those days. You need to have a large staff, you need to have a lot of equipment, you need a lot of place to be comfortable, you need to be able to be reachable in, within five minutes if not sooner.

In comparing his availability to a doctor, Daniel differentiates his profession of being a funeral director as more demanding. Jeremy echoed a 24/7 availability, "You can't tell when death will happen, right? So you have to be available at all times." Similarly Mary explained, "It's 24

hours, you're not showing up at work at 8:30 and leaving at four, it's 24 hours a day." Michael also spoke about constant availability of being a funeral director and how that has changed as his business has gotten smaller. He elaborated,

> And so for a while we [he and another funeral director] were going 10 days on, four days off, which was a pretty grueling schedule and then we kind of modified that a little bit. But we were still going, every call that came in we would go out on removal. You know if someone died at home, we'd have to go. And since then we've modified that because we were both just getting burned out.

Now, Michael utilizes a removal service that removes the deceased individual from their place of death and brings them to the funeral home. Though the funeral home's phones are still manned 24/7 by Michael and his co-worker, he said that this allows them the ability to live a "reasonable life." Elizabeth's availability differs slightly as she talked about having off days. She explained, "For us specifically it's like every other weekend off and one day a week, but I'm on call a couple nights a week." This difference is likely a result of Elizabeth working for a corporate-owned funeral home in which there are many other funeral directors on the staff. It is important to note that the funeral director that did not speak about the unique availability of the job, Peter, works for a corporate-owned funeral home and is responsible for managing five different businesses. As such, Peter's role as a funeral director is much more managerial. He illustrated this by answering what the most difficult aspect of managing five businesses is, stating "the traffic."

The work experience of funeral directors is also used to position themselves as uniquely qualified. Mary stated, "I think you grow into the role." She explained the following vignette between her and a younger funeral director that recently graduated school.

> "In chapter six in the embalming school book, we learned," and I'm like "I know but you gotta live it." And she'll give me that example, whether its embalming a body, "Well it says to do this," "I know it does, but that's the body in the

textbook. This is the body on the table that you're dealing with." And so some of that is young and inexperience.

At the age of 27, Elizabeth knows that she is young for the industry and shared a similar feeling as Mary. Elizabeth stated, "You only get better the more experience in your own life and in the professional life. Like unfortunately, the more losses I experience the better you're going to be dealing with it. So it's, kind of just as you get older you become better at it. So, I can see myself doing this forever." Experience is critical to being a funeral director as it allows them to share opinions and make recommendations to the benefit of their clients. Daniel shared, "I do try to say is that in my opinion, it is always better to air on the side of inclusion. Um, because hopefully, uh, the rest of you will have lived good, long, happy, healthy lives, why go through the rest of your years because of this or that? You didn't do this or you did do that." Likewise, Peter recommends including children in the service whenever possible. Michael explained his recommendations for a funeral of an active 50-year-old as opposed to a 95-year-old that has outlived their peers.

> I'm expecting a big turnout. So I'm trying to persuade them to plan something that will accommodate that turnout. Especially, that's just the way we do things here. I mean in this area, so I might suggest why don't we have calling hours for four hours or three hours and make sure that the venue that we pick is able to accommodate everyone as opposed to you know, just cremate them and we'll have a graveside service. Well, a graveside service for a 50 year old that's well connected and knows everyone, all of a sudden you've got an urn and there's 1,000 people around the grave. That doesn't work that well. I don't think that's helping anyone, I mean personally.

Michael's experience as a funeral director has allowed him to have educated expectations, which influence suggestions and persuasions that will be the benefit of the clients.

Lastly, the funeral directors spoke about the emotional labor that is required of their profession. Michael shared, "Part of my job is to help them comes to terms with yes, it has occurred, and make them cry. My job is make them cry." As the clients are grieving and

experience heightened emotions, funeral directors understand their position as making sure that grieving is all their clients have to worry about. Elizabeth explains, "Our goal is to have the family be able to grieve and for us to handle the rest because it's an exhausting time. Let us do all the exhausting stuff, you know, that's why we're here *laughs*." Similarly Daniel expressed, "My goal is to get done exactly that in which they need or want to get done. I need to try my best to get things done before a family even thinks to ask me about it." Thus, the funeral directors are in a unique position to help manage the emotions of their clients. Mary elaborated, "They're looking to you for direction and advice and security. But they wanna know that somebody can help them." In engaging in emotional labor on behalf of their clients, funeral directors maintain their important profession and their unique qualifications.

Talking Back to Stigma

Within the profession of funeral directing, there exists a stigma which all of the funeral directors were seemingly aware of. Throughout the interviews, funeral directors talked back to the stigma both directly and indirectly. Elizabeth explained, "The stigma is you're not supposed to be interested in it. So if someone went "Oh my god that's awesome!" you'd be like, "What, ugh, you want me to die?"" Additionally, she summed up, "I think that funeral directors often tend to have a, we all know the image we have *laughs*, the stigma that we're trying to swindle and get money." However, she directly talked back to this stigma as she continued, "And it's so not like that. For me, I know for everyone that works here, we are truly here for the family. You gotta be." Daniel shared a similar feeling, "You didn't wake up wanting a funeral you have to have it. And although I own a business and that business is there to make money, it can't be made at the detriment of others' well being." Michael also directly talked back to the stigma of funeral director and even made a joke of it.

32

I think you know, our viewpoint is, we're basically, we're social workers really. Um, and we're not hard selling anyone. I mean we might encourage people to do things but it's more encouraging them to do something that we think is really to their benefit. You know, we go and look at the caskets and we're giving them options, but we're not saying, "Oh this baby, this one, this one you're sure to get to heaven."

In directly talking back to the stigma, funeral directors are reconstructing the understandings of their profession.

Funeral directors also talked back to the stigma indirectly, demonstrating their monetary investment in the emotional wellbeing of their clients. Jeremy expressed, "I am very committed to helping families get off to a healthy grieving process. That's me. *laughs* I spent a lot of money doing it too, believe me." Daniel explained that at his funeral home they offer their clients books on grief as well as live-streaming of both the funeral service and the cemetery burial. He further elaborated,

These are just things I think that are, that make, that add additional services um, to offer additional services to the family to make it more special. Again, just so you know, we do not charge the family for streaming, we don't charge the family for um, having, using that new equipment so they don't have to bring in collages, but we also have not increased our service fee, so it's not even as if it's hidden. Just so you know. And it's part of trying to best serve a family.

The monetary investment in a client's emotional well-being also manifested itself in fees being negotiable in certain situations.

The normal situation is basically what funds our business but there's certainly outliers, the young parents who lost a child where they have no money to deal with a funeral, I mean they don't. So we'll do whatever it is we need to do and usually we don't charge for it, or charge minimally for it, you know, just whatever the outside expenses might be.

By not fully charging and providing additional services at no additional cost, funeral directors talk back to the stigma of being in the profession for the money.

Lastly, each funeral director indirectly talked back to the stigma of their profession by sharing memories of clients that they have served. "Memory of client," which applied to specific memories of clients, was coded 32 times throughout the six interviews. Some shared memories from decades ago, while others shared memories from the past month. In doing so, the funeral directors demonstrated their emotional commitment to their clients as being more than simply a bill to collect at the end of a service.

DISCUSSION

Over the course of the interviews with funeral directors, it became exceedingly clear that "closure" is a socially constructed term. Generally, "closure" is understood by these funeral directors to mean either an end to a prolonged sickness, or the acceptance the death of a loved one and the transition to a new reality without them. Yet, this understanding was fraught with conflicting feelings and contradictions. Funeral directors expressed a dislike of the word "closure" itself and a desire for a new word that might better embody their understandings. Nevertheless, their understandings of "closure" and their opinions of the terminology reaffirm that *something* exists after experiencing a death, whether that is an acceptance, transition, restoration or something entirely different. Moreover, this "thing" that exists is desirable and necessary for the continuance of a healthy life and also incredibly personal for the individual. Despite these understandings, feelings and desires, the discourse of "closure" remains as an open-ended, catch-all term for the feelings to accomplish after someone dies.

According to funeral directors, a funeral service is an individual's best bet to accomplishing "closure." In mobilizing and exploiting "closure" as achievable through a funeral service, funeral directors maintain their importance in the death care industry. They assert that they are uniquely-qualified professionals whose education, legal necessity, availability, work

experience and emotional labor position them as being able to best help their clients achieve "closure." This assertion of their unique professional qualifications and general importance has become critical in the face of a changing industry. Currently, cremation rates are at an all-time high of 41 percent (PBS). With cremations, there is less money to be made. Michael explained the impact that high cremation rates have on the funeral industry and the livelihood of funeral directors.

> I would say the norm now, if you have a casket at all, I would say 50%, over 50% don't have a casket at all. Then probably another 25% don't utilize our services aside from getting rid of the body, I mean that's our job, to get rid of the body. I mean, putting it bluntly. So it's limiting what we do and limiting what we can bill for. I mean… and, it limits how we keep our guys busy.

Later in the interview, he spoke about the decline in profits as a result of higher cremation rates.

> I mean our services range from $3,075 to $5,400. And on top of the $5,400 for a traditional call, you've got a casket, a burial vault, which there are margins built into those and that's really the bulk of our side of the costs. With a cremation, more often than not, it's the $3,075. A cardboard container is you know, $100, so really there's no margin there. And a lot of times the ashes are being scattered so, there's just less money.

With less funeral service calls coming in and less money being made, funeral homes are forced to decrease the number of funeral directors on their staff in order to remain in business.

In the face of challenges to the profitability of the funeral industry, funeral directors mobilize and re-imagine the important concept of "closure" in order to assert their importance in this crucial life event. Specifically, they simultaneously and somewhat contradictorily assert the importance of closure even as they insist that the concept is open-ended, hard to pin down, and personal to every griever. They 'resolve' this supposed inconsistency by calling on their unique and multifaceted status as the professionals of emotional labor. The open-ended and deeply personal nature of this crucial process of "closure" provides a way for them to insist on their continued importance in the death care industry even as market forces are blowing in the

opposite direction (Valocchi 2017). As professionals, they can tailor the ritual to the individual, suggest beneficial 'add-ons' to the ritual and in this way remain economically viable in the face of industry pressures.

Published in the 2016 annual report of Service Corporation International, a national network of funeral service locations and cemeteries which two of the funeral directors in this study worked for, was their strategic business plan to grow revenue. One of their approaches is to remain relevant to the customer:

> Remaining relevant to our customer is key to generating revenue growth in a changing customer environment. We work to meet the varying needs of our customers to give them what they want. In our funeral segment, we focus on memorialization services that will be meaningful to the customer and their family members and friends. We continue to offer contemporary product and service offerings. We also focus on the ethnic traditions and customs important to our customers. Additionally, we emphasize the simplicity and convenience of our packaged offerings.

In the context of the funeral homes in this study, these service add-ons consisted of casket inserts, flower personalization, music at the service, and bringing in personal items such as motorcycles to name a few. Add-ons also included memorabilia of the deceased including keepsakes using their fingerprints or cremated ashes, as well as memorial gifting. As these add-ons are sold as personalizing the service, they mobilize and exploit the personalization of "closure."

In addition, this framing of "closure" enables funeral directors to 'talk back' to the stigma as mercenaries of death, profit-minded capitalists exploiting people at some of the most vulnerable moments in their lives (Valocchi 2017). The 'talk back' maintains that above everything else, their job is to help their clients with the emotions that follow a death of a loved one. The suggestions and recommendations of the funeral director and the money that they make is only at the benefit of their clients' emotional well-being. Essentially, in talking back to the

stigma that envelops the profession of funeral directing they say: "Because there is no one way to achieve "closure," my unique qualifications have given me the knowledge to help you best achieve "closure." Let me get to know you and work with you emotionally to suggest some ways (i.e. a funeral service, service personalization and add-ons) to best get you "closure" or on the path to it." In doing so, they assert that they do not engage in manipulation or exploitation of any sort. This assertion is crucial in maintaining their client base and their livelihood as funeral directors.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the ways in which funeral directors mobilize and exploit "closure" of their clients' grief and I found more information than I could have imagined. I argue that reaffirming the existence of "closure," while constructing it as open-ended and personal, funeral directors are able to uniquely position themselves as the experts in loss. As experts they seemingly hold the knowledge of what services and add-ons might be best to accomplish "closure," or at least set their clients off on a path of health grieving.

Throughout the course of the interviews, the participants often asked me why I was researching funeral director and client relationships. When the first participant asked, I was caught off guard and rambled about the losses I have experienced and the funerals I have attended. However, by my last interview I had engaged in the emotional labor to craft a response that was honest, yet routinized. Just as the funeral directors in this study engage in emotional labor in conversations with their clients, I engaged in emotional labor in my interviews. I was also asked to be fair in my writing and I believe I have. Though not my original intent, I hope that this study further lifts the veil of the funeral industry. As the industry becomes more corporate-owned, it will be important to examine the changing power and economic relationships

of funeral service providers and their clients as well as their construction of "closure." While

death remains inevitable, "closure" is not.

REFERENCES

Baudrillard, Jean. 1993. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. London: Sage Publications.

Berns, Nancy. 2011. *Closure: The Rush to End Grief and What It Costs Us*. Philadelphia,
    Pennslyvania: Temple University Press.

Edmonds, Molly. 2009. "How Dying Works." *HowStuffWorks*. Retrieved December 8, 2016
    (http://health.howstuffworks.com/diseases-conditions/death-dying/dying.htm).

Fisher, Gene A. and Kyum Koo Chon. 1989. "Durkheim and the Social Construction of
    Emotions." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 52(1):1–9. Retrieved August 4, 2015
    (http://www.jstor.org/stable/2786899).

Forsyth, Craig J., C. Eddie Palmer, and Jessica Simpson. 2006. "The Funeral Director:
    Maintaining Business, Reputation and Performance." *Free Inquiry in Creative
    Sociology* 34(2):123–32. Retrieved
    (http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/docview/61692267?accountid=14405).

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1975. "The Sociology of Feeling and Emotion: Selected
    Possibilities." *Sociological Inquiry* 45(2-3):280–307. Retrieved March 25, 2016
    (http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1975.tb00339.x/abstract).

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1979. "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social
    Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 85(3):551–75. Retrieved October 19, 2016
    (http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/stable/2778583).

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2012. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*.
    University of California Press. Retrieved October 19, 2016
    (http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/lib/trinity/reader.action?docID=10555078#).

Lemert, Charles. 2013. *Social Theory: The Multicultural, Global, and Classic Readings*. 5th ed.
    Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Public Broadcasting Service. 2013. "Economics of the Funeral Industry." *POV: Homegoings*.
    Retrieved May 6, 2017 (http://www.pbs.org/pov/homegoings/economics-of-the-funeral-
    industry/).

Ritzer, George, ed. 2007. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Oxford, UK, Malden, USA
    and Carlton, Australia: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Retrieved December 29, 2016
    (http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/b.9781405124331.2007.x).

Rotondaro, Vinnie. 2011. "Funeral Divas." *Slate*, March 25. Retrieved November 7, 2016 (http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2011/03/funeral_divas.html).

"Sarcophagus." *Merriam Webster*. Retrieved May 1, 2017 (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sarcophagus).

Seale, Clive. 1998. *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Service Corporation International. 2017. "Annual Report 2016." *Investors Annual Reports*. Retrieved May 9, 2017 (http://investors.sci-corp.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=108068&p=irol-reportsAnnual).

Thompson, William E. 1991. "Handling the Stigma of Handling the Dead: Morticians and Funeral Directors." *Deviant Behavior* 12(4):403–29. Retrieved December 8, 2016 (http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.trincoll.edu/socabs/docview/61293665/BD69B2145C064A79PQ/1).

Turner, Jonathan H. and Jan E. Stets. 2005. *The Sociology of Emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Turner, Ronny E. and Charles Edgley. 1976. "Death as Theater: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the American Funeral." *Sociology & Social Research* 60(4):377–92.

United States Census Bureau. 2012. "Industry Snapshot: Funeral Homes and Funeral Services." Available from (http://thedataweb.rm.census.gov/TheDataWeb_HotReport2/econsnapshot/2012/snapshot.hrml?NAICS=812210).

Valocchi, Stephen. 2017. "Comments on Draft." *Email Message to Author* May 9.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Recruitment Letter

[Date]

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am a senior sociology major at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut and I am writing this letter to ask whether you would be willing to participate in a 60 to 75 minute face-to-face interview as part of my senior thesis. During the interview, I will ask you to reflect on your history in the funeral industry, your general business practices, and your experience working with grieving families.

Death is an incredibly important event in our society, however it is understudied in the field of sociology and difficult to talk about in general society. When people *do* talk about death, notions of closure are often a central part of the conversation. My study investigates the role of closure in conversations between funeral directors and their clients. This topic is important because many research studies on funeral directors have focused on the production of a funeral as an event, while few studies have investigated closure as it relates to funeral directors. As such, I am seeking to interview funeral directors like yourself.

The success of my study and relevance of the research findings depends on your participation in this study. Please email me at haley.thompson.2@trincoll.edu or call me at (773) 614-1758 to offer your participation in this study or with any questions you might have after receiving this letter. Interview times and locations have the ability to be very flexible, including both weekends and weeknights. Thank you in advance for considering participating in my senior thesis.

Sincerely,

Haley Ray Thompson

Appendix B. Phone Script

Hello, my name is Haley Ray Thompson and I am calling from Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. I recently mailed you a letter inquiring about your participation in my senior thesis on the relationship between funeral directors and their clients. Do you have a moment to talk?

Appendix C. CFDA Email Announcement

Trinity Student Seeks Information on Working with Grieving Families

Hello. I am a senior sociology major at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut and I am writing this to ask whether you would be willing to participate in a one-time 60 to 75 minute telephone interview as part of my senior thesis.

During the interview, I will ask you to reflect on your history in the funeral industry, your general business practices, and your experience working with grieving families. Responses are kept strictly confidential and no identifying information will be shared as a result of the telephone interview.

Please contact me at haley.thompson.2@trincoll.edu if you are interested in participating. Also, please feel free to share this announcement with any interested funeral directors.

Haley R. Thompson
haley.thompson.2@trincoll.edu

Appendix D. Semi-Structured Interview Script

Introduction

The purpose of my research study is to investigate the role of closure in conversations between funeral directors and grieving families and clients. You will be asked to reflect on your history in the funeral industry, general business practices, your understanding of closure and your role with clients in relation to closure. This is estimated to require 60 to 75 minutes of your time.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to stop or withdraw your participation at any time, without any penalty. Your responses in this study are completely confidential, and will be used only for research purposes. Are you ready to begin?

Gaining Background Information

1. How did you end up being a funeral director?
    a. Tell me about any specific motivators or deterrents.
    b. How long have you been in this business?
2. Describe your educational background.
    a. Schools attended, degrees attained, years attended.
3. What is your favorite aspect about being a funeral director? Least favorite?
4. What is it like to talk to people outside of the industry about what you do?

General Business Practice and Goals

5. Can you describe the process of planning the average funeral?
6. What is it like when you first sit down to speak with a family about their wishes?
    a. Do you have things that you always say or try not to say?
7. What kinds of goals or wishes do families talk about when specifying what they want when planning a funeral?
8. How do you negotiate things when family members disagree about what they want for the funeral?
9. What would you describe the purpose of a funeral to be?

10. Describe what you hope the family members or friends get out of the funeral.
    a. How can you tell if they have or have not received this?
    b. What do you do when they do not receive this?
11. Describe a successful funeral from a business standpoint.

Closure and Funeral Directing

12. What have you learned about the experience of grief from watching families during the planning of a funeral?
13. What role do you think the funeral plays specifically for family members that are grieving?
    a. How is this similar or dissimilar to other attendees? Friends? Co-workers?
14. When death is discussed in general society, there is often talk about needing to have some closure. When you hear that term, what does it mean to you?
    a. How about the term resolution?
15. Do either of these terms come into conversation with your clients? If so, describe these conversations.
16. What role, if any, do you believe you play as a funeral director in helping to attain closure?
17. What role, if any, do you think clients believe you play as a funeral director in helping to attain closure?
18. How do these two roles compare?
19. Tell me about a time in which a family very obviously did not attain closure.
    a. How did you know that they did not attain closure?
    b. What did you do, or not do, in response to this?
20. Do you have any contact with grievers after the funeral is over?
    a. How does this compare between family members? Friends?

Looking Back and Looking Forward

21. How has your own experience with grief shaped how you help families plan funerals for their loved ones?
22. How have families' requests for funerals changed over time?
23. How have your own expectations for the funerals you plan changed over time?
    a. What has caused your expectations to change?
24. How has your business changed since you began funeral directing?
25. Where do you see the funeral industry in 10 years? 20 years?
26. What do you with people knew about the funeral industry that you believe they do not know?

Wrapping Up

27. Is there anything that I should have asked you that I did not, to better understand the role of closure in conversations with your clients?
28. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
29. Please fill out the demographic information form.

Appendix E. Demographics Form

What is your sex? _____
What is your age? _____
What class do you most identify with? (lower, middle, upper) _____

Appendix F. Codebook

1. Family deterrent
2. Second career
3. Motivation
4. Education
5. Apprenticeship
6. Identity
7. Make a difference
8. Feeling rules
9. Availability
10. Reviews
11. Memory of client
12. Deviant death
13. Meaningful
14. Sales
15. Stigma
16. Funeral importance
17. Personal experience
18. One-shot
19. Honoring wishes
20. Negotiable fees
21. Business conflict
22. Professional
23. Goal
24. Opinion
25. Closure
26. Participation
27. Religion
28. Community
29. Afterwards
30. Honor a life
31. No fee/charge
32. Service
33. Empathy
34. About me
35. About others
36. Cremation
37. Technology
38. Expansion
39. Family in business
40. Race
41. Brand
42. Philanthropy
43. Merchandize
44. Learning
45. Gender
46. No judgment
47. Personalization