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TAKING THE BURDENS:
THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF THE FUNERAL DIRECTOR

Stephen R. Barley

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MASSACHUSETTS
INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
50 MEMORIAL DRIVE
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02139
"When the place was packed full, the undertaker he slid around in his black gloves with his softy, soothing ways, putting on the last touches, and getting people and things all ship-shape and comfortable, and making no more sound than a cat. He never spoke: he moved people around, he squeezed in late ones, he opened up passageways, and done it all with nods and signs with his hands. Then he took his place over against the wall. He was the softest, glidingest, stealthiest man I ever see, and there weren't no more smile to him than there is to a ham....

Mark Twain
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Abstract

An ethnographic study of how funeral director's semantically construct the activity of funeral work reveals a central metaphor, "smoothness", that organizes the funeral director's concept of his work role. The metaphor is defined ostensively by everyday strategies for doing funeral directing: establishing operating procedures, staffing scenes, creating slack, reframing removal settings, restoring the remains, familiarizing the environment, and structuring interactions. These activities allow the funeral director to avoid mistakes and events which might mar the funeral process and thereby link funeral directing to other occupations that manage human crises.
Every society devises schemes for managing death and disposing of the dead. The task of coordinating the preparations and rituals comprising these schemes is usually entrusted to a chosen few. In ancient and pre-industrial societies, religious functionaries wrapped the dead, conducted the rituals, and ministered to the living. Typically the family or the larger community augmented the efforts of the religious figure by addressing the practical concerns engendered by death. Although the clergy continues to execute the religious aspects of the modern American funeral, it is the funeral director who assumes the more extensive task of managing funeral preparations and events. Funeral directing may be considered an occupation that manages a human crisis.

Funeral Directing as the Management of Crisis:

The few studies that have investigated occupations that manage crises report propensities to ameliorate emotional shock and to circumscribe the affected person's perception of severity. Davis (1963) suggests several tactics by which medical personnel prolong hope of recovery among seriously handicapped victims of polio and their parents. Sudnow (1967) and Glaser and Strauss (1965) document strategems by which hospital staffs shield patients from an awareness of death. The coroner's mollifying of death announcements is described by Charmaz (1975) and McClenhen and Lofland (1976) present tactics deputy U.S. marshalls use to play down the severity of the bad news they deliver. Insofar as funeral work is the coordination of the crisis of death, one would suspect that funeral directors also seek to circumscribe perceptions of severity in order to expedite their work.

Hughes (1958) offers several theoretical propositions concerning occu-
pations that manage emergencies and crises. He submits that individuals in such occupations appraise the crises they manage as routine events since they encounter similar situations with frequency. For example, doctors treat cases of appendicitis as nothing extraordinary, although the patient may construe the condition quite differently. The ability to view crises as routine enhances the professional's capacity to exercise competence, but it also engenders occupational risks. Clients rarely experience their own crises as less than of absolute importance. If the recipients of a service detect the provider's relativistic attitude they may become suspicious of the provider's sincerity and competence.

Hughes argues that it is particularly important for those who manage other's crises to avoid the risk of making mistakes, since mistakes become magnets for criticism that might damage the individual's reputation. Often, reputation is the lure by which such occupations attract clientele. Hughes writes that "a large part of the business of protecting one's self from the risks of one's own work mistakes lies in the definition of role" (Hughes, 1958). Therefore, one may expect professionals who coordinate crises to construct occupational roles and complementary work strategies to circumscribe mistakes, stay criticism, and protect reputation.

Research indicates that funeral directors consider "reputation" crucial for successful business. Funeral homes typically rely on word-of-mouth advertising and funeral directors devise, enhance, and protect their reputation by carefully avoiding mistakes that might mar the funeral (Unruh, 1979; Turner and Edgely, 1976; Pine, 1975). Characteristics of funeral work uncommon to other occupations that manage human crises may amplify the funeral director's sensitivity to the costliness of mistakes.

Just as doctors and lawyers divide their work into units defined by the
provision of services to a particular client, so the funeral director orders his activities by the requirements of discrete "cases". However, unlike medical, legal, and therapeutic casework, except for embalming, the execution of a funeral requires no mystifying theoretical or technological knowledge. Moreover, the funeral director's expertise is put to scrutiny in public contexts whereas doctors and lawyers are evaluated in the privacy of the relationship between client and practitioner. For such reasons a funeral director's mistakes are more easily detected and criticized by laymen. Also unlike doctors and therapists, the funeral director is not cushioned by protracted, repetitive interaction with clients. Should the doctor misdiagnose or the therapist misinterpret, they can hope to recoup their mistakes in future sessions. Only one opportunity exists for the funeral director to construct a well-managed funeral.

Studies of Funeral Work:

Following from the recognition that a major theme in funeral work is the production of a flawless funeral, previous researchers have adopted a dramaturgical metaphor to analyze funeral work (Haberstein, 1962; Turner and Edgley, 1976). Their approach views the funeral director as a producer, the funeral as a production, and the funeral home as a stage complete with props, stagehands, and front and back regions. Such studies illuminate mechanisms by which funeral mistakes are avoided and funeral perceptions are shaped. For example, chroniclers of the theatrics of funeral work unanimously agree that backstage areas of funeral homes shield unpleasantries, such as embalming, that might discredit the funeral director's image of respectability and the aesthetics of the funeral ritual (Haberstein, 1962; Turner and Edgley, 1976; and Unruh, 1979).
Although dramaturgical analysis delineates factors that sustain a successful funeral, it fosters a limited understanding of funeral work. The school accentuates the "performance", the public aspect of the funeral, while glossing over other less visible phases of the funeral process such as "making a removal", "making arrangements", and "preparing the body". Secondly, the theatrical metaphor does not directly describe the meaning of funeral work as it is understood by the funeral director (Turner and Edgley, 1976). Rather the metaphor is a tool for highlighting and organizing structural aspects of the funeral milieu. In summary, dramaturgical analyses provide neither a description of the practical, everyday activities of the funeral director nor an understanding of how he construes his work role.

Non-dramaturgical studies of the funeral occupation also emphasize structural factors. Pine's (1975) research demonstrates that a funeral home's organizational form shapes the funeral director's role. Homes run as small family businesses drawing clientele from a particular community or ethnic group represent Pine's "professional service model". Directors in such homes carry out all funeral tasks, follow the bereaved throughout all phases of the funeral, and are particularly heedful to deliver personalized service. "Bureaucratic" funeral homes are usually large, urban operations with high volumes of business, hierarchical authority structures, and specialized division of labor. "Bureaucratic" directors handle only one phase of the funeral and rarely develop a relationship with the family. According to Pine, directors subscribing to the professional service model are more likely than bureaucratic directors to attend closely their mistakes and individual reputations.

Unruh (1979) suggests that funeral directors actively construct
their occupational environment so as to circumscribe risk and to protect their reputation by avoiding mistakes. Although Unruh explicates the funeral director's concern for control and offers a fuller view of funeral work, his research accents situational variables that funeral directors manipulate to mitigate the probability of mistakes. Among studies of funeral work, only Unruh's (1976) earlier detailed discussion of the importance of timing in the funeral process explores funeral work as it is understood by members of the occupation.

This article extends the body of previous research concerning funeral work in three directions. First, it delineates aspects of the meaning of funeral work as it is understood by an insider and emphasizes the practical, everyday activities of the funeral director. Particular regard is shown the funeral director's behavior during "non-public" phases of the funeral. Secondly, the presentation focuses upon strategies by which the funeral director coordinates the funeral rather than upon the aspects of the funeral situation he manipulates. Of foremost concern is how such strategies allow the funeral director to construct and enact his work role. Finally, strategies for doing funeral work, such as creating slack and reframing removal settings, are shown to link funeral directing to other occupations that manage human crises.

Research Methods

This analysis of funeral work is based upon funeral home tours and intensive, ethnographic interviews with an informant over a period of several months. Interviews were taped and then transcribed for analysis. Initially interviews were open-ended, unstructured and intended to evoke the funeral director's perspective of the meaningful. As information surfaced questioning became more
specific. Attention was keyed to identifying semantic categories integral to
the funeral director's conception of his work. The objective was to delineate
a set of semantic domains and then to analyze each domain using the techniques
of componential and attribute analysis as described by various cognitive
anthropologists (e.g., Tyler, 1969; Goodenough, 1971; and Spradley, 1979)\(^3\).

"Smoothness" as a Strategic Role

Verbs portray the funeral director's understanding of funeral work.
"Coordinate", "plan", "guide", and "control" occur frequently as the informant
describes the context and routine of his activity. Funeral work involves
eliminating "hassles" and unpleasantries in order to execute a flawless fune-
ral "as a service to individuals who have already been upset by the turn of
events." In a word, funeral work is creating "smoothness":

The name of the situation is service. You're getting
paid to perform a function whether it be professionally
or businesswise and you're trying to make things as
easy as possible on the family, make things run as smooth
as possible, keep anything from upsetting them in a real
touchy time--which is something you begin to live.

...A very important factor is the smoothness of the way
tings go. There are no hassles, to use the vernacular
of the day...You're guiding the arrangement of this
whole funeral--through the wake and through the actual
funeral mass--and you're trying not to be oppressive
about it...That's why if you're doing your job correctly
you try to take all the burdens or as many of the burdens
as possible off them.

Smoothness lends unity to the funeral director's personal understanding
of his occupational role and operates as a metaphor that orients the director's
execution of everyday activities. Although the term refers to an attribute
of funeral proceedings, its meaning is best understood by examining the
informant's use of the term to justify particular strategies of action. The informant invokes the metonymical metaphor (Manning, 1979) to explain tactics intended to bound complications that might interrupt the production of the funeral, exacerbate the emotional state of the immediate family, or interfere with the disposition of the dead. Since smoothness organizes the director's interaction with the funeral environment and is delimited by strategic action, smoothness may be considered the funeral director's "strategic role" (Lofland, 1976).

There are two analytically distinct types of complications the funeral director seeks to manage in order to achieve smoothness. The first category, "controllable" complications, involves events, delays, and contingencies that can be substantially eliminated by anticipation and careful planning. Such complications are deemed highly responsive to the funeral director's ability to time, script, and routinize events. The sources of these complications are well known, are usually independent of a funeral participant's emotional reactions, and are of calculable probability and timing. The second category of complications that can destroy smoothness are "uncontrollable" in that they are not open to direct intervention since they usually arise from the expressive reactions of participants in funeral settings. Uncontrollable complications are less responsive to planning, scripting, or routinization. Their probability cannot be predicted with accuracy.

Corresponding to each type of complication are strategies the funeral director employs to counter disruption and to ensure smoothness. "Strategies of Control" are designed to excise, circumvent, or intercept work delays, mishaps, and inconveniences. Strategies of a second type aim to bound funeral participants' perceptions and actions; thereby rendering the emotional tenor
of the public aspects of the funeral more manageable. Since these strategies seek to mollify the impact of death scenes, I have labeled the strategies for achieving "naturalness".  

Strategies of Control

The production of a funeral requires the funeral director to procure and schedule resources, to plan and time events, and to steer the movements of funeral participants. The sheer number of details which must be coordinated to attain a smooth funeral increases the probability of snags in the funeral process. Thus the director seeks to program and routinize tactics for eliminating complications. Chief among the informant's strategies for controlling snags are: (1) employing operating procedures, (2) staffing scenes, and (3) creating slack.

Operating procedures: When the funeral director can predict recurrent uncertainty, he may formulate standard operating procedures to eliminate mistakes in the funeral process. Although operating procedures routinize many aspects of funeral work, such as embalming or the maintenance of the home itself, among the most important operating procedures are those which ensure that a newly bereaved individual will be able to contact the funeral director regardless of time and those that assure that the obituary will appear correctly in print.

"Cases" commence when a member of the deceased's family or a friend of the deceased contacts the funeral director and engages his services. Usually the call comes by telephone, although funeral homes located near major hospitals experience a number of "walk-ins". Calls cannot be anticipated; nor are calls timed conveniently. A call can come in at any hour of the day or night. Consequently, the funeral director attempts to guarantee his own availability or
or the availability of his apprentices by using a sophisticated communications system. Funeral home telephone extensions are installed in both the director's home and automobile. Hearses and limousines are equipped with two way radios. When away from a convenient extension, the funeral director carries a pager. In addition to the communication system, apprentices live in the funeral home to intercept walk-ins who call after hours.

When telephoning the text of a death notice to the appropriate newspaper, the funeral director identifies himself by a code, a series of numbers. The code assures the newspaper's representative that the caller is a genuine funeral director and eliminates the possibility of someone placing an obituary as a practical joke. The informant typically spells all names using the familiar system: "A as in Arthur," "B as in boy," etc. The recipient of the call is then instructed to repeat the spelling. The procedure protects the funeral director from embarrassing surprises in the death notice.

Operating procedures are best targeted for recurrent mistakes arising from the behavior of funeral home personnel. Other strategies must be devised to handle unpredictable but typical contingencies.

**Staffing Scenes:** The director staffs funeral scenes to eliminate or intercept spontaneous mishaps, confusions, and delays. During wakes, either the funeral director or one of his apprentices is stationed near the front door to assist the flow of traffic by directing people to the proper location. In addition, the "official greeter" attends any needs that a visitor might present:

And while the visiting hours are going on, you have some personnel—depending on how busy a wake is or how many wakes you have going—at the front door opening it and closing it and just being like the official greeter, and making sure people are going in the right direction. A lot of people get very nervous when they come to a wake.
Even people that have been many times. So you're there to help them if they appear to be nervous: make sure they don't trip up the stairs and you get them into the proper room if you have more than one wake going...You're there if any member of the family has some type of request which would come from any type of public gathering. Somebody might want the air conditioner on. Somebody might want the heat on. Where are the rest rooms? Where can I get a drink of water? I need an aspirin.

The duties of "pallbearers" depict a more elaborate use of the strategy of staffing scenes to control contingencies. Pallbearers are individuals employed by the funeral home on an ad hoc, part time basis to assist coordination during the funeral itself. The informant's pallbearers are regulars, men whom he hires repeatedly. Pallbearers ensure order and coordination within the context of providing valet service, a convenience for those who attend the funeral. Among other duties, the hired pallbearers park participant's automobiles in the home's parking lot, determine who among the participants will drive in the cortege, arrange participant's vehicles in a designated order, assist participants to their vehicles following the gathering of the mourners, and direct and time traffic to coordinate the cortege's progress. The pallbearer's objective is to keep the funeral cortege intact on the way to the church and to get the cortege to the church on time.

Staffing the wake and the funeral provides a means for intercepting potential disruptions and for pacing funeral scenes to avoid delays. Control is achieved under the guise of providing considerate service for funeral participants whose unscripted and unsynchronized behaviors are the most likely sources of unforeseen contingencies during the course of a public funeral event. By staffing scenes the director scripts potentially random behavior while fostering perceptions of helpfulness. Sources of disruption that do not arise from participants' behavior are managed by creating slack.
Creating Slack: The strategy of creating slack cushions unfolding funeral plans when the funeral director must rely upon outsiders to perform tasks. Slack time and resources provide margins of error for absorbing contingencies. One tactic for creating slack is to schedule events, arrivals, and deliveries to minimize the probability of wrinkling the smoothness of proceedings. For example, the funeral director instructs florists to deliver flowers two hours before they are needed. If flowers are not delivered by the appointed time, the funeral director has leeway to call the florist and remind him or her of the obligation to deliver. Likewise, family members are instructed to arrive at the funeral home well before visiting hours are scheduled to begin. The extra time allows the family an opportunity to be by themselves "so that if it becomes difficult for them they can get through that difficult period and get themselves under control before the general public comes in." In order to guarantee that the immediate family will arrive at the funeral home by the appointed time on the morning of the funeral, the funeral director will dispatch a limousine to the family's home.

In addition to creating slack time, the funeral director can eliminate much uncertainty by owning his own hearse and limousine and by maintaining a regular staff large enough to handle a normal case load. When the funeral director owns his own equipment and employs his own staff, he is able to exercise more control than when he is forced to employ outsiders or rent equipment. Adequate equipment and personnel represent "slack" resources:

...we fortunately have a large enough staff and our own equipment here...You can consider yourself, to a large degree, when it really gets going and it gets to be very involved, like a puppeteer. Any of those puppets you have on the other end of the string you can control. It's when you get outside your realm of control that it is a great cause for concern...
Despite strategies such as establishing operating procedures, staffing scenes, and creating slack time and resources, the potential for mishap remains. The unplanned event, such as the absence of a tent at the cemetery on a rainy day, is the funeral director's bane:

So your blood pressure jumps a few points because you're being paid by the family to do it. You're doing it the way you were told...and it doesn't happen. You're frustrated because you know you did everything you were supposed to do. You've done it, checked it, everything's been perfect—as perfect as you can get it as a human being and it doesn't happen. So you're standing there with your fingers in your ears and people are looking at you. They say "What did you do wrong?" It's part of the general reputation, you don't want things to go wrong.

Strategies for Achieving "Naturalness"

Funeral scenes and the sight of the deceased's body can trigger stressful behavior that may affect the smoothness of the funeral. From the funeral director's point of view, acutely expressive behavior can interrupt the pacing of funeral events, upset the "dignity" of the setting, and hamper the director's work. Since the funeral director cannot control other people's reactions as easily as he might schedule the delivery of flowers or deploy his staff and since his role is not officially the role of priest or counselor, the funeral director seeks to moderate emotional stress by making funeral scenes appear more "natural".

When the funeral director speaks of "naturalness" as a quality to be attained in a particular funeral scene, he refers to the desirability of arranging contextual cues to mitigate perceptions that he believes might disturb participants. The director attempts to achieve naturalness by (1) reframing removal settings, (2) restoring the remains, (3) familiarizing the environment and (4) structuring interactions.
Reframing Removal Settings: Under circumstances when outsiders are likely to view the corpse or to observe the more unpleasant aspects of funeral work, the funeral director seeks to circumscribe the forcefulness of cues. Such a situation may occur when removing the body from the place of death. The funeral director categorizes "removals" on the basis of the death's context. There are four major types of removals: hospital removals, nursing home removals, home removals, and accidents or sudden deaths that do not occur in one of the other contexts. Besides distinguishing removals by the context of death, the funeral director classifies removals as either "hard" or "easy". Difficulty is attributed by the amount of physical work to be done, the degree of flexibility open to the funeral director in deciding when to make the removal, and especially the presence of outsiders. Depending upon the context of the removal, the director may find it necessary to modify or reframe the setting in order to achieve a degree of naturalness.

Hospital removals present little difficulty since hospitals are prepared to handle deaths with expediency. Most hospitals maintain morgue facilities where bodies are taken shortly after death to be placed in refrigerated lockers to await removal. Since refrigeration slows decomposition, the funeral director has discretion in timing the removal. Moreover, the physical terrain of the hospital minimizes the funeral director's toil. Wide corridors, ramps and elevators are easily negotiated by a one-man stretcher. Therefore, little lifting is required in the course of the removal. Since the probability of uninitiated onlookers being present in the hospital's morgue is quite small (Sudnow, 1967), the removal setting is not reframed.

Home removals are considerably more difficult than hospital removals. First, homes are less maneuverable. Small doorways, sharp angles, and stairs may require the funeral director and his assistant to lift and carry the body.
Often furniture must be moved to create suitable access. The work is made more difficult by the fact that the men are garbed in suits and ties, apparel hardly suited for physical labor.

Second, little discretion is allowed the funeral director when scheduling a home removal; quickness is of essence. Without refrigeration, decomposition threatens the funeral director's ability to easily restore naturalness to the remains and creates unpleasant circumstances for the other occupants of the home. Furthermore, speed is desirable because the deceased's body is seen as a disruptive presence in the home.

Yet, for the funeral director, the most difficult aspect of making a home removal arises from the necessity of working under the scrutiny of the family. When a person dies at home, the family's natural behavior is to notify relatives and friends. By the time the funeral director arrives on the scene, several people may have gathered at the home. The situation requires utmost care on the part of the funeral director to lessen the impact of the removal on those present and to be as quick, as quiet, and as unobtrusive as possible. The director seeks to reframe the removal setting by shielding the survivors' view of the removal and the body by returning the site of death to a more "normal" condition. In essence, the director attempts to limit the survivors' awareness of the removal:

First of all when we arrive at the house, one of us will go inside first--just to check out what's what. Who's in there. Where the person has died. Just how much work you're going to have to do to perform this feat. Then you will (single out the) one person that kind of stands out to be in charge, (who) isn't that much bothered by what's going to happen even though they might be a relative. You try to get the rest of the people...into an area where they really cannot see what you're doing. Usually it's the kitchen which would be more at the back of the house. Get them in there to have a cup of coffee.
Then you go out and bring in your other man...with the stretcher. You're careful not to make too much noise...if you're in the role of making a removal and let's say you went to move a table and the lamp fell off. With that noise of the lamp falling off, you would rest assured that somebody in the kitchen would say, "My God, they've dropped him." So you try to have it over as quickly and as quietly as you can. To get in and out of that house and put the place back together again. Usually you try to take the bed clothes that are on there and just fold them or roll them up. Get them off to the side. Air out the room. Usually the shades are down. You put the shades up. Try to bring it back to as much normalcy as you can so there's as little reminder of what's gone on as possible.

In terms of difficulty, nursing home removals fall between hospital and home removals. Since nursing homes and private dwellings are similarly constructed, the funeral director again confronts restricted maneuverability. Although the director does not have to move furniture or return the room to normality, he does have to contend with the presence of patients and the lack of refrigeration which, as we have seen, make speed an important attribute of the removal. Since outsiders are likely to witness the removal, the director attempts to reframe the setting.

...and oftentimes in a nursing home you are taking a person out of a bed that is in a two-bedded room--three or four-bedded room...You do not want to leave that person who's died in a room with people who are still living any longer than is absolutely necessary. It's inconvenient for the people that are in the room...oftentimes the nurses...will try to clear the way for you and get the people down the hallway and close the doors, or if you have to go by a sitting area they usually try to get the people out and get them somewhat occupied so that they are not seeing what goes on. You're dealing with elderly people, sick people...who know that possibly their time here on earth is rather limited...you can see oftentimes in their faces that concern.....

When death occurs in a context where uninitiated individuals are likely to view the corpse and the director's activities, the removal setting is
reframed. The more difficult the removal, the more reframing is seen as necessary. Reframing is achieved by executing a speedy, unobtrusive removal and by de-emphasizing the presence of the corpse. The director's intent is to simulate a context suggesting more "natural", everyday events by limiting outsiders' awareness of the removal and by shielding the corpse from view.

**Restoring the Remains:** The presence of the body in the midst of the living also occurs when the body is "laid out" for viewing. As in removals, naturalness is considered to be an important attribute of a successful wake. In both situations the unmasked face of the corpse is hidden to reduce the probability of expressive behavior which could disrupt the smoothness of the funeral scene. Although concealing the corpse from sight restores naturalness in a removal, naturalness in a wake refers to presenting the deceased in a "viewable" fashion. By "preparing the remains" the director fabricates the naturalness necessary for a palatable viewing. Preparation is the technical aspect of funeral work for which training and skill are required. The processes for producing a natural appearance are elaborate and well-calculated.

Once the body has been cleansed, the features are "posed." Posing refers to the closing of the deceased's eyes and mouth. Since the face will be viewed most closely at the wake, the features must be given special attention:

You start with the posing of your features. Now, that has to be done promptly. Let's take the eyes for example. There's to my knowledge two different methods of closing they eyes... One is what you might call the abutting method, which means the top lid is butting to the bottom lid. Just coming together as naturally as possible, just as if you were sleeping. The other method, which would be done a little bit quicker, is an overlap method. Now you're overlapping the top lid to the bottom lid which in my estimation is not a good way to do it. This is just a small example. It doesn't look natural...You're talking about the face which people are looking at and if you lose that there's very little you can recoup no matter what you do in your cosmetic area.
Having posed the features, the funeral director can begin embalming. An inverse relationship exists between the speed of the embalmer and the quality of the outcome. Hasty embalming can distort facial features. Moreover, embalming must be executed thoroughly to effectively retard decomposition. Otherwise, the body may begin to decompose during the wake causing a discoloration of the deceased's features. These effects are understood to detract from the intended natural effect and to damage the funeral director's professional reputation.

If the body is not properly preserved you could get to some degree the same effects you'd get in the person who's been completely unattended. It wouldn't be as severe obviously, but you could get areas that might start to show signs of decomposition. It usually starts on your points, your extremities, like the tip of your nose, the bottom part of your ears, your fingers. If those are not properly embalmed you could see some discoloration which would be very difficult to keep covered by cosmetics and you'd be like Billy, the boy artist, with a paintbrush as you try to keep that covered! So if that's not done properly, you could have an awful situation on your hands—a real nerve wrecking situation and a situation if you ended up that way it's nobody's fault but you own...you're wrong and you're in trouble.

To lend a more lifelike appearance to the deceased's visage, cosmetics are used. Carefully avoiding the "paintbrush effect," the director blends and smooths cosmetics into the skin to achieve an appropriate color. When possible and when the deceased is female, the funeral director secures samples of cosmetics actually used by the woman. The funeral home retains a hairdresser who comes to the home to style the deceased's hair. Frequently, the hairdresser consults with the family to be sure that tints and rinses are the same as those used by the deceased when alive. The intent of such tactics is to create as normal an appearance as possible.

The funeral director prefers to dress the deceased in their own clothing.
For example, a woman might be garbed in a dress which she bought for a wedding or one which the family particularly liked. The color of the dress is thought to be quite important. If possible, the funeral director will dress the deceased in light colored clothing, to create an image less symbolic of death. The best of situations is to be able to match a dress or shirt to the casket's liner.

The dress worn by a woman should have a high neck and long sleeves. The style enables the funeral director to hide blemishes more effectively than by covering them with cosmetics. Masking blemishes is particularly important if the individual had been hospitalized prior to death. In such instances, the body will usually bear evidence of incisions and intravenous injections. Hiding such marks supposedly makes viewing the body more palatable.

The body should be positioned neither "too high" nor "too low" in the casket. Caskets have either an adjustable bed or padding which allows the funeral director to position the body so as to achieve the most pleasing effect. The body should be positioned at a medium level relative to the depth of the casket, be easily visible, and be ever so slightly turned to face out towards the chapel. Positioning the head is extremely important:

One of the things we don't want is the person looking right up at the ceiling. So you're tilting the head a little bit just to make it look a little more natural.

The appearance of the deceased is a topic of frequent discussion among funeral participants and provides the director with evidence for the efficacy of his strategy. Remarks such as, "Didn't she look natural!" are common. If preparation is accomplished artfully, the funeral director creates the illusion that the deceased is "sleeping peacefully" in the casket. Death's pallor has been masked and an image created to mollify the foreignness of death.
Familiarizing the Environment: A funeral director's third strategy for achieving naturalness complements preparation by providing a setting where the deceased can be viewed in repose. Again, the funeral director's emphasis is upon managing visual cues to achieve an aesthetic which simulates an everyday reality while suggesting icons of rest. The general furnishings of the funeral home's chapels are chosen to create an "uplifting" effect which is thought to counteract exhaustion and the emotional impact of the death and the wake setting. The furnishings are not unlike those found in many homes and suggest a degree of familiarity in a potentially stressful environment. In fact, the chapel is designed to resemble an average but well-furnished living room.

Again going back to the idea of a funeral home being the extension of a person's home...that's basically and exactly what it is. You're trying to give them a nice, clean, comfortable facility. Lighter colors to brighten the place up a bit. In the old days it was more morbid with deep wine red colors. You might see that for the drapes. The original rug that was here was a deep red rug...everything was dark--dark mahogany, dark rugs, dark drapes--well this is an uplifting with off-white walls. It's more of an uplifting feeling if you walk in here...the chairs are blue and the lamps. Your basic idea--to give them someplace comfortable and pleasing to the eye to come to. Something that is...if they can, they enjoy being here for a period of time because of the decor, forgetting about what they're here for. At least it gives them something to look at.

During the wake the casket containing the body of the deceased rests on a church truck, an aluminum or wooden dolly that supports the casket at waist level. Around the truck is hung a casket drape, a piece of velvet cloth that matches the draperies of the room and hides the truck from view. Around the casket are placed flower stands upon which sit flowers sent to the family of the deceased. The drape, flower stands, and flowers are considered "finishing items" used to "create an aesthetic appearance". Both finishing items and
general furnishings are intended to soften the harshness of an alien scene in hope of ameliorating potentially uneasy reactions among those who come to view the dead.

Structuring Interactions: The potential for disruptions in the funeral process due to what the funeral director would call "emotionality" is not confined to those funeral scenes where the body of the deceased is present. Excessively emotional behavior may threaten the smoothness of any interaction with the bereaved. To ensure smooth interactions the funeral director structures situations tactfully and subtly. The funeral director's tendency to use what he believes to be connotatively less harsh words, like "casket" instead of "coffin" and "loss" instead of "death", are understood by the funeral director as tactics for mollifying discussions of death and the deceased.

The funeral director's technique for guiding bereaved individuals towards consideration of the funeral arrangements provides an example of how he structures interactions. The funeral director initiates the process by engaging the bereaved in general conversation in order to set the stage for moving gradually towards doing business. If the funeral director perceives that the "principal" (e.g., the spouse), is in "no state to make rational judgements," he tries to identify another person who is "in a position to make decisions." The director wishes to ensure that the onus or responsibility for choosing among the various options and costs does not fall upon himself. Should the director appear to coax the family towards a particular coffin or some other financial commitment, he may later run the risk of being criticized when the impact of the death has subsided and the bill has arrived.

Eventually, general conversation melds with "taking the information". Now, the funeral director gathers information on the deceased and the deceased's family to be used to complete the death certificate which the funeral director
has obtained from the attending physician. Taking the information is secondarily understood to be a tactic for preparing people to make financial decisions:

I could walk into a house or somebody could come in here completely distraught—tears or even a worse reaction which is complete silence, you know they're out of it. When you start asking them questions...you're making the mind work...and when the mind starts to work their heads will clear a little bit. Now they're thinking about, "Well, gee, you know my husbands's got a brother, Jim, who lives in New York. Should I or shouldn't I list him in the newspaper." There are decisions like that that have to be made and they're very easy, practical decisions but this starts the brain moving in a different direction and gets them off the tragedy a little bit...You start them off with the easy stuff first, and as you're working them along they're getting into the more important things. So that when you get to the end of the line (and) you start talking about things that are going to have a lasting effect on them and the finances, they're pretty well grooving on what you're talking about...

Making the arrangements for a family member's funeral may be a "touchy" activity, yet the funeral director must move towards conducting business negotiations. By structuring the process of making arrangements the funeral director shifts the bereaved's attention away from contemplation of the death itself towards consideration of the practical consequences of the crisis. This strategy subtly defines the interaction as a "natural" interchange and avoids the risk of appearing to take advantage of the bereaved's emotional state.

Strategies for achieving naturalness aim to modify funeral participants' reactions to funeral scenes by creating the perception of more frequently experienced phenomena. Removal settings are reframed to imply that neither the death nor the removal occurred in the setting. Remains are restructured to camouflage the visual cues of death and to suggest that the deceased is "peacefully asleep." The decor of the funeral home is designed to provide
"uplift" by eliminating cues associated with death and by creating cues of familiar environs. Finally, interactions are structured to shift focus away from the immediacy and finality of the death in order to facilitate more naturally occurring interaction. Each strategy is a hedge against participants' behaviors that could disrupt the smoothness of the funeral.

Concluding Comments

The intent of this study has been to describe the meaning of funeral work as it is understood by an insider through an explication of the tactile metaphor, "smoothness"; a metaphor employed by the funeral director to attribute meaning to his art and deed. As an operative metaphor, smoothness connotes a standard for evaluating funeral work, but most importantly, serves the director as a linguistic and hence cognitive schema for his role in the death crisis. Smoothness is a metonymical metaphor: it keys upon one attribute associated with funerals and elaborates that attribute to create a symbol of successful funeral directing. Under the umbrella of the image of smoothness, the director's strategies for achieving control and naturalness are seen as a coherent, purposive whole. Metonymy may be a device frequently employed by a member of an occupation to lend concise sense to everyday work life (Manning, 1979).

The concept of smoothness not only justifies the director's everyday activity, it provides a map and compass for orienting role related behavior. In this latter sense we may view the metaphor as a role "construct", a concept which functions to channel the director's actions in light of his understanding and anticipation of events (see Kelly, 1955). The metaphor expands to guide the spontaneous activity of funeral directing. One morning during an interview the informant told me that if I were his employee and I had promised to arrive at 9:00 am to clean windows prior to a funeral service, I could be assured that
I would receive a call at 8:30 to remind me of my obligation. The informant's justification (somewhat bitterly stated) was that too many "Stevies" had disrupted funeral plans by failing to punctually fulfill their obligations. For the informant, the role of achieving smoothness is "something you come to live."

The strategic role of achieving smoothness links the funeral director to incumbents of other occupations that manage human crises. Informed by the metaphor, the director enacts strategies to control for mistakes that might jeopardize his reputation as a legitimate expert in the provision of funeral services. The director's strategies for achieving naturalness in the funeral process are analogous to those activities of other professions which seek to limit the perception of the crisis's severity in order to expedite work. However, the metaphor highlights major differences between the role of the funeral director and the occupational role of those who manage other types of human crises. Unlike the doctor or therapist, the funeral director is hired to perform duties that laymen could execute had they the time or inclination. Therefore, it behooves the funeral director to perform punctiliously to escape criticism for doing that which we would avoid. In a very real sense, the funeral director's clients pay the director to chart a smooth course through the "rough" time of the death crisis. Thus, the director's understanding of his role mirrors expectations of the society in which he works.
Footnotes

1. Funeral work is an occupation populated predominately by males (Pine, 1975). The masculine form of the third person pronoun will be used throughout this article to underscore the sexual demography of the occupation as well as to indicate that the informant was male.

2. The informant is a lifelong member of the metropolitan neighborhood in which his funeral home is located. He has been associated with the funeral business since birth and has been an active funeral director for twelve years. The informant and his brother manage a funeral home originally established by their father. The home draws most of its clientele from the surrounding community which is populated predominately by individuals of the Catholic faith and Irish, Italian, Polish and Lithuanian descent. Consequently, the informant's business is weighted towards traditional Catholic funerals. The informant's business typifies Pine's "professional service model".

3. The strategies discussed below span and integrate most of the 49 domains identified during the course of the study. This article explicates no domain in order to achieve more concise exposition. My objective is to focus sharply upon the strategies of the funeral director by glossing a fully detailed description of the funeral director's understanding of his work.

4. The funeral director undoubtedly employs other strategic roles when he is concerned with specific subsets of his work world. For example, he may act as a "small businessman" when considering the home's financial situation or as a "professional" when interacting with community civic groups or conventions of funeral directors. However, "smoothness" seems to be the most relevant role when the director is specifically engaged in the funeral process, the main focus of this exposition.
5. The strategies I have chosen to represent in each cluster are those which seem most important to the informant. Other strategies exist and additional examples of the strategies I have described can surely be found. For example, I suspect that the home has codified procedures for ordering and maintaining a stock of caskets and other supplies so as to guard against being ill-prepared to handle a case. Moreover, rules that dictate the appearance and behavior of funeral home personnel can be viewed as strategies for affecting the perceptions of funeral participants (see Unruh, 1979).

6. These strategies have been attacked by critics of the funeral industry as contrivances which serve only to perpetuate society's dependence upon funeral directors and to line the coffers of funeral homes (Mitford, 1963; Bowman, 1959). That the funeral director conceives of these strategies as integral to his efforts to manage others' awareness of death's more unpleasant attributes is amply revealed in the text. Haberstein (1962) speaks of the practices as evidencing "an aesthetic drift which has placed increased stress upon beauty-in-externality, a tendency to dissociate or repress the grimness and coarseness of most aspects of human affairs and the encapsulation of human crises such as death". Blauner (1968) shares a similar opinion of our culture's attitude toward dying. Bowman (1959) theorizes that the processes of urbanization, industrialization, and the move toward secularism have shifted the responsibility for disposing of the dead and the coordination of the accompanying rites of passage onto the funeral director and away from the family and clergy. The meanings of funeral practice are probably multiple. The choice of one's interpretation depends upon one's project. Here, we are concerned with delineating the meaning of funeral work as seen by funeral directors themselves.
8. A bloated face could be distressing to someone who has known the deceased. However, most funeral participants would probably not notice slight discolorations of the deceased's body, although a funeral director would. Hughes (1958) notes that professionals define certain sets of mistakes by criteria that only another colleague would recognize. Mistakes in this sense refer to problems in the practice of the professional's art.
Bibliography


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