

Social Aspects of Death, Dying and Bereavement (DDB) Study Group

Theme: Social Class, Death, Dying and Bereavement

Monday, 16 November 2009
ICOSS, University of Sheffield

To mark the new status of the Death, Dying and Bereavement Symposium as part of an independent British Sociological Association Study Group, the theme for this year's meeting reflected sociology's roots in the study of social class. Presentations addressed death, dying and bereavement in terms of social class, either through ongoing research, already published studies or theoretical discussion.

The day was a great success with 39 people in attendance from a range of academic backgrounds and included people who work in hospices and for charities.

The following questions prompted us to select the theme of social class:

- Has the concept of social class become too complex for use, or just plain irrelevant?*
- Has Death Studies led us astray from core sociological questions?*
- With an eye to reforming 'deathways', have we privileged middle class agendas?*

The conference focussed on:

- The implications of poverty (e.g., during life-limiting illness; following the death of a 'breadwinner').
- Power and conflict (violent death; death in war).
- Cultures of consumption as markers of class identity (e.g., informal memorialisation; the consumption of memorial products; the distribution of effects after a death).
- Working class cultures of death (around, for example, funeral practices, spiritualism, clairvoyance).
- Middle class values and beliefs (e.g., as expressed in death 'reform').
- The intersection of social class with other social divisions (e.g. ageing, gender, ethnicity).
- Methodological questions (e.g., class and the interpretation of qualitative data; the transcription of 'non-standard' accents/dialects; reflexivity and differences/similarities of class between researcher and researched, for example as representatives of middle class institutions).

*Glennys Howarth addresses these questions in an article called 'Whatever happened to social class? An examination of the neglect of working class cultures in the sociology of death' (Health Sociology Review 16 (5): 425-435).



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PROGRAMME

Monday 16th November 2009, 10.30am – 4.30pm
ICOSS, University of Sheffield

Map available at http://www.shef.ac.uk/content/1/c6/03/72/52/ICOSS_MAP%5B1%5D.pdf

Theme: Social Class, Death, Dying and Bereavement

10.00 – 10.30	Tea/Coffee and Registration
10.30 – 10.40	Welcome
10.40 – 11.10	Moira O'Connor and Lauren Breen , Curtin University, Australia <i>One Size Fits All? The Intersection between Social Class and Grief Research</i>
11.10 – 11.40	Marion Judd , Queen Mary University of London <i>Social aspects of contemporary dying: social class and the right-to-die movement</i>
11.40 – 12.10	Jack Kamerman , Kean University, USA <i>Social Class and Other Conceptual Orphans in Death Studies</i>
12.10 – 1.30	Lunch (provided)
1.30 – 2.00	Charlotte Wilson , D. Roberts, A. Caress, M. Campbell and G. Grande, University of Manchester <i>End of life care: socioeconomic status as a predictor of access to palliative care services</i>
2.00 – 2.30	Margaret Holloway , Sue Adamson, Vassos Argyrou, Peter Draper and Daniel Mariau, University of Hull <i>Religion, secularism and social class in contemporary funerals</i>
2.30 – 3.00	Tea/Coffee
3.00 – 3.30	Helen Frisby , University of the West of England <i>"Simple, innocent customs": 'Folk' funerals in Yorkshire, c.1840-1914</i>
3.30 – 4.00	Marilyn Gregory , University of Sheffield <i>Homicide-suicide in Yorkshire and the Humber and the issue of social class</i>
4.00 - 4.30	Summary of the day/Comments
4.30 onwards	Social activity in a local establishment – we hope you can join us

Early Bird Registration for the symposium closes on **Monday 19th October 2009**.

Fees are £10 for Postgraduates, £15 BSA members, £20 for non-members.

Registrations after 19th October incur a £5 late booking fee.

Registration ends 6th November 2009.

Please find details of how to register at the end of this document.

Convened by Julie Ellis, Jenny Hockey, Therese Richardson and Kate Woodthorpe.



ABSTRACTS

Moira O'Connor and Lauren Breen, Curtin University, Australia

One Size Fits All? The Intersection between Social Class and Grief Research

Much of the classic grief theories were based on research with white, middle class, middle aged women bereaved through the deaths of their husbands following illness. Despite the limited transferability of the findings many health professionals continue to draw heavily upon these theories and they also underpin the dominant grief discourse. There has been comparatively little research into grief following violent deaths, socially stigmatising deaths or deaths in non-dominant cultures (such as Indigenous Australians). Ways of grieving and cultural practices around grieving which do not fit these dominant assumptions are marginalised and excluded, and attempts are made to bring people into line. This dichotomy between 'normal' grief and grief that deviates from this norm is heightened as we move towards a new DSM category labeled: Prolonged Grief Disorder. Symptoms of Prolonged Grief Disorder must be present for at least six months, must cause significant social occupational or domestic impairment and include: intrusive thoughts related to the deceased; intense pangs of separation distress; yearnings for the deceased, which are distressing to the bereaved; difficulty accepting the loss; avoiding reminders of the deceased; anger, bitterness, emptiness, and/or numbness; and difficulty 'moving on' with life. It is claimed that Prolonged Grief Disorder is not responsive to general counselling and instead requires more specialised (and, by implication, medicalised) psychotherapeutic interventions. In this presentation we will draw upon research on grief following violent deaths and grief practices in Indigenous Australian cultures to challenge the dominant discourse of ways of grieving. We argue that this pathologising and homogenising of grief raises issues for those who are marginalised and disenfranchised and that issues of class and power need to be brought to the foreground of grief research.

Marion Judd, Queen Mary University of London

Social aspects of contemporary dying: social class and the right-to-die movement

Studies of the US Hemlock Society membership show marked differences in the sociodemographic profile of the general US population and that of Hemlock Society members in terms of age, social class and religious affiliation. In contrast little attention has been paid by social scientists to the UK right to die movement and its members.

The UK right-to-die movement was initiated by a group of mainly medical doctors and clergy around 80 years ago and remains a thriving social movement to this day. Information on the sociodemographic profile of members of the largest UK right to die society (Dignity in Dying) has not been made available, but a recent study of Friends at the End (FATE), a small Glasgow-based right to die society suggests that age, social class and religious affiliation of FATE's members are similar to those reported in the Hemlock society studies, with FATE and Hemlock Society members being more likely to be older and female. Amongst FATE members there are a considerable number with professional backgrounds in health and social care.

The relative absence of FATE members from lower socio-economic classes would benefit from further attention in relation to gender, social class, culture/custom, income and religion. This paper offers some possible reasons for the relative absence of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds within FATE membership, and discusses how social exclusion, cultural values, customs and beliefs associated with class might influence personal right-to-die ideology and engagement with the right to die movement.





Jack Kamerman, Kean University, USA

Social Class and Other Conceptual Orphans in Death Studies

Although the neglect of social class (particularly certain social classes such as the working class) in death studies is the focus of this conference, social class is far from the only blind spot in death studies. Other concepts and topics have also been neglected both in death studies and its sibling discipline, suicidology. Social class and other conceptual orphans such as generation; other neglected topics such as megadeath and suicide bombers; and the reasons for their neglect are the focus of this paper. These reasons include the interdisciplinary character of most of the academic meetings and journals in this area (a function in part of the organization of and territorial arrangements in universities), the class bias in the selection of university faculties, the increasing commercialization of universities, and the insularity of the discipline of death studies in different countries. The relative importance of social class in relation to other variables such as culture and generation is considered. A partial explanation for selecting a particular concept and a particular topic over another is offered. The opportunity to be funded for research is one element in that explanation. The ambivalence toward the working class in Sociology and in society, alternately the victim of condescension and romanticization, is also examined. Finally, an argument is made for the importance of separating the history of death studies as a discipline from the history of the sociology of death as a specialized area in sociology.

Charlotte Wilson, D. Roberts, A. Caress, M. Campbell and G. Grande, University of Manchester

End of life care: socioeconomic status as a predictor of access to palliative care services

Palliative care services aim to provide specialist care for the dying including; the palliation of symptoms and side effects and promotion of dignity & well-being towards the end of life. Equal access to these services is essential if health care services are to offer equitable provision to patients. The availability of hospice at home (H@H) services is particularly important in providing specialist palliative care (SPC) to the many people who prefer home care. In order to identify whether socio-economic factors are associated with SPC access, this population study explored how socio-economic status and other key demographic indicators were associated with referral rates in two socioeconomically distinct areas (Salford and Trafford). These areas were served by the same H@H service so provision was held constant. Secondary data from the UK National Census 2001, North West Cancer Intelligence Agency and H@H Service referral data (2004-06) were collated for both areas. Descriptive analysis profiled electoral ward characteristics whilst simple correlations and regression modelling estimated associations with referral rates. Referral rates were lower and cancer mortality higher in most deprived wards (Salford). Referral rates were significantly associated with deprivation – particularly multiple deprivation – but not significantly associated with cancer mortality. The socio-economic characteristics of those referred to hospice at home rather than service provision strongly predicted referral rates, suggesting that lower socio-economic status is associated with poorer access. This has implications for the allocation and targeting of resources and contributes important findings to future research exploring relationships between socio-economic status and care for the dying.





Margaret Holloway, Sue Adamson, Vassos Argyrou, Peter Draper and Daniel Mariau

University of Hull

Religion, secularism and social class in contemporary funerals

This paper reports on a study funded by the AHRC. The study commenced in October 2008 and will run until the end of March 2010. Through a focus on contemporary funerals, it aims to explore: the changing nature of belief in contemporary society; the search for rituals and practices to express contemporary spiritualities; the impact of secularising and postmodern trends on an established socio-religious event (the funeral); the ascription of meaning, both individual and subjective and socially prescribed; the connections between meaning and identity, including spiritual and religious identities; and the ethnically diverse and pluralist contexts in which these phenomena are played out. The paper will explore the relationship between social class and religious, spiritual or secular beliefs, expressions and practices, through preliminary analysis of the Phase 1 data obtained from case studies of around 50 funerals. For each funeral, this comprises of: observation of pre-funeral meetings between families and funeral directors and celebrants; observation of the funeral; a post-funeral focused interview with the bereaved person(s). The majority of the deceased were working-class/unemployed, although some social mobility has occurred between generations. Predominantly, however, the phase 1 data provides a snapshot of the significance and expression of belief in popular lower class culture in Hull.

Helen Frisby, University of the West of England

"Simple, innocent customs": 'Folk' funerals in Yorkshire, c. 1840-1914

The later C19th/early C20th working-class experience of death and dying has traditionally been interpreted in terms of subjects' supposed attempts to imitate middle class culture, and their implicit aspirations to join the middle classes through conspicuous consumption of funerary goods. It is certainly true that the Victorian undertaker found a ready market for his wares in both the rural villages of the Yorkshire Dales and the slums of urban Sheffield. However, here I challenge the traditional assumptions by employing evidence from folklore and material culture to demonstrate the existence of a distinctive culture of death and dying amongst the Victorian and Edwardian working classes. From an extensive catalogue of beliefs about predicting death, through the careful removal of wild bird feathers from the deathbed (it was believed these 'held the person back'), 'waking' the deceased, the quasi-sacramental sharing of wine and biscuits amongst the funeral party and the ritual 'telling the bees' of a death, the folklore and material culture of death and dying in this period exposes a culture remarkable for its vigour and its internal consistency. However the evidence is not always as straightforward as it seems, for careful reading reveals that it must be interpreted on two levels; as both a straightforward account of contemporary working-class funerary practices and, more critically, as evidence in itself of a gulf between the middle-class folklorists and their working class subjects.





Marilyn Gregory, University of Sheffield

Homicide-suicide in Yorkshire and the Humber and the issue of social class

Homicide followed by suicide is often defined in the literature as homicide(s) followed by the suicide of the perpetrator within one week of the homicide(s) (Campinelli and Thomas 2002, Hannah et al 1997). Homicide-suicide events in Yorkshire and Humberside were previously documented by Milroy (1995) in a study of the period 1975-1992 (cohort one). The present study covers Homicide-suicide events in the same region from 1993-2007 (cohort two).

Work is ongoing in comparing data from the two studies. Social class is an interesting aspect of homicide-suicide, because there is some evidence to suggest that the phenomenon differs in this aspect from homicide alone. Caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions about social class because it is not easily defined, and official ways of defining it have changed between the two cohorts. However, compared to homicide research Brookman (2005), Dobash et al (2004), which shows a third of male on male offenders are unemployed, both cohorts reveal a much lower percentage of unemployed perpetrators than in homicide more generally. Homicide-suicide offenders appear to be much more like the 'ordinary guy' in Dobash et al's terms in that they are on a number of measures more 'conventional' than the typical homicide offender.

Cohort one reveals a comparatively lower percentage of offenders were unemployed at the time of the offence (13%). Fifty-one percent were in skilled or semi-skilled occupations, and the remainder encompassed a variety of occupations from company director, to farmer and professional sportsperson. Cohort two also had few unemployed perpetrators (13%) with 47% in skilled and semi-skilled occupations and the remainder distributed across other occupations

Please visit the event website www.britsoc.org.uk/events/DDB to register and for further symposium details. For more details about the study group please visit www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/DDB.

Please direct any administrative enquiries to the BSA office at events@britsoc.org.uk and any academic enquires to k.woodthorpe@open.ac.uk.

