

The Sexiness of Topics: What it means to be 'into' death

The problem with death, apart from being the cessation of living, is that in political, funding and academic terms, it just ain't sexy. Well, no, I tell a lie - it is sexy in that by and large people are interested in it, want to know more about it, and have what many refer to as a 'morbid fascination' with it (you only have to look at the popularity of programmes like CSI and Six Feet Under to see that this is true). But there are certain boundaries at which this passing interest stops - and post-death seems to be one of them. These boundaries, unfortunately for those working in the field of death - both professionally and academically - can really constrain resources and hinder societal development.

Perhaps a good symptom that demonstrates this can be found in the death industry itself. For example, did you know that, currently, we do not know how many burial grounds there are in the UK? It may be just me, but in an age where everything is increasingly measured, quantified and documented, to not know how many sites there are available for interment on this little island of ours seems a little odd.

Perhaps an even better illustration of the modest status of death can be found in the longer term planning of burial space. Calls from the cemetery industry to make changes to legislation regarding the disturbance of human remains have persisted for decades, but it was not until June 2007 that the Government announced it would do anything about it. By that point some areas, particularly in London, had already run out of burial space (and had done so many years ago), leading to cemeteries closing and being (effectively) abandoned to the wilderness. Bodies from these areas have ended up being interred in neighbouring boroughs, who - keen to protect their own dwindling burial space - have charged more for non-residents.

You see, disposal is *just not a vote winner*, so politicians have tended to turn a blind eye to it and have instead focussed on the 'sexy' topics of health, crime, education, communities and increasingly the environment. This focus of attention has been reflected in academia, where those intellectually interested in death, wanting to research it, publish about it, document it, are competing with the 'biggies' of, for example race and ethnicity, criminology, gender and sexuality, and so on and so forth.

Please do not mistake this feature for a soapbox tirade. I am not begrudging those who work and contribute to these 'sexy' areas - they deserve as much funding as possible and are absolutely vital in a healthy, functioning society. But death is important too. Without knowing about and understanding death, how can we appreciate life?

However, imagine if you will, a sociologist interested in death is like a small fish in a massive social science pond. And there always seems to be more pressing concerns on the agenda than death and disposal.

The question is, then, as a sociologist interested in an area that is not regarded as 'sexy', where does one go from here?

One answer is that those who work in/on death and disposal, professionally or academically, have to make connections with those working in the 'sexier', more heavily funded areas. Cemetery managers are increasingly aware of the need to provide ethnically appropriate services and are diversifying their sites accordingly, for example, in building statues to Lord Shiva for Hindu groups, or viewing platforms for those that wish to see the coffin enter the cremator. By making efforts such as these, they are able to qualify for some sources of funding set aside for ethnic causes, so it is a win-win situation. Academics could do the same, by tapping into the bigger, 'sexier' agendas.

However, by diluting your intellectual topic of interest you can also end up pandering to the political agendas of those at the top. No doubt this is a concern for the vast majority of academics as they battle to maintain their independence, intellectual freedom and the identity/visibility of their discipline. Perhaps it also reflects the bigger picture of the purpose of academia and where it fits in to society overall.

This debate is probably with us for the long haul - so I would appreciate some pointers on how to turn a topic (and not just any topic - death is one of the, if not the, most universal, all encompassing commonalities to all human beings there is) into a 'sexy' topic, without undermining my integrity and getting caught in a political game of claims to what topic is most important and/or legitimate. Answers on a postcard please...

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