

# Speaking for the Dead: Funeral as Ritual Performance

An Exploration of the Narrative Experiences of  
Funeral Officiators through Performative  
Inquiry

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# Existing Research on Funerals

- Significance of funerals as cultural performances (Reimers 149)
- Specific rhetorical value of eulogies (Kunkel and Dennis 2)
- Comparison of efficacy of formal and informal interactions in comforting the bereaved (Horton and Kline 17)
- Process of personalization and deritualization (Davies 65, Cook and Walter 366-367)

# Research Questions

- What is the narrative experience of a funeral or memorial service for the officiator?
- How do funeral officials tailor their communication strategies for these events?
- What do the differences between formal ritual processes and spontaneous interpersonal moments reveal about deritualization?

# Why Performance?

- Rituals are fundamentally performative (Rothenbuhler 8-9).
- Bereavement is an intensely personal and emotionally affective experience.
- The use of text alone distances us from our experiences (Albrecht 227).
- Performance provides a means of empathetic, mindful inquiry that is sensitive to the experiences of co-researchers (Spry 341).
- Performance is a means of bringing together Self and Other for meaningful exchange (Conquergood 80).

# Method: Performance Studies

- Stage One: Data collection through intensive interviewing
- Stage Two: Transcription and Scripting
- Stage Three: Rehearsal and Memorization
- Stage Four: Reflexive Performance
- Stage Five: Critical Reflection

# Data Gathering: Informants

- One female pastor who has performed funerals professionally in a Protestant Christian tradition
- One female layperson who performed a unique Pagan memorial service
- Autoethnographic segment from researcher's memories of eulogizing

# Data Analysis: Performative Reflection

- Juxtaposition of common and contrasting threads allowed performance to explore different aspects of memorial process
- Visceral, experiential difference between rehearsal and performance
- Reactions of audience members supports catalytic effect of viewing the performance

# Question #1: Narrative Experience

- Officiator provides prepared, formal remarks
- Officiator offers time to the bereaved to tell stories about the deceased
- After formal segment of service is concluded, officiator circulates and continues to elicit stories from the bereaved
- Officiator encourages expression of a variety of emotions from the bereaved

## Question #2: Tailoring Communication Strategies

- Focus on emotional support
- Keeping self and personal feelings at a distance to provide attention to bereaved
- Conversations center on deceased
- Emphasis on listening over speaking
- Use of belief systems to structure experience

## Question #3: Deritualization

- Expanded role of family in determining the shape of a service
- Use of non-traditional literature as source material for ritual structure
- Primary focus on community and relationships between humans
- Decentering of God and of officiator as divine messenger
- Emphasis on hope and meaning in the here-and-now of material existence

# Conclusions & Implications

- Use of performance enabled audience connection that is unavailable through formal presentations
- Use of performance and autoethnography provided valuable check against researcher bias
- Tension between need for ritual structure and desire for personalization of rituals suggests room for future inquiry
- Use of fiction in constructing unique, personalized ritual demands future investigation
- Room exists for more in-depth research through expanding breadth and diversity of interview data

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