

Dealing with the Dead: Life as a Third Generation Independent Funeral Director

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Abstract

This 'On the Front Line' article explores the necessary and yet undesirable work undertaken by a third generation, independent funeral director. Peter's narrative account of the realities of funeral directing and his journey into the family business offers a poignant insight into the dirty work of death work. Reflecting on his own exposure, experiences and practices Peter offers us an opportunity to see behind the scenes, to hear how he has learnt to cope with death work undertaken by his family. Consequently, we reflect on how performances of emotional neutrality afford funeral directors the capacity to offer comfort to the bereaved in the face of such extreme dirty work. Yet, as Peter shares, this neutrality, masks the dirt and hides the pain of 'dealing with the dead'.

Keywords:

Death work, emotional capital, emotional neutrality, dirty work, funeral directors

Each year in the UK there are over 600,000 funerals, conducted by 4000 funeral directors (UK Funerals Online, 2017) as part of an industry that employs 20,000 workers and is worth £1.7bn (McClean, 2016). Seventy-percent of all funerals are undertaken by independent family firms (see Parsons, 1999 for an overview of the changes in the structure of the UK funeral industry). Interestingly, however, there are no published academic qualitative empirical studies of UK independent funeral directors. Heeding Everett Hughes' challenge, to 'discover the course of passage from laymen's estate to that of the professional' (1958:120), this article presents Peter's experience of being, and becoming, a third-generation independent funeral director. We begin by considering the ways in which this rewarding yet difficult work is associated with notions of dirt.

Work described as dirty is that which threatens to taint or stigmatise those associated with such labour. It is not that the work itself is inherently dirty but, rather, that association with such work reduces the prestige or esteem afforded to its occupational members in the eyes of others. In this sense, dirt is to be understood as a social construction imputed by people based on 'necessarily subjective standards of cleanliness and purity' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999:415) that evoke some sense of rejection or repugnance. Put another way, the willingness of certain workers to literally or symbolically get their hands dirty is seen by outsiders to taint them such that they exhibit an undesired differentness that marks them out from polite society (Goffman, 1997). Dirty workers do that which we would rather not know about in so far as it requires work with issues, tasks or people that we do not want to come into contact with or be polluted by (Hughes, 1958, 1962). Dirty work is thus rejected, even where it is recognised as necessary work. Dirty workers are simultaneously unwanted and necessary as they clean away the detritus and pollution that is a by-product of the functioning of society and which, if left unchecked, would challenge the appearance of our ordered lives (Douglas, 1966).

There are four distinct if overlapping forms of dirty work: physical, social, moral (Hughes, 1951, 1958, 1962; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) and emotional (McMurray and Ward, 2014). Funeral directors, particularly those working in independent family-run funeral homes, come into contact with all four forms of dirt and are therefore required to handle the stigma associated with that work (Thompson, 1991). The death work undertaken by funeral directors is physically dirty in so far as it involves work with bodies, bodily fluids and physical waste. It is cast as socially dirty by dint of the need to serve others, and morally dirty in the intersection of commerce and care of the dead (Bailey, 2010). It is also a form of emotional dirty work (McMurray and Ward, 2014) given that it involves managing 'expressed feelings that threaten the solidarity, self-conception or preferred orders of a given individual or community'; that is to say, it requires engagement with and management of difficult and burdensome emotional encounters. Indeed, it might be argued that dealing with difficult and unwanted emotions lies at the core of death work, in so far as it requires the emotions of self and other to be managed in the face of feelings of loss, grief, guilt, conflict and even disgust.

Death work (Henry, 2004), of which funeral directing is a part, is a demanding form of emotional dirty work, as Peter's account (below) illustrates. Yet, there has been a reluctance in the death work literature to focus on the emotional experiences of those tasked with undertaking it (see Howarth, 1996). There is an acknowledgement that those working in large UK funeral firms perform philanthropic emotional labour (Bolton, 2000) – that is to say they draw on non-institutional social feeling rules as part of their encounters with clients – despite being commercial service workers (Bailey, 2010) while also suffering the anger of clients frustrated with the financial and contractual aspects of funeral arranging (Parsons, 2003). In both these studies, the private emotions of the funeral directors are positioned as a marginal concern in relation to the economic imperatives of death work. Whilst the financialisation of death is important, we draw explicit attention to what it means to live with the emotional dirt associated with such work. Moreover, we draw attention to 'how' the capacity to cope with dirty work is developed in the context of inter-generational family-run funeral homes.

As Peter recounts below, for him, and others in the industry, much of the work is learnt 'on the job', both through observing the work of other family members as well as being 'thrown in at the deep end'. We theorise Peter's ability to swim rather than sink as the accumulation of emotional capital through exposure, experience and practice generative of a habitus that can cope in a field of extreme dirty work. Reference to 'extreme' stands as an acknowledgement of the fact that Peter's occupation requires him to routinely deal with end/edge of life and all the physical, social and emotional intensity that implies, including heavy workload, lengthening working week and spill-over into wider life that threatens to become normalised (see, Granter et al. 2015 and Turnbull and Wass, 2015 for more on extreme work). It speaks to a habitus capable of composure in the face of heart-wrenching emotional distress and repugnant sights and smells. In such contexts the capacity to perform emotional neutrality has value in the field of death work, yet in what follows we reflect on the extent to which such performances are masking the dirt and hiding the pain of 'dealing with the dead'.

Emotional Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework of 'capital' is premised on the idea that 'the social world is accumulated history' (Bourdieu, 1986:241). For Bourdieu capital is accumulated labour that exists in either a material or embodied form and can present itself in a variety of guises; economic, social, cultural and symbolic. Whilst not part of Bourdieu's original presentation of capital, emotional capital has been positioned, particularly in the education literature, as an extension (Nowotny, 1981; Allat, 1993) of the concept. Emotional capital, however, cannot be understood without an appreciation of Bourdieu's most central concepts of habitus and field.

Habitus is best thought of as a 'system of dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1977). These dispositions are a spectrum of cognitive and affective factors (see Probyn, 2004) that constitute a 'product of history [that] produces individual and collective practices' (Bourdieu, 1990:54). The habitus is an 'embodied history, internalised as second nature and so forgotten' (Bourdieu, 1990:56). In other words, habitus is a dynamic and generative embodied manifestation of prior experiences, that will (though not conclusively or even predictably) impact on behaviours, emotions and frames of reference.

Field is, in essence, context – 'discourses, institutions, values, rules and regulations – which produce and transform attitudes and practices' (Webb et al, 2013:21). Each social context has its own rules and norms which influence and shape (in)appropriate behaviours and feelings. Drawing on Ekman's (1973) concept of display rules, Hochschild (1979) developed 'feelings rules' to explain the ways in which we self-regulate our emotional response even in a private context e.g. we might feel guilty for not feeling sad at a funeral or happy at a party because our personal disposition is somewhat at odds with the prevalent feeling rule of that particular context. However, just because feeling rules and emotion norms exist this does not mean that they are fixed, neither do they exclusively determine behaviour. Instead,

they are there to guide: they are the rules of the game but this does not mean that the rules are never broken or re-written.

Emotional capital then, is a form of capital that shapes identity, occupational choice and a capacity to cope. Cottingham (2016) presents two processes of capital accumulation in the form of primary and secondary socialisation, similar to Cahill's (1999) prior and professional socialisation. Bourdieu refers to socialisation as a 'quasi-magical' process (Bourdieu, 1990:8) as it informs identity, behaviours, understandings, values and norms. In other words, socialisation shapes the habitus – it shapes who we are and what we can cope with. Primary socialisation (Cottingham, 2016) refers to that which takes place in the early years of children's lives within the context of the family and early schooling. By focusing on primary socialisation (in respect of death work in this case), we are acknowledging how choices, abilities to cope, likes and dislikes are not innate but are informed by very early processes of socialisation. However, they are often perceived to be natural dispositions – our habitus. Secondary socialisation (Cottingham, 2016), or 'professional socialisation' (Cahill, 1999), are the processes in which we might actively chose to engage. An example of which might be training or formal educational choices or Peter's education in financial institutions (see below). In essence, secondary socialisation represents active choices made in an attempt to alter the habitus – the habitus that has been previously shaped and informed by primary socialisation, though these two processes need not be at odds.

Cottingham's (2016) distinction between primary and secondary socialisation processes are helpful in shaping the way we think about the accumulation of emotional capital as a trans-situationally embodied form of cultural capital. In addition to this, our empirical analysis of those working in occupations that can be described as 'emotionally dirty' (Author C and Author B, 2014) offers a refinement to the theorising in relation to the accumulation of emotional capital, specifically through a triumvirate of accumulation modes: *exposure*, *experience* and *practice*.

For our purposes emotional capital can be defined as: the capacity to perceive, perform and manage contextually relevant emotions accumulated through exposure, experience and practice. Growing up

and working as a funeral director in an independent family run firm means that *exposure* refers to growing up with talk, practices and fringe jobs associated with the processing of the dead (see below). This early socialisation into the business of death encourages mastery of fear and revulsion (Cahill, 1999) coupled with an understanding that this is a means of making a living.

For Peter, early exposure to death work – and the difficult emotions this elicits – is reinforced by the *experience* of removing bodies from homes and coping with the images and emotions that attend the aftermath of road traffic accidents. Each new experience builds on the emotional capital already accumulated through exposure, such that he is able to undertake work that others would not do. Many of these encounters become routine and therefore *practiced*. This does not however mean that the work becomes mundane or even normalised. The body still recoils at the smell of burnt flesh, for example, and while Peter has had to come to terms with the suicides of young people, and the complex emotions of families in grief, the encounters stay with him and shape him. This is epitomised by his understanding of and reflection on the difference between ‘handling the loss of a young child in tragic circumstances to that of someone who has died well into their nineties and enjoyed a full and active life’. The former requires a very different interaction with parents, with loss, and with the internal guilt of having to ask about the practicalities of burying a child.

This ‘academic’ dissection of growing up in a third-generation family funeral business cannot however do justice to the lived experience. Peter’s account shows how the accumulation of emotional capital is collectively directed and personally accomplished on an on-going basis. It is an example of Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of capital as an accumulated history in an iterative and generative process of becoming.

Of course, this does not mean that the work becomes easy or that funeral directors are unaffected by the emotions they encounter. Peter provides a sense of the hours, stress, pressure and affects that accompany death work. However, for the most part, his account is painted in fairly neutral tones.

Indeed, funeral directors are not in the business of exaggerating, embellishing or dramatizing. Instead, their affective repertoire is one devoted to providing comfort (Hyland and Morse, 1995) such that their presentation of self and service separates the sacred from the profane – purity from dirt – often through performances of emotional neutrality. This ability of funeral directors to ‘suppress emotions felt whilst displaying unemotional behaviour, wherein the suppression of the emotion is the performance itself’ (Ward & McMurray, 2011) is one acquired through the accumulation of field specific emotional capital, such that, in the face of such extreme dirty work, they are able to maintain their composure, in both a physical and emotional sense: a testament to the primary socialisation experienced by those raised within the context of death work, perhaps. Yet, whilst this capacity to perform emotional neutrality in the face of extreme dirty work is necessary in allowing funeral directors to offer comfort to the bereaved, it comes at a cost. This is perhaps the most surprising aspect of family funeral work – the emotional impact on those working as funeral directors is rarely shared (a point that might explain the relative absence of qualitative research in the area). As Peter notes, ‘there is very little care of the self in our industry’. Instead, he has been brought up in a ‘field’ defined by a ‘stiff upper lip’.

Performances of emotional neutrality have value within the field of death work in that they afford funeral directors the capacity to offer comfort to the bereaved in the face of such extreme dirty work. Yet, as Peter shares, this neutrality masks the dirt and hides the pain involved in dealing with the dead, both in the face of working relations and in the written account offered here. He exhibits a tendency observed in respect of other extreme workers who prefer to ‘downplay discourses that the public and the media apply to them, preferring self-deprecating narratives of ‘it’s just what we do’ or ‘this is what we signed up for’ (Granter et al., 2015:446). His account effectively performs and maintains the emotional neutrality of his professional role. This capacity to perform neutrality in the face of extreme dirty work is so enmeshed in the habitus such that it becomes an unthinking guide to action resulting

in David naturally presenting his experiences in such a way as to document and yet neutralise their impact. He is simultaneously recounting and comforting us as readers, or at least attempting to reduce the discomfort that we might otherwise feel with a more raw account: as our agent of dirty work he seeks to maintain the boundaries between order and disorder, purity and dirt, life and death. The long-term effects of performing neutrality; in maintaining a stiff upper lip whilst experiencing pain, might usefully be considered in future research on death workers' journeys from lay person to professional state (Hughes, 1958).

Peter's Account

I grew up right here in this funeral home. It was our family home until 1999. Wherever I went as a child, death was not far away. My father, introduced me at an early age to many aspects of the funeral business. After school, at weekends and during holidays, I cleaned his workshop, tended the garden and cleaned cars. He had endured a similar, but according to him, far more intense induction from my grandfather, so he clearly felt compelled to give me the same experience! I was fifteen when I first assisted him with the collection of a body from a private nursing home.

Removals from local nursing homes were viewed by my father as very much a routine part of the job. It was generally elderly people having died in an environment of care, not unlike a private hospital. The deceased had usually been 'laid out' by nursing staff, dressed in their own clothing or covered by a sheet. I have reflected a lot on these early experiences of the job recently, as my own sixteen-year-old son started to carry out similar types of removals with me.

My son, will be going off to University soon, to have a life outside of the business, as I did. Unlike my father, I decided initially at least, that it would be beneficial for me to get some life experience outside the family business. So, despite being surrounded by death, bodies and the family business for the first 18 years of my life, I moved away to work in a financial services PLC for almost 10 years. I did really well for myself but then my uncle retired and my cousin, over a few beers, asked if I would come back to

the family business. Dad and his brothers did not put any pressure on any of us to carry the business on, but it was family pride, I think. All the work our grandfather and fathers had done to build it up. It is a good business. It was a decision that came from the heart. The heart said 'would you want to drive past with the Co-op running it?' I felt quite strongly that we should continue the family tradition into its third generation. Whether my children, nieces and nephews might take our family business into its fourth generation will be their choice.

Returning from a corporate environment, and a company with an entire department devoted to training, I was shocked at just how 'hands on' my re-integration into funeral work was. This is certainly not untypical in the funeral profession, but never the less, it felt a little bit 'sink or swim'. My father and my uncle would say: 'Don't worry, you have the right surname' and 'You'll know more than they do.' Of course, this was meant to re-assure me but people and families are complex and can be very difficult to handle in times of grief.

I survived this early baptism of fire and managed to keep the family name in tact during my early weeks. However, it was not long until I was introduced to the 'On call' rota. It quickly became apparent that this was a 24/7 profession. Deaths occur in every circumstance and at any time of the day or night, and so we are available to attend whenever we are required. Not all funeral directors offer this level of service but we always have and always will do. Some of the 24/7 type work we do is on behalf of HM Coroner in our locality. Not all funeral directors hold a Coroner's contract but it is a service we have been proud to provide continually since 1958. Working on behalf of HM Coroner means working alongside the Ambulance and Police Emergency Services on sudden and unforeseen deaths including suicides, road traffic accidents, industrial accidents and those that occur in prisons. This work requires us to respond on scene within an hour of being informed. We are there to take responsibility for both physically removing the body from the scene and transporting the deceased either to the mortuary or back to our facility, depending on the nature of the situation. On scene we often need to help reassure

and gently advise the relatives who are left behind. Some of the most harrowing and difficult situations I have faced have been working on behalf of HM Coroner.

I remember going out on my first suicide, to see a young beautiful girl lying in a car having been poisoned by carbon monoxide fumes. I can still picture her today and remember thinking what could possibly have brought her to take her own life? It really had an effect on me. Another more recent example, was someone who set himself alight. Burning flesh is one of the worst. It was one of the worst Coroner's situations I have ever seen, and we see lots of different things. They do stick in your mind. Like child deaths, a little girl dying of meningitis at five years-old, sudden death syndrome, still births. We have to deal with very difficult situations but there is no real training given on any of these aspects of the work, other than 'watch what I do'.

Over time I have developed my own very practical ways of coping with what we have to do. For example, when a body has remained undiscovered for a few days one of the worst things is the smell. To help with this, I now carry a pot of Vicks Vapourub with me, to rub around my nose when I need to. It's like when I meet with families to go through the arrangements, I have to recognise their level of understanding. Are they listening? Repeat what I say and slow it up because they're thinking of something else emotionally and not really listening to what I'm saying.. You have to be so careful. Sometimes it's better to say very little. You have to get the degree of empathy right for the situation. These are the things I have become well practiced at, but there is no real training to help you deal with what you see or how to handle relatives in a highly emotional and sometimes distraught state. It is just part of the job, you are expected to deal with it and be strong. 'It is what we do!' We are the professionals, handling the deceased, helping and guiding those that are left behind to pick up the pieces ... but it does affect you.

I sometimes have up to fifteen families I am looking after at any one time. It is really tough. You're coming in at all hours because, unlike in some of the large national funeral groups, where they compartmentalise job roles, (e.g. funeral conductors, funeral arrangers, removals team, mortuary

technicians, embalmers, driver/bearers etc), in a smaller family business we take on all those job roles. We can be out in the middle of the night faced with difficult situations, then be back at work for 7.30 a.m. the following morning to arrange that particular funeral with the relatives. We effectively share their whole early journey of grief. We are 'their rock' for that period.

However busy it becomes, we need to handle each deceased and their family with the same level of professionalism as the next. There is no second chance to get things right and this, sometimes relentless, pressure, combined with sleep deprivation during a busy period does take its toll. In these busy periods, I survive on adrenalin and the desire to deliver a high level of service to the families. Continually dealing with grief on a day to day basis does affect me but in a tight community where we know a lot of our clients personally, it is just expected. It is the stiff upper lip.

I go to the local health place and have acupuncture and all sorts to try and release some of that pressure. That pressure is a killer. I play sport, ride a bike, run, play squash, golf or just get away from the town. You need a release mechanism because there is very little care of the self in our industry. If I can't cope I fear I will let the family down. Having gone through what I have gone through so far, I wouldn't wholeheartedly recommend this as a career. Yet, I take great pride in what we do and what my family has achieved.

There is an intrigue about what we do. It is a bit of a laugh until it happens to you. We are definitely the butt of a few jokes, for example, 'are you measuring me up?', 'don't sit near him...' and 'You'll never be out of a job, boy!' You just have to smile and say yeah, yeah and move on. Some people accept us as part of the community but there are people who are frightened. I have been brought up with it. Death work is not nice work but it is very necessary work.

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