

UP IN FLAMES: USING ANTHROPOLOGY TO ANALYZE THE INCREASING
CREMATION RATES IN NORTH DAKOTA

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ABSTRACT

Cremation rates within North Dakota, and the greater US, have been rapidly increasing over the recent decades. Funeral directors, coroners, and death investigators alike have noticed the increase; however, nobody has made a positive determination for why the increase was occurring. Using an anthropological lens, I evaluated the state of cremation with North Dakota and with the use of GIS analysis and interviews with local funeral directors, I was able to determine that there is not one specific reason for the rising cremation rates. Instead, there are multiple factors at play, one of which is cost.

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2020, in a North Dakota city, a young man named Ben Washington died alone in his apartment. He lived alone, with no family or friends nearby. His closest family member, his elderly mother, lived nearly 1000 miles away. The young man was discovered only because his landlord was concerned about the windows in his apartment being open for an extended period of time. When the landlord knocked on his door, Mr. Washington did not answer, but the landlord noticed an unpleasant odor coming from the unit. The landlord called 911 in hopes that they would complete a welfare check on Mr. Washington to assure that he was okay. When police officers arrived on the scene, with the landlord's permission, they entered the unit and found Mr. Washington clearly deceased in the middle of the living room floor. When I arrived on the scene, as a death investigator, it was obvious to me that Mr. Washington had been deceased for at least a week. I transported Mr. Washington back to the county morgue and awaited a phone call from his mother so we could discuss the next steps that needed to be taken to reach Mr. Washington's final disposition. Disposition is a term used within the deathcare field (the field that medical examiners, coroners, funeral directors, death investigators fall under) that means the final method of disposal or final means of laying someone to rest.

When I finally received a phone call from Mrs. Washington, she was distraught. Not only because she had lost her son, but because she did not have the financial means to pay for the type of service that she wanted for him. Before his early death, Mr. Washington had been a member of the armed forces, so the local VA hospital was able to provide some financial support to Mrs. Washington, but it was not enough. Mrs. Washington wanted her son to be transported to her home area for a service and a burial with a traditional headstone so that she could have a physical location to visit to grieve her loss.

Despite her wishes, the VA support would not be enough to have her son brought home. Instead, she had no choice but to give her son an indigent funeral: cremation, burial of ashes, and a small headstone provided by the county. Because of Mrs. Washington's lack of money, she had to sacrifice her desires for her son's final disposition. And she is not the only one. More so now than ever before, families of the recently deceased are opting for cremation rather than burial (Rock Creek Funeral Home 2020). This trend that I was seeing led me to wonder if others were seeing cremation be chosen for frequently than burial as well. After informally speaking to colleagues, I learned that everyone around me is noticing the cremation rates rising but nobody knew why. Through those informal conversations, I developed my research question: why are cremation rates in North Dakota rising? Furthermore, could the rising cremation rates affect the way that death is viewed by Americans?

In January of 2020, I joined a field that many people know very little about. I was hired as a medicolegal death investigator at a local coroner's office in North Dakota. My role as a death investigator has led me to interact with hundreds of family members of the recently deceased, and I have seen a scenario similar to the one presented above happen more times than I can count. The story told about Mr. Washington is a piece of realistic fiction that I created by drawing upon media stories and my personal experiences.

Investigating deaths takes up the largest portion of my time; however, I also counsel family members surrounding the deaths of their loved ones. This includes informing families of their options and helping them find a funeral home that they would like to work with. Many of the families I see are very concerned with what the death is going to cost them and a lot of them already know that they want their loved ones to be cremated. The prevalence of knowing that

families want to use cremation led me to wonder why cremation is such a popular means of disposition, despite burial being portrayed as most popular by movies, television, and public opinion. Despite choosing cremation for disposition, some families assume that choosing cremation is a bad choice. On a scene someone once said to me “I know that this sounds terrible but I think I want to cremate him.” Despite cremation being a perfectly valid method of disposition, this individual seemed to have an internalized view that cremation was bad. Through my interactions with families and my colleagues, I developed my research question.

To answer this question, I decided to evaluate the state of cremation on a small-scale in North Dakota. I believe that the increasing cremation rate is primarily the result of the cost difference and rising costs between cremation and burial. The average cost of cremation with an urn and a remembrance service, according to one funeral home in my research area, is about \$4,000 (Rock Creek Funeral Home 2020). The average cost of embalming, burial, and a remembrance service is around \$9,000 (ibid.). I believe, that because of the stark difference in average costs more so than any other reason, families are opting for cremation.

However, before effectively evaluating the reasoning for why cremation rates are increasing, I must first explain the different disposition options (cremation or burial) and why there is a large difference between the costs of the two. When a family chooses cremation, they are paying for a crematory fee, transportation of the deceased, preparation of the body for cremation, a remembrance service, funerary staff labor hours, and an urn. These would all cost, on average, around \$4,000 depending on the funeral home. However, depending on familial wishes for services, cremations can vary in price between \$2,000 to \$10,000+. On the other hand, when paying for burial, families will be paying for a remembrance service, funerary staff labor hours, transportation of the deceased, and preparation of the body. But, you will also be

paying for embalming, grave digger fees, a cemetery plot, a casket, and a vault. The average cost of all of these is around \$9,000 but prices can range between \$2,500-\$30,000. That cost will further increase if the family of the deceased would like the body shipped to them in situations where their loved one died far away from where the rest of the family lives. In cases where the family wants the body shipped, the body must be embalmed before it crosses state lines. It is then shipped by either ground or air, and the family must pay for the shipping and receiving costs. The additional costs of shipping a body start at around \$5,000 and will increase depending on the distance the body is being shipped.

There is a lot of variation that is seen within pricing for cremation and burial; however, one is significantly cheaper than the other. Because cremation is less expensive, I believe families are beginning to choose it as a means of disposition more frequently. Most of the deaths I investigate occur outside of the hospital and therefore they are typically unexpected because when someone is sick or expecting to die, they are either in the hospital or on hospice care. Because most families I work with are not planning for or expecting the death to occur, they likely do not have funds set aside for funeral services. However, if a family member dies, it will be fiscally easier for to spend \$4,000 instead of \$9,000.

In the deathcare field, it is understood that increasing cremation rates are not inherently problematic. In fact, cremation can have multiple benefits over burial (Jones Family Mortuary n.d.). First and foremost, cremation is cheaper than embalming and burial (ibid.). This can allow families to honor their recently deceased family member, while not overextending their budgets. Cremation also allows for more freedom in the timing of final disposition. It can take place almost immediately after death, with approval from a coroner, medical examiner, or primary physician, and after the process begins, cremation only takes about six hours (ibid.). The quick

turnaround time can allow families to have immediate cremation and services or, if they so choose, they can cremate and then wait days, weeks, months, or even years to have a service, if they choose to have one at all. This can allow families to adapt final dispositions to their schedules, which can allow them to minimize the strain already associated with stressful situation of dealing with death.

Additionally, cremation is more environmentally friendly than burial is. When a body is embalmed, it is pumped full of various chemicals, most primarily formaldehyde and methanol. As the body decomposes, those chemicals begin seeping into the ground in the surrounding area, which can have negative effects on local crops and water sources (Green Cremation Texas n.d). Furthermore, the majority of coffins are made of wood, which primarily comes from deforestation efforts. Finally, cremation is more space-conscious, as ashes and urns take up significantly less space than full bodies in caskets that are then placed into vaults (ibid.). As the population continues to increase, cemeteries will begin to become crowded as well (Green Cremation Texas n.d.; Jones Family Mortuary n.d.). When all of the space in cemeteries is full, there are not many options for burial, as most urban areas do not have available space to expand cemeteries. If families choose to cremate their loved one, they can either keep the ashes and urn with them, or, if they choose to, they can bury the urn. However, urn burial takes up a much smaller area, meaning the cemeteries will not fill up as quickly (Green Cremation Texas n.d). The problematic part of the increasing cremation rates is that according to my hypothesis, people are not choosing to cremate their loved ones.

Because finances frequently come up in my interactions with families, my initial hypothesis was that the cremation rates are rising because burial is too expensive. However, because anthropology is holistic field, I cannot look at only the financial aspect of dying. I must

look at the larger picture to see if cost is a factor and if there are other issues that may be contributing to the rising cremation rates. In the next section, I will explain first explain how the topic of death is discussed within the realm of anthropology by evaluating the social, cultural, and biological aspects of death.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past, Anthropologists have studied the American relationship death, which is characterized by both fear and fascination (Emerick 2001). True crime television shows, movies, documentaries, and podcasts are widely popular, primarily within the white female demographic (Milan 2021). When faced with death in their personal lives, however, those same people are struck by immense grief and fear (Emerick 2001). This fear is about more than just the physical act of dying; it also includes the physical changes that happen to a body after death, failure to prevent death, uncertainties about the soul, and the emotions evoked by the death of a loved one (*ibid*). All of this fear culminates in what anthropology Ernest Becker (1997 [1974]) described as a culture of “death-denying.”

Becker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Denial of Death* outlines why people in the United States are afraid to die, and how they subsequently do everything they can to prevent death. Becker writes that the fear of death ultimately stems from our humanity. He compares humans and animals, suggesting that because animals do not seek out or realize meaning in their lives, they are not afraid of death. This fear then leads to denial. Yet, the American relationship with death goes further than just ignoring its inevitability. Americans actively resist and try to prevent death. This prevention primarily occurs through advancements in medicine.

Western medicine’s aim is “to fix the body, to make it physically clean, untainted by emotion, mentally accessible, and reasonable” (Emerick 2001: 35). The goal of medicine has led the US medical system to miraculous advances in prolonging life. These advances are allowing people to psychologically harness death by not only delaying it, but by developing a full understanding of what happens to the body throughout aging, dying, and decomposition (Emerick 2001, 33).

The Social Aspect of Death

Within anthropology, death is understood less as a biological process and more as a cultural process, primarily ending when time of death is pronounced (Lock 2002). This means that what constitutes death in the U.S. may not constitute death in another country, as anthropologist Margaret Lock has demonstrated in her comparative study of death in North America and Japan. As Lock writes, in North America, we adhere to the concept of brain death as time of death, but this is not a universally recognized event (Lock 2002). Japan, for example, does not adhere to brain death because they believe that death cannot be determined by only a biological marker (lack of brain function). Instead, death in Japan is viewed more as a social process, not one specific period in time (Lock 1996, 586).

However, even within the United States, where brain death is recognized, there are disagreements about determining time of death. Take, for example, the Jahi McMath case. Jahi McMath was a 13-year-old girl from California who had a tonsillectomy procedure in 2013 (Truog 2018). After the procedure, Jahi suffered complications, which ultimately led to her being declared brain dead by doctors in California (Scott 2020). Jahi's parents did not agree with the doctor's determination so they decided, after prolonged legal proceedings, that they would be moving Jahi to New Jersey, where she would be on a ventilator until her cardiac death in 2018 (Truog 2018). Jahi was pronounced brain dead in California in 2013, but her family moved her to New Jersey, where California's brain death determination did not stand. Jahi's story shows just how complex determining time of death can be within one country.

As the above examples show, death cannot be measured by solely biological factors. As anthropologists have demonstrated, death is a social process. The social aspects of death are most

visible in the funeral and mourning rituals that occur following a death (Varisco 2011). These rituals allow the friends and family members of the deceased an opportunity to grieve (*ibid*).

In the United States, after a death, the next step loved ones must contend with is disposing of the body. In the deathcare field, disposal of a body is referred to as “final disposition,” and can take many different forms. The first, and most traditionally recognized, form of final disposition is an immediate underground burial. Disposition can also take the form of delayed burial, cremation, body donation, entombment, and alkaline hydrolysis. Although all of the aforementioned final dispositions vary in their specific methods they all have one commonality: they provide the option for loved ones to have a funeral service.

According to ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep (1960), funerals fall into one of the three categories of rites of passages. Van Gennep’s three categories are separation, transition, and incorporation. Funerals are the most prominent component of separation rites. Funerals are typically one the first options available to families to begin coping with death; however, that is not the only function of a funeral. They are also a time for the deceased’s spirit to transition into the afterlife, whatever that may be (Van Gennep 1960). Different cultures and religions have different perspectives of what the afterlife is, and furthermore, different cultures have different relationships with the deceased. As stated, the American relationship with death is described as “death-denying and death-defying,” but that is not common in every nation across the globe.

For example, Mexicans view death and dying differently than Americans. Among Mexicans, death is not something that is shied away from or ignored; it is simply just a part of life (Brandes 2003). That is not to say that death is not feared, but the comfortableness surrounding death is due, in part, to the idea of machismo (Brandes 2003). Fear is not viewed as a masculine or macho emotion; therefore, men must overcome or hide their fear if they want to

be viewed as strong men. The way that men have found to most easily overcome or hide their fear of death is by joking about, talking about, and making light of it in order to become comfortable with it (Vargas 1971). Where there is comfort, there is not fear. The spirit of machismo, in relation to death, has permeated society, not just men.

Another example of a different relationship with death comes from the Wari' tribe of Brazil. Before outsiders infiltrated their camps in the 1960s and made them change their traditions, the Wari' tribe took part in funerary cannibalism. After a Wari' died, the tribe members consumed the deceased. In anthropologist Beth Conklin (2001) has written, Wari' cannibalism was not an act of violence or aggression, like Western societies assumed, but was instead an act of compassion and a way of coping with grief. The Wari' believed that burying a deceased tribe member was disrespectful and Conklin wrote that it also inhibited their ability to cope with their grief over the death.

Cannibalizing their dead loved ones was used as a means of coping because it allowed the living to cut ties with the deceased. According to Conklin (2001), the Wari' believe that remembering the deceased person is what causes the grief and sorrow. By consuming the deceased, the Wari are able to compartmentalize the memories and after time, forget about them all together. By no longer thinking about the deceased, they no longer feel the pain of the death. However, the cessation of all cannibalism in favor of burial when someone dies, meant that the Wari' no longer are able to compartmentalize and detach themselves from their grief. The main reason that they were able to forget about the deceased was because after cannibalization, the body no longer existed (Conklin 2001). But, with burial, the Wari' know that the body still exists and therefore, they think about the body whenever they are near the burial site. This means that they are never reaching a state of acceptance or closure in regard to the death.

Within the United States, people are free to choose what their funeral service will look like. Most services tend to have similar components (speeches, music, photos, flowers, etc.), but there is nothing stopping someone from completely breaking that norm. Furthermore, within US, there is nothing stating that religion must be a component within a funeral. Many funerals that take place throughout the country have no religious themes attached to them. The ability to forego a religious aspect of a funeral ceremony luxury that is not as common is Romania as it is in the United States.

For example, the Romanian Orthodox Church has played a very influential role within Romanian society. So much so, that there is no real separation of church and state in Romania (Rotar 2021). Because the church has such great power, they have been able to dictate how funeral ceremonies should be carried out, and have, up until recently, required that funeral ceremonies have religious ties. However, in 2014, the New Funeral Law was passed (*ibid.*). This law stated that all people are free to choose their own last rites, meaning that the church or family members of the deceased cannot change the plans that the decedent had for their disposition (*ibid.*). This law allows citizens the right to have a non-religious funeral.

The creation of the New Funeral Law meant that the church could no longer interfere; however, it did not provide any guideline as to how the non-religious funerals would be carried out. Within Romania, a celebrant needs to oversee the funeral, but the creation of the law did not create a job of celebrant (Rotar 2021). There are no professional celebrants for non-religious funerals, often leading the funerals to be improvised and informal. Furthermore the families of the deceased are expected to arrange for the ceremony and storage of the deceased on their own. Typically, the churches store the body, but with a non-religious funeral there is not a church involved to help store. This raises an issue because nearly 50% of Romanians live in apartments

and it is illegal to store a dead body in an apartment in Romania (*ibid.*). Despite legal protection allowing non-religious funerals to take place, the Romanian Orthodox is able to gatekeep important aspects of planning and holding a funeral service.

Aside from analyzing how different countries handle death, anthropology is also concerned with the concept of a good death (Engelke 2019). Outside of anthropology, doctors, philosophers, and even civilians are interested in what a good death is and how they can achieve it. Within the US specifically, death is something that is feared (Becker 1997 [1974]; Emerick 2001). However, that fear can be minimized if people know they are going to die a good death or die successfully.

Anthropologists and medical doctors alike have gone searching across the world for an answer, but they quickly learned that there is not one universal definition of a good death. Heavily reliant on an individual's culture, the picture of a good death will change for everyone (Walter 2003). However, there are common themes throughout the various ideas of a good death. Written by a group of psychologists, Meier et al. (2016) completed a comprehensive, cross-cultural, and multidisciplinary analysis to attempt to identify the components of a good death. Meier and her team of researchers ended up evaluating 36 studies on what constitutes a good death. These studies came from 8 different countries, primarily the US, Japan, and the UK. Through this analysis, they learned that throughout those countries, 11 common themes were identified when people discussed what they thought of when they defined their idea of a good death.

When identifying a good death, most informants stated that the following eleven things were important to them: preference for a specific dying process, pain-free death, treatment preferences (or lack of treatment), religiosity/spirituality (or lack of), emotional well-being, life

completion, dignity, family, quality of life, and relationship with healthcare partners (Meier et al. 2016). Of these eleven themes, the preference for the dying process was identified as the most important. Most people have an idea of what they want their death to look like. They know that they would like to die at home or in the presence of family or if they want to die in their sleep. Having their death look the way they imagine it, was the most important aspect of dying a good death. Because the apparent most important part of a good death is how each death aligns with each individual's perceived vision of their death, there cannot be a universal definition of a good death.

Corroboration of Meier et al.'s findings were found in a short piece written by sociologist Tony Walter. In the past, death was primarily a religious act whereas now, in the present, at least in Western societies, death is a medical act (Walter 2003). This transition from religion to medicine has caused a shift in the definition of a good death. As the shift has occurred, individualization (in regard to funeral services and remembrance) has become more of a priority within many societies. The individualization also has caused the definitions of a good death to change. Because so many societies are focused on individual perspectives, the definition of a good death is going to be highly subjective to the individual. Walter believed that the notions of a good death may be similar throughout members of the same culture; however, everyone will have a slightly different perspective as to what their good death looks like (Walter 2003).

One of the most prevalent anthropological works the good death was Sharon Kaufman's (2005) exploration of hospital deaths and how dying in a hospital takes away from the idea of a good death. According to Kaufman, the good death is a natural death that occurs peacefully, typically during someone's sleep. However, that way of dying is actually quite uncommon. When people are nearing death, they typically start to show increased signs and symptoms of

illness. They then go to the doctor because doctors are supposed to “fix” physical ailments and illnesses. But, when someone is dying, going to the doctor will almost guarantee that they will not achieve that “good” death (*ibid.*).

As shown above, death is treated very differently throughout the world and the concept of a good death is far from universal. Regardless of those differences, anthropology has shown that everyone needs to grieve and cope with death. Cultural Anthropology’s interest in the various ways death is treated throughout the world shows no signs of slowing. However, one thing that anthropologists (in the US specifically) are not really talking about is why cremation rates are rising. In order to determine why the cremation rates are rising, I cannot focus on only the social aspect of death. Within anthropology, the biological aspect of death is also a concern.

The Biological Aspect of Death

Death, in the biological sense, refers to “the disappearance of all signs of life in the organism as a whole” (Kaufer 1974, 34). In most cases, “natural” death occurs in elderly individuals. The term natural death refers to death that occurs in the course of nature and from causes primarily relating to age and disease (Natural Death n.d.). A natural death is a death that is not the result of an accident (like a drug overdose or a fall) or violence (homicide) (*ibid.*).

When natural death occurs, the body undergoes a series of changes, such as labored, ‘growl-like’ breathing, increased sleep, diminished consciousness, and low body temperature (Emerick 2001).

The biological side of death is concerned with the actual physical body. Death investigators focus primarily on the physical body and the topics of interest to death investigators align with the interests of forensic and physical anthropologists. A deceased body, or a corpse, is something that cannot be ignored. It is a focal point, as not only is it an object, but it was once a living person with a personality and a life, and those things do not go away when death occurs

(Engelke 2019). They instead go from a reality to a memory. However, the deceased body is something that also engrains itself into the memories of people. The physical symptoms of an impending death are seen while someone is still living; however, further physical changes in the form of decomposition take place after death occurs. The decomposition process is something that is frequently discussed in the field of deathcare. The stage of decomposition a body is in at the time it is found can tell deathcare workers how long someone has been deceased and can even influence final disposition. In cases of extreme decomposition, embalming (and therefore burial) are not viable options, forcing families to choose to cremate their loved one.

Decomposition is a very obvious process that can take over four of the five senses. It can be touched, smelled, seen, and often times heard. Decomposition is also something that is frequently talked about both within anthropology and within the deathcare field. In anthropology, decomposition is studied primarily by physical and forensic anthropologists, and the following information is given as it is understood by anthropologists. However, it should be noted that the fields of anthropology and deathcare understand decomposition and utilize the information learned from decomposition in the same way. The state of decomposition a body is in when it is found can provide an estimation to when the true time of death occurred. For legal purposes, on a death certificate, the time of death is listed as the time a body was found because if the death occurs outside of a hospital there is no definitive way of knowing exactly when the death occurred. However, the stage of decomposition a body is in when it is found can provide an estimation of when the individual died. Determining an estimation of time of death is called the postmortem interval (PMI). PMI works because decomposition takes place in stages and begins almost immediately after death, not ending until the deceased body has turned into a dry skeleton.

Decomposition is long process that happens in five stages. The five stages are fresh, bloated, decay, postdecay, and skeletal (Vass 2001). These stages are marked by specific physical changes than are seen within a body. The first stage of decomposition, fresh, begins immediately after death. During this stage, the body will begin to exhibit livor mortis (blood pooling), rigor mortis (muscle stiffening), algor mortis (body temperature cooling), tache noir (eyes begin to dry out), green discoloration, and marbling (Goff 2009). Throughout the fresh stage, insects begin to feed inside the body by entering through any orifices or wounds. The fresh stage ends when the body begins to show bloating. The bloated stage is caused by putrefaction of tissues. Various anaerobic bacteria begin to digest internal tissues. This digestion causes gasses to be released. However, those gasses are trapped inside of the body, which causes the body to inflate and become bloated.

The third stage of decomposition, decay, begins when the insect activity and bacterial putrefaction cause the outer layer of skin to break and releasing the gasses trapped inside. This causes the body to deflate. The third stage is primarily recognized by large masses of maggots feeding internally and externally on the body, often spilling onto the ground/floor around the body (Goff 2009). By the time the decay stage ends, most soft tissues are gone, leaving only skin, cartilage, and bone remaining for the postdecay stage. During the fourth stage, the skin and cartilage is consumed by insects and other animals if they are present. Once the skin and cartilage are no longer present, the fifth stage has begun. In the skeletal stage, only the bones of the deceased remain.

In addition to the actual physical changes that occur in a body, the materiality of the body in anthropology also shows interest in sovereignty in relation to a deceased body. After death occurs, the bodily autonomy a person had in life is gone (Engelke 2019). After his death, Mr.

Washington's body no longer 'belonged' to Mr. Washington himself. Instead, when death occurs, ownership of the body was relinquished to the state. In the US, the government is very much involved in death. Various government policies determine what constitutes death, the specific time of death put on a death certificate, what happens to the body after death, and who can look at or touch the body after death. In our society, the mishandling of a dead body could potentially lead to legal action, should that mishandling interfere with a police investigation. It is governmental rule that has led to the creation of my profession and the success of the funeral industry in the US.

As a member of the deathcare field, I understand the death process to end once final disposition is reached. By using my background in both deathcare and anthropology, I am able to contribute to anthropology's understanding of death by demonstrating what happens after the grieving and mourning rituals end. Describing how death care workers fit into the narrative of death may give people a better understanding of the after-death process and what options may be available to them and their loved ones. I turn now to an explanation of the deathcare field.

THE DEATHCARE FIELD

As briefly mentioned above, coroners, medical examiners, funeral directors, and death investigators, all fall under the career field of deathcare. The term deathcare is used as a catch-all phrase to indicate that a profession deals with death in some way. While all of the professions mentioned do different tasks and operate differently, they all are primarily working around death, which is why they are clumped together. My experience within the deathcare field is limited to my experiences as a death investigator in North Dakota.

As a medicolegal death investigator, it is my job to investigate all of the unattended deaths that occur within the county's jurisdiction. In addition to unattended deaths, I investigate attended deaths that fall under a certain set of circumstances known as a century code. An unattended death means that the death occurred outside of the care of a physician or hospice care. If a death is attended or happened within a hospital, I investigate it if it falls into one of the following categories:

1. Obvious or suspected homicidal, suicidal, or accidental injury
2. Firearm injury
3. Severe, unexplained injury
4. Injury to a minor
5. Fire, chemical, electrical, or radiation
6. Starvation
7. Unidentified or skeletonized human remains
8. Drowning
9. Suffocation, smothering, or strangulation
10. Poisoning or illegal drug use

11. Prior child abuse or neglect assessment concerns
12. Open child protection service case on the victim
13. Victim is in the custody of the department of human services, county social services, the department of corrections and rehabilitation or other correctional facility, or law enforcement
14. Unexplained death or death in an undetermined manor
15. Suspected sexual assault
16. Any other suspicious factor

(North Dakota 66th Legislative Assembly 2020)

Investigating a death means that I analyze the circumstances surrounding the death and use all resources (medical records, interviews with peers of the decedent, law enforcement records, EMS reports, etc.) to determine the cause and manner of death for each individual. In some circumstances, I visit the scene of the death, or where the death or injury occurred, and take pictures of the decedent and the environment in which they were found. Some circumstances surrounding death call for an autopsy. An autopsy is completed by a medical examiner or forensic pathologist who has a medical degree. If this is the case, I will give them my evaluation and suggestion for cause and manner of death. After I give my assessment of cause and manner, a death certificate is signed and distributed to the family.

As a death investigator with a background in both the biological sciences and anthropology, I am able to combine my experiences from both fields to interact with both the biological and social aspects of death. I want to know what caused someone to die but I also need to be able to make connections with family members of the deceased. Lately, in my office, we have been discussing how deathcare is a field that causes a lot of stress and emotion, but one

thing that provides solace is knowing that we are able to help people through a very difficult time. Investigating deaths and caring for someone after death means much more than just physically examining a body. As investigators, it is our job to give a voice to the decedent. It is our job to determine what happened and what caused the death, and by doing that we are able to help family members come to terms with their loss.

Caring for a deceased body creates a very intimate bond between the investigator and the loved ones. As coroners and death investigators, we know that most civilians never want to meet us. By showing them that our goals are to take care of their loved ones and give them answers, we are able to make the tough time a tiny bit easier. In the deathcare field we are not just caring for the deceased body. We are caring for those who loved the decedent, as well.

Throughout my tenure within the coroner's office, I have interacted with the family members of over one hundred decedents. Throughout these interactions, I typically ask them about their relationship with the decedent, the decedent's medical/social history, and I help them choose a funeral home for the final disposition. One of the most frequent concerns I see with family members is an inability to pay for the type of service they want. This often leads to the family choosing to cremate their loved one because of cremation's smaller price tag. Although I cannot give a number, I can confidently say that a majority of the families I work with end up choosing cremation as a method of final disposition.

It was through my personal experience and through workplace conversations that I developed my research topic. I am uniquely qualified to discuss this topic my work exists at the crossroads of anthropology and deathcare. My education has taught me how to use an anthropological lens to understand the trends I am seeing in the field. By using my anthropological knowledge, I can see that the process of death does not end until final

disposition. I take The goal of this paper is to determine why cremation rates are increasing by using the rates in North Dakota as a case study. But, additionally, I am taking the anthropological narrative of death one step further by incorporating a discussion of what happens after time of death is pronounced.

METHODS

Based on my experiences with families in the field, my hypothesis was that the main reason for the increasing rates of cremation was related to cost. To determine if my hypothesis was correct, I started with an in-depth GIS analysis of the cremation rates in North Dakota.

Mapping Cremation in North Dakota

In order to gain an understanding of the state of cremation in North Dakota, I completed an in-depth Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis. I first downloaded a shapefile that contained the boundaries for the counties within North Dakota (ND GIS 2020). I uploaded the shapefile into the ArcGIS software (ESRI 2020). I found open-sourced death disposition data from the State Registrar's office and imported it into ArcGIS. The data included death dispositions for all North Dakota resident deaths from 2009 to 2019. Gaining access to the death disposition data was difficult. In order to gain access, I emailed someone who worked in the Vital Statistics division of the State Registrar's office. I only knew that this division existed because of my employment within a coroner's office. Had I not been a member of the deathcare field, I would not have known that this information existed or was publicly available. From my understanding, the Vital Statistics office has only a few employees, and they do not keep a running database with all dispositions by county on hand because it is not often that they get a request for the data. Initially, I requested all of the data from 1995 to 2019. However, to supply that data, employees would have had to comb through each year's data individually. The data prior to 2009 is not yet digitized, thus the employees would have had to pull out a handwritten file and transcribe the information into an Excel spreadsheet. My contact at the Vital Records office stated that it was possible but it would take about six months. But, because 2009-2019 was already digitized, they were able to access and share that information more easily.

The data I received was an Excel spreadsheet of the number of deaths per disposition in each North Dakota county for each year between 2009-2019. (See Figure 1).

2009 CountyofResidence	County	Burial	Cremation	Donation	Entombment	Hospital Disposal	Other	Removal from state	Unknown	TOTAL
	ADAMS	20	8	0	0	0	0	0	5	33
	BARNES	96	35	1	0	0	0	0	0	132
	BENSON	63	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	68
	BILLINGS	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
	BOTTINEAU	79	19	1	0	0	0	0	0	99
	BOWMAN	37	3	3	0	0	0	1	0	44
	BURKE	24	7	1	0	0	0	1	0	33
	BURLEIGH	379	196	11	1	0	0	4	1	592
	CASS	507	334	3	5	0	0	9	0	858
	CAVALIER	52	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	58
	DICKEY	45	15	1	0	0	1	9	0	71
	DIVIDE	21	7	0	0	0	0	1	0	29
	DUNN	18	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	23
	EDDY	39	11	1	0	0	0	1	0	52
	EMMONS	44	9	0	0	0	1	0	0	54

Figure 1: Raw Data Received from Vital Records

I chose to focus on the oldest and newest data, to evaluate how the rate of cremation had changed over a ten-year span. I uploaded the data into ArcGIS and created two choropleth maps (maps that show differences by using color) to demonstrate how cremation rates have risen.

Cremation and Per Capita Income

After creating the maps that visualized the rising cremation rates, I decided that I wanted to evaluate the per capita income for each county in North Dakota as well. I speculated that the cremation rates would be highest in the North Dakota counties that had the lower per capita incomes. To test that hypothesis, I used GIS analysis to visualize the annual per capita income per county in North Dakota. I used the same methods as listed above; however, the income information for 2010 was gathered from the United States Census Data and the 2018 data was from United States Department of Agriculture (US Census Data 2010; USDA 2018). Per capita income data for 2009 and 2019 were not available, so I used the data that was closest in year. I then created two more choropleth maps to show the per capita income by county in 2010 and 2018. The next step was to determine if the average income in each county was correlated to the

percentage of cremations in each county. To do this, I plotted the cremation percentage against the average per capita income and looked at the correlation coefficient (r).

Semi-Structured Interviews

As mentioned previously, anthropology is a holistic field so I wanted to explore more than just quantitative data. While the GIS data shows that cremation rates are rising, it cannot speak to the potential meaning behind the change. To dig deeper into what I learned from the choropleth maps, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews with local funeral directors whom I had created relationships with through my work. I reached out to six funeral directors via email explaining my project and asked if they would be willing to share their experiences with me. Only three funeral directors responded and agreed to be interviewed. The other three never wrote back.

I then set up one-hour interview slots with each funeral director and conducted digitally recorded, semi-structured interviews with them in the family meeting rooms of the funeral homes they work at. The funeral directors I interviewed all work in the same small community and in order to protect their identities, I gave them and the funeral homes they work at pseudonyms. The interviews were semi-structured, so I created a list of questions I wanted to have answered. However, the questions were open ended enough that the funeral directors were able to direct the interviews towards topics they felt were the most important. (See Figure 2). Doing semi-structured interviews was deemed exempt by the NDSU Institutional Review Board.

1. What does a traditional vs. non-traditional funeral service look like in your eyes?
2. What are the costs associated with the different types of services?
3. How often do families choose to cremate loved ones as opposed to using a traditional burial method?
4. What factors do you think play a part in that decision?
5. Can you rank those factors from most to least important?
6. How much of an impact would you say religion has on choosing a type of memorial service?
7. Do your interactions with family discuss religion? If so, how often?
8. Can you explain the typical mourning practices or routines you observe while working with family?

Figure 2: Interview Questions

When choosing who I wanted to interview, I knew that speaking directly with families would best answer my questions; however, due to ethical considerations, I could not approach families because of my position within the coroner's office. The next best option was to interview funeral directors because they work with the families very closely while helping them plan services. I also recognize, however, that at the end of the day the funeral directors have a financial stake in the rising costs of funeral services. When they hold more expensive services, they ultimately make more money. They are participants in the funeral industry, not unbiased observers.

I then transcribed the three interviews. The interviews lasted between 35-55 minutes. After transcription, I read through them and specifically looked for answers that quotes about why people are making certain disposition decisions and about how people grieve. When triangulating the quantitative and qualitative data, I was able to see the multiple variables involved in the rising cremation rates.

RESULTS

Quantitative Cremation Rate Results

In 2009, 5,865 deaths occurred in North Dakota. (See Figure 3). In figure 3, the darker the color, the higher the rate of cremation. Of those, 1,511 or 25.8% ended in cremation. The cremation rate varied by county, with the southwest corner, Bowman County, having the lowest cremation rate at 6.8%, and Golden Valley County, two counties north, having the highest rate at 41.7%. Figure 3 also shows that the three largest counties, Cass, Grand Forks, and Burleigh, have higher rates of cremation.

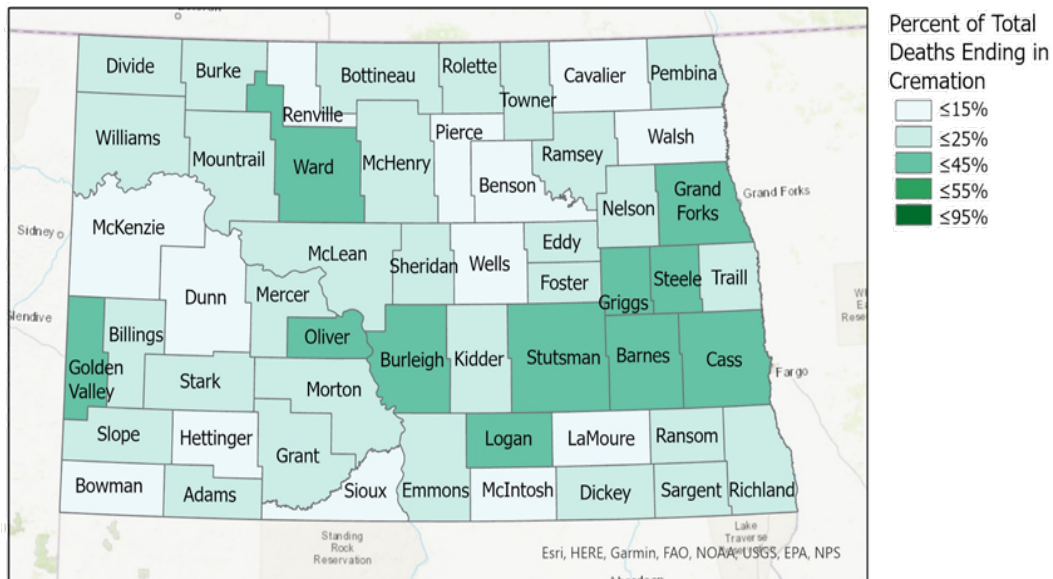


Figure 3: ND Cremation Rate 2009

Between 2009 and 2019, there was a significant increase in percentage of cremations. (See Figure 4). In 2019, there were 6,611 deaths, with 49.9% of them ending in cremation. As of 2019, most North Dakota counties were cremation 25-45% or more of their decedents. Cremation rates increased to the point that nine North Dakota counties (Cass, Sargent, Dickey, Kidder, Oliver, Slope, Golden Valley, Nelson, and Grand Forks) were cremating between 55-

95% of their decedents. In 2019, Sioux County had the lowest percentage of cremations at 14.3%, and Oliver County had the highest percentage at 90%. As a whole state, in 2009, the cremation rate for North Dakota decedents was 25.8%. That number jumped to 49.9% as of 2019. One thing to note, between 2009 and 2019, Sanford Hospital built a Level 1 Trauma in Fargo, Cass County. This is the only Level 1 Trauma center between Minneapolis, MN and Seattle, Washington.

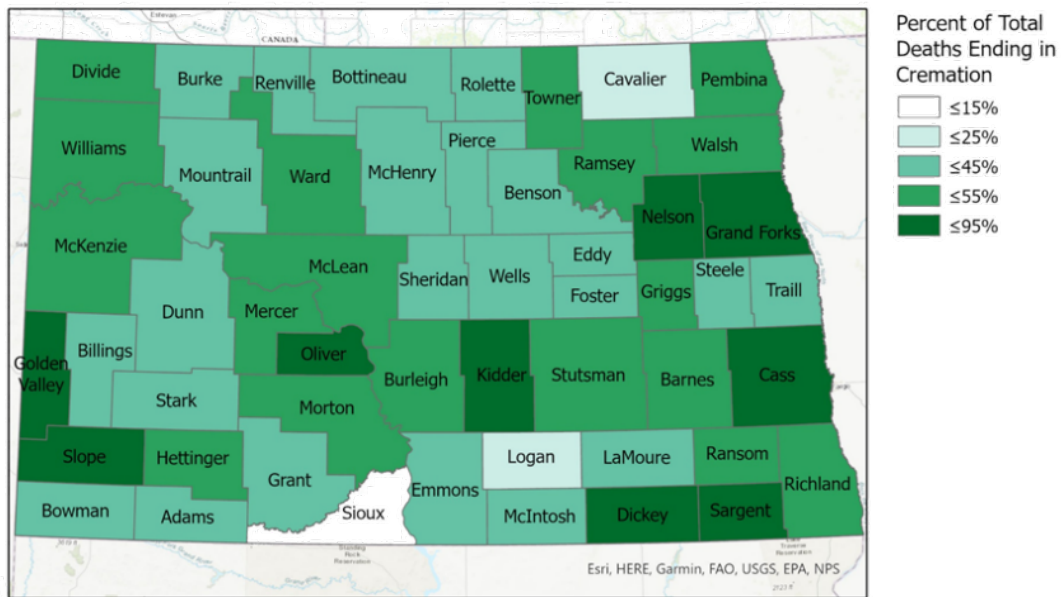


Figure 4: ND Cremation Rate 2019

A ten-year period led to a nearly 25% increase in cremations. Cremation rates across North Dakota have been increasing over the past decade. As of now, there is no clear answer why. While many people in the deathcare field have noticed the trend, nobody has tried to determine the cause of it. I tested my hypothesis that the reason for the increasing cremation rates, cost, by looking at the per capita income data for North Dakota counties.

Cremation and Per Capita Income

The maps showed the following: the average per capita income in North Dakota counties in 2010 ranged from \$13,500 in Sioux County to \$32,300 in Burke County (See Figure 5). In 2018, it ranged from \$16,700 in Sioux County to \$45,500 in Billings County (See Figure 6). In the eight-year period, there was a 41% increase in average per capita income in the state of North Dakota. One thing that can be seen is that between 2010 and 2018, the average per capita income seems to have equalized across most North Dakota counties

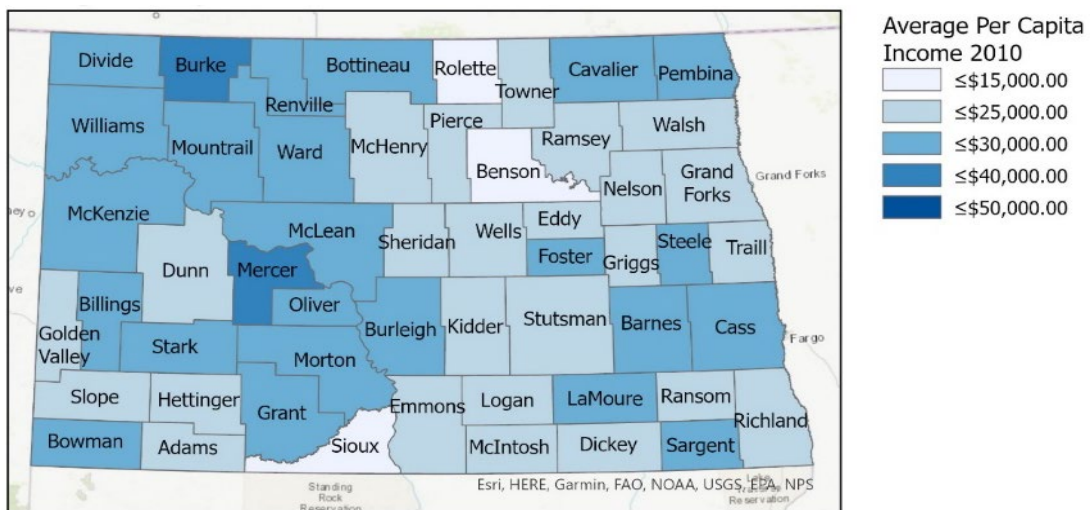


Figure 5: Average Per Capita Income 2010

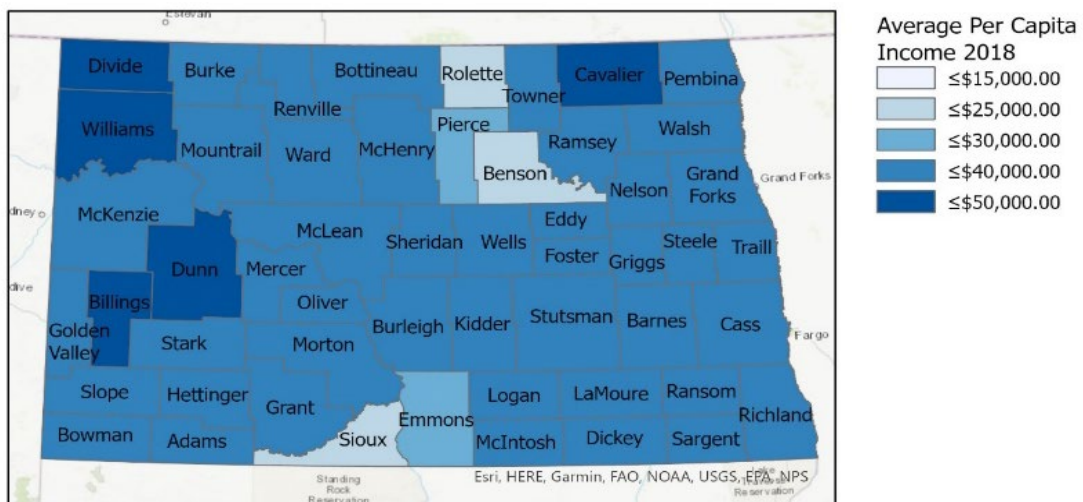


Figure 6. Average Per Capita Income 2018

To determine if there was correlation between the rising cremation rates and per capita income, I completed a scatter plot comparison. For both the 2009 and 2019 comparisons, I expected to see a negative r , which would indicate that as income increases, cremation percentage will decrease. However, that is not what I saw. The scatter plot for 2009/2010 showed an r^2 value of 0.05 (see Figure 7).

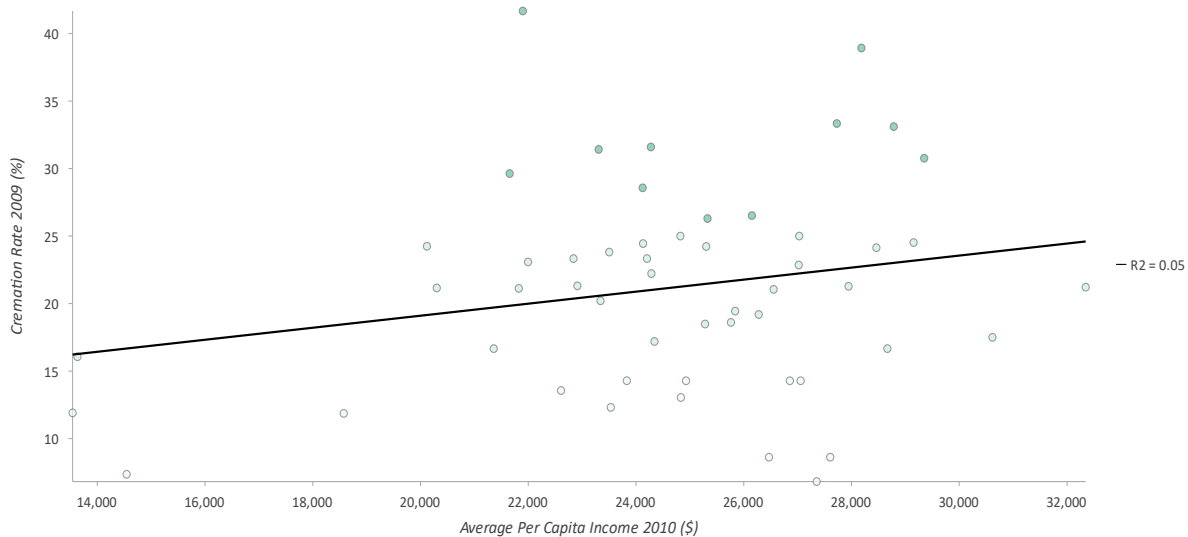


Figure 7: Income and Cremation Rate Comparison 2009/2010

To find the correlation coefficient, I took the square root of r^2 . I found that the r value was 0.22. This result indicates that there is likely no correlation between the cremation percentage in 2009 and the average per capita income in 2010. The scatter plot for 2018/2019 showed an r^2 value of 0.01 (Figure 8). Again, taking the square root of r^2 , the correlation coefficient was 0.10. The low correlation coefficient indicated that there was minimal correlation between the two factors.

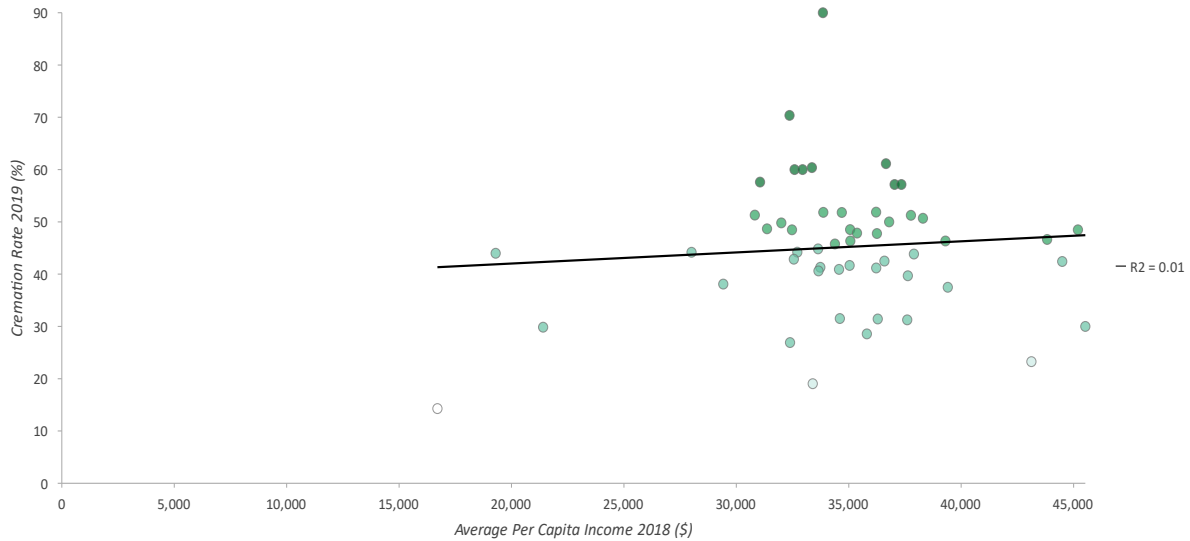


Figure 8: Income and Cremation Rate Comparison 2018/2019

The quantitative data showed that there are more factors involved in the rising cremation rates than I anticipated. The quantitative data does not tell the whole story. To learn what those other factors may be, I turned to my qualitative data.

Interviews

I met the three funeral directors I interviewed through my employment, and I have worked with each of them repeatedly throughout my tenure at coroner’s office. The three funeral directors whom I interviewed have been in the field anywhere from 10-25 years and they all have multiple job duties. They are involved with the families of the deceased almost immediately after time of death until the final disposition is complete. In this specific North Dakota county where they work, funeral directors are also morticians, so they have on-call time and deal with all of the transportation and preparation work for deceased bodies. They also meet with family members to plan services and final dispositions. One funeral director does all of the work, from start to finish, for a decedent. Because of this, the funeral directors meet lots of families, and they get to know the families well, allowing them to learn the motivations behind the choices families make.

When I asked why families might choose cremation, all of the funeral directors had different insights. Mary, a woman in her early 30s who had been working at Rock Creek Funeral Home for nearly a decade, said there were multiple factors at play. One is the mobility of an urn compared to permanence of burial. Once your loved one is buried, chances are they will not be moved. However, an urn is portable. No bigger than a shoe box, it is easy to pick up and take with you wherever you go. This can be beneficial for families who decide to move away from the area. Also, if the family or the decedent are new to the area, they do not have strong enough ties to the area to want to be buried there.

Mary also spoke about the American relationship with death:

There are people who are not comfortable with a dead body. What we [funeral directors] hear is, “That’s not how I want to remember them [a deceased loved one],” and I think part of that is cultural. The U.S. is a little bit more of death-denying and death-defying, and a person’s body in a casket is there. It’s hard to ignore.

In other words, people are not comfortable seeing and being around a deceased body. They are more comfortable with ashes in an urn because it is easier to remember their loved one as a living person, as opposed to a corpse. To Mary this is “cultural” and speaks to how Americans are coping with death in a way that is death-denying. The materiality of a dead body forces people to acknowledge that their loved one is now only alive in their memories.

Mary said what she hears most frequently is that the cost of cremation is just easier to handle than the cost of burial. But she also said she doesn’t really think it is about cost: “I think a lot of times people will say cost, but I think it’s more complicated than that. I think it’s more likely [for them] to tell me that they want to do this for cost reasons as opposed to delving deep into the thought behind things like mobility and those deep issues.” In other words, Mary

believes that people do not like to delve deep into their thoughts surrounding death, grief, mobility, etc. because the less they think about the situation, the easier it is to handle.

Unlike Mary, Eric, in his late 30s and in the field for 13 years, immediately said the most prominent reason for choosing cremation is the cost. Eric explained that burial has always been more expensive than cremation, but the price of burial is increasing at a faster rate than the price of cremation. This is because, as he said, there is more work that goes into prepping a body for burial. Not only do families have to pay for the funeral services, but with a burial they “have a casket that you're hauling around for the services, you're preparing the body- embalming, dressing and cosmetics. A casket, a vault, digging of a grave, and a hearse typically.”

Another reason people have given Eric for why they choose cremation is because it aligns better with previous family choices. If families have dealt with cremation in the past, it is easier for them to choose it again because they already know the process.

He also said peer pressure can be a factor and this is most common when people are preplanning their services, which has become increasingly more common within the funeral industry over the past decade. (Funeral directors are dealing more frequently with natural deaths, which means that people have time to decide what they want their disposition to look like. To preplan a service, individuals of any age meet with a funeral director and go through step-by-step what they want their services and final disposition to be. With pre-planning, individuals also pre-pay, so their family members do not have the unexpected burden of paying for a funeral when the death occurs.) Eric told me a story about his 93-year-old grandmother. A few years prior to the interview, he was helping his grandmother, who was a life-long devout Catholic, pre-plan her service. She told him that she wanted to be cremated because “that’s what everyone is doing.” Despite being a devout Catholic, she chose cremation so that she could “fit in” with what

“everyone else” was doing. (Religious affiliation was one reason Eric gave for people not choosing cremation. North Dakota is a strongly Lutheran and Catholic state; meaning that depending on your county, you are likely to be either indifferent toward (Lutheran counties) or against cremation (Catholic counties).)

Michael has been in field longer than both Mary and Eric, and he too has observed the increase in cremation rates. He, like Eric, immediately said the increase is because of cost. However, it is not necessarily about net worth. Michael told me of multiple situations where “the families had all the money in the world to work with, but they came in and the only concern that was on their mind was spending the least amount of money possible.” The way he explained this was no matter how much money you spend, it will not bring your loved one back. Michael’s comment perhaps helps explain why there was no correlation between per capita income and the rising cremation rates. It also demonstrates that a solely quantitative analysis cannot answer the question of why cremation rates were rising.

While Michael was confident that cost was the biggest driving factor in the rising cremation rates, he also noted that people often choose cremation because it is convenient. He went on to say that people using convenience as the deciding factor frustrates him because “since when did your mom or your dad or brother dying become convenient? It should be inconvenient. Our life should stop for a few days, and we should focus on that [loss].” Similar to Mary, Michael views cremation being convenient as a way to avoid the deeper issues involved in a loss. However, he was quick to say that he is not anti-cremation: “I just think people need to take time and make some decisions that are meaningful for them. Don’t worry about it being easy. Don’t worry about it being inconvenient. Let’s talk and see what is going to be the best for you and

your family.” In other words, cremation is the right choice for some families, but for others, it hinders their ability to confront the death of a loved one.

In summary, what I learned from the three interviews is that cost is a factor, but certainly is not the only one. It is obvious that the cremation rates are rising, and all three funeral directors know that cost is involved, but there is more going on. The cremation rates are rising because of cost, mobility, convenience, previous family choices, and peer pressure. As the most popular form of disposition leans towards cremation, what does that mean for the future of death in the US?

THE FUTURE OF DEATH IN THE US?

This case study looked at cremation within only North Dakota, but counties across the country are seeing the same trends. According to the Cremation Association of America, the US cremation rate in 2019 was 54.6% and it is expected to rise to 65.2% by 2025 and 72.8% by 2030. With an expected nearly 75% of the US's dead being cremated within 10 years, will this affect the way American society perceives death? Will it change our relationship with death? While providing an answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, I thought the funeral directors may have some insight into the topic.

Eric and Michael were fairly confident that increasing cremation rates have not and likely will not affect the way we, as Americans, interact with or perceive death, but Mary had a different perspective. According to Mary, being able to physically see a person in a casket can provide a sense of closure to family and friends. With cremation, that aspect is missing. Seeing someone in a casket tends to evoke an emotional response. Services with an urn present are not as “heavy” (Mary’s word) because there is no body. Mary also believed this may delay the grieving process as well.

Grief is a unique process. Mary said she has seen everything from laughter to anger to despair as people grieve the loss of their loved ones. The grieving process was originally outlined by Kubler-Ross (1969) as a five-stage process of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, Mary said, “Anybody who said that grief comes in stages is an idiot. It’s not ever that clean.” According to Mary, the way a person dies (expected vs. unexpected, sudden, or tragic vs. natural, etc.) or who the person is (child vs adult) is going to be the strongest indicator for the type of emotions people feel and the way they grieve. Typically, she said, seeing

the body starts the process of moving on from their grief. But when someone is cremated people have a tendency to prolong their grieving process.

Mary said she has seen more of this prolonged grieving because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic forced a surge in cremations because a huge number of people were dying. Funeral homes could not keep up with embalming new bodies, nor did they have the space to store the decedents as they awaited embalming. The pandemic caused a surge in unemployment and most people had even less disposable income than normal. Many families wanted to wait to have their services until after the pandemic ended (which still has not happened) so their entire family could gather, unmasked, in one spot. Cremation is required in situations of delayed services because embalming only slows the rate of decomposition but does not stop it. It would not be feasible for a funeral home to store a decedent for an extended period of time so that a family could have a service with the body present.

As the pandemic continues, families are choosing cremation and delayed services out of necessity. But, according to Mary, delaying the services gives them a “get out of jail free card” in terms of their grief. If the service is not happening for months or years, they do not have to cope with or come to terms with the death. Seeing the body or having a service are what makes a death feel real, she said. By cremating a body or delaying a service so long that it never happens (which is usually the case), people can take their feelings and “put them in a box,” never to think about again.

If the trend that Mary is seeing in North Dakota continues, she fears that the US relationship with death may become even more strained than it already is. At one point during our interview, Mary said, “The US relationship of death-denying and death-defying feels like the phrase ‘out of sight, out of mind.’ If death is not talked about, it cannot hurt, right?” If Mary is

correct that cremation gives us an easy out, and if cremation rates continue to rise, death will become an even more taboo topic, and people will have even more unresolved emotions and more trauma relating to death.

But I disagree with Mary. I believe that the trend she is seeing with using cremation to ignore one's feelings is unique to the North Dakota county she works in. This county is predominantly Lutheran. Raised as a Lutheran myself, I can attest to the fact that we are subconsciously taught to repress our emotions, especially sadness or grief (Erickson 2020; General English Lutheran Conference 2016). The rest of the country is not primarily Lutheran. Although my experience within other religions is limited, I have hope that they are more in tune with their emotions than the Lutherans.

Religion aside, I have an optimistic view of the future of the American relationship with death, regardless of rising cremation rates. Beginning in 2011, Caitlin Doughty, a mortician based out of California, founded The Order of the Good Death, which in turn spurred the creation of the Death Positive movement. The goal of the movement is to break the culture of silence surrounding death. The Death Positive movement was inspired by and serves as an antidote to anthropologist Ernest Becker's work on death denial (Doughty n.d.).

When creating the movement, Doughty outlined eight tenets that encompass the goals and values of the movement:

- 1.I believe that by hiding death and dying behind closed doors we do more harm than good to our society.
- 2.I believe that the culture of silence around death should be broken through discussion, gatherings, art, innovation, and scholarship.
- 3.I believe that talking about and engaging with my inevitable death is not morbid, but displays a natural curiosity about the human condition.
- 4.I believe that the dead body is not dangerous, and that everyone should be empowered (should they wish to be) to be involved in care for their own dead.

5.I believe that the laws that govern death, dying and end-of-life care should ensure that a person's wishes are honored, regardless of sexual, gender, racial or religious identity.

6.I believe that my death should be handled in a way that does not do great harm to the environment.

7.I believe that my family and friends should know my end-of-life wishes, and that I should have the necessary paperwork to back-up those wishes.

8.I believe that my open, honest advocacy around death *can* make a difference, and *can* change culture.

(Doughty n.d.)

Since its inception, Doughty has published three books and done countless public speaking engagements, all while running her own funeral home, creating content for her “Ask a Mortician” YouTube channel, and acting as a legal advocate for more environmentally friendly dispositions, such as recomposing, which is a process of turning a deceased body into soil (Doughty n.d.).

My hope is that over the next decade, the Death Positive movement will continue to destigmatize the world of death. However, this is a good avenue for future research looking both at if cremation rates continue to rise and if we see long-term changes to the US relationship with death.

FUTURE RESEARCH AVENUES

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the rising cremation rates within North Dakota and suggested multiple causes for the rise. Further research could provide a more in-depth perspective as to the relationship between the rising cremation rates and how Americans cope with death. Such an exploration would have to include a discussion of one aspect of death that I chose to largely leave out: religion. Religion, spirituality, and secularism are all intertwined with the world of death. When planning funeral ceremonies or choosing whether or not someone should be cremated, religion will always be factor, even if it is just to say that religion will not play a factor in any decisions being made.

Another possible research avenue would be to explore the way people are actually grieving. Because grieving and disposition are so closely linked, it would be plausible to assume that since the popular disposition is changing, then the way people are grieving may be changing as well. A larger scale discussion of how people grieve and how cremation may affect that grieving would not be complete without an analysis of the funeral industry. The funeral industry within the United States has been widely successful, and it is estimated to be worth around \$20 billion annually (Mardsen-Ille 2020). An analysis of how the industry has grown would provide more information into the rising prices of funeral-related services, and how the funeral industry itself may affect the grieving process.

CONCLUSION

As a death investigator and a member of the deathcare field, I interact with the dead and the families of the dead on a daily basis. I have seen firsthand how death affects people and how choosing a final disposition can preoccupy those who have recently lost a loved one. Throughout my tenure in the deathcare field, I have heard many families say that they will be cremating their loved one not because they want to, but because they cannot afford a burial service.

That recurring theme with families led me to inquire about the cremation rates within my county, and I learned that they were rapidly increasing across the entire state of North Dakota. It then became my goal to determine why cremation rates in North Dakota were increasing. To do this, I drew on my personal experience in my field, completed a GIS analysis, and conducted interviews.

What I learned is that there is no simple answer. Cremation rates in North Dakota are rising for multiple reasons, including cost, convenience/mobility, previous family choices, and peer pressure, to name a few. According to the funeral directors, cost is the reason they hear most frequently, but it is not the only reason nor do they necessarily think it is really a matter of money. The increase in cremations has led one funeral director to believe that the lack of physically viewing a body is complicating the grieving process. Furthermore, she believes that the projected increase in cremation rates by 2030 will make grieving even harder than it already is. I came into this project with one very specific question, and yet my research has shown that this is a topic that is ripe for future inquiry.

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