

The Difficulties that the Financially Insecure have in Obtaining a Proper Burial

Jacob Campbell
Eastern Washington University

Death is one of the few transcendent activities that all people participate in. Even though it is a constant, it is often a taboo subject. Along with death being a taboo subject, so is the funeral. People generally desire to obtain a proper burial. This is often a major confound when poor people are coming up on death. This is a major social problem. Symbolic interactionism is one theory that could be used to look at the overall social issue. The theory itself does not stand up as a strong theory. Empowerment theory is a practical and applicable theory that can be used to work with somebody who approaching death.

Keywords: Poverty, Burial

The Desire for a Proper Burial

Death is most likely one of the most taboo topics in American culture. It is a topic that is rarely brought up in normal conversation, and can be even more difficult to plan for. Within the topic of death is a great many different areas to focus on. These can include such legal topics as a living will and testaments, advanced directives, and durable power of attorney. They can also encompass how family members and or spouses will deal with death, caring for loose ends and other subjects. Added to this mountain of possible topics is the funeral service. This is often a heavy burden, especially when the person is financially insecure.

Planning for the funeral involves a number of different aspects. There is the aspect of financial cost. This can be a major issue if the party is poor or even lower middle class. Funerals are very expensive and although they can be covered by insurance, many Americans do not have insurance. Another aspect is the actual plan for the funeral. Moller (2004) describes that the poor often just want to be put away well, and have a proper funeral. What it means to have a proper funeral varies from person to person and culture to culture. For example, African Americans traditionally have had much more intricate and tradition based services. It is important for each person to be able to look at what a proper funeral is to them.

This article was written for either Jacob's BASW or MSW program while at Eastern Washington University. It is being self-published at his website, <http://jacobrcampbell.com/resources> to help other social work students in their practice and give ideas.

Older Adults Funeral Services and Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a descriptive theory that social workers and other professionals often use to describe a social problem. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the symbols that people create. Straker (2002) describes the key aspects as; meanings of interactions, interpretations of symbols by others, the effect of others interpretations, social structures. Funerals services are often very symbolic. Although the symbolism varies from funeral to funeral, they often are meant to do some of the following. Symbolically say goodbye, give a memorial that symbolizes the dead, and celebrate the dead symbolic awakening into the afterlife.

To use symbolic interactionism one would focus a lot on the various symbols. There are symbols both in the funeral itself and in the social problem of poor people not being able to afford the funeral. A symbolic interactionist would talk about the feelings associated with not being able to afford a funeral. Then how others viewing the poor's lack of ability to finance a funeral are and what symbols they are made of. Then they would even compare that with how those outside thoughts can affect the poor even more.

Rogers (2006) describes five criteria for judging theories, they must; be functional, strong, parsimonious, falsifiable, and make practical sense. Firstly, symbolic interaction does not have clarity or ridged specifics integrated with its use. It is often elusive and based on opinion what is symbolic and then what that symbol means. It also is not functional in bringing about social change. Secondly, symbolic interactionism is not strong, because it does not allow for predictions to be made about future behavior. Thirdly, symbolic interactionism does not become easily incorporated with other theories or perspectives. Fourthly, symbolic interactionism is not falsifiable. The concepts involved to not allow for empir-

ical observations. Fifthly, most of the time it does not make practical sense for the social worker to attempt to help the client. Symbolic interactionism is a weak theory that does not have much use except to bring understanding to the client about the importance of symbols.

Older Adults Funeral Services and Empowerment Theory

Aria (1997) describes five stages of empowerment theory. The first two stages focus on the client and problem interaction. She defines them as experiencing powerlessness and coming to awareness. The third stage is where the social worker-client interaction is the focus; she titles it connecting and learning. The fourth and fifth stages are where the client takes their new skills and reaches out with them. She labels them as mobilization/action and contribution.

Empowerment theory could be used to both to work with clients who are preparing to die and need a funeral service and also with clients with family members who recently had a funeral service. In working with a client who is preparing to die, they must realize that they are dying and financially insecure and that they are not the only ones in a similar predicament. This must include a desire to do as much as possible before their time is up. Empowerment theory often deals with teaching skills. In this case, it could be working on planning skills (for the actual funeral) or working through

bureaucracies to help obtain funding for the funeral. Connecting the client with a dying support group could be helpful. The client also may be willing to help advocate for more health care coverage or cheaper avenues for obtaining a funeral.

Empowerment theory is a productive theory for working with clients; it does still have some limitations. Especially in dealing with funerals and death, traditionally very spiritual events, the theory does not go in-depth. It overlooks the biology of the clients, often a major concern for those dying. It is also difficult to operationalize and measure.

References

- Aria, S. (1997). Empowerment: From the theoretical to the personal. *The Journal of Leisureability*, 24(1). Retrieved from <http://www.lin.ca/resource/html/Vol24/v24n1a2.htm>
- Moller, D. (2004). *Dancing with broken bones: Portraits of death and dying among inner-city poor*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rogers, A. (2006). *Human behavior in the social environment*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Straker, D. (2002). *Symbolic interaction theory*. Retrieved from http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/symbolic_interaction.htm