

THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF DEATH

The Social Organisation of Death:

Medical Discourse and Social Practices in Belfast

Lindsay Prior

Senior Lecturer

Department of Sociology

University of Ulster at Jordanstown

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MACMILLAN

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First published 1989

Published by
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Filmsetting by Vantage Photosetting Co. Ltd,
Eastleigh and London

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Prior, Lindsay 1947 –

The social organization of death : medical discourse
and social practices in Belfast.

1. Belfast, Death, Social aspects

1. Title

306.9'09416'7

ISBN 978-0-333-46435-9 ISBN 978-1-349-19918-1 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-19918-1

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vi
<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Death, Disease and the Body	1
PART I PUBLIC DISCOURSE	
2 Vocabularies of Causation	25
3 Categories of Death	47
4 The Pathology of Death	67
5 Accounting for Death	87
PART II PRIVATE DISCOURSE	
6 Segregating the Dead	111
7 The Social Distribution of Sentiments	133
8 The Disposal of Dead Persons	153
9 Death, Politics and the Body	175
10 Conclusion: Discourses on Death	199
<i>Notes</i>	203
<i>References</i>	211
<i>Index</i>	225

List of Figures

2.1	What to do when someone dies	28
4.1	Plan of Royal Victoria Hospital Mortuary	69
6.1	The distribution of space within the cemetery	115
6.2	The cemetery: detail from cemetery map showing distribution of land and individual graves	119
8.1	Sketch plans of two funeral directors' premises	159
8.2	The order of the funeral cortège into the graveyard	171

List of Tables

2.1	The distribution of deaths by sex, age and nosological category, Belfast, 1981	36
2.2	Factors listed as 'cause of death' in the hospital register, Belfast Lunatic Asylum 1871	46
3.1	The relationship between sex, age of deceased and certification by coroner in sample of 415 deaths, Belfast, 1981	56
3.2	The relationship between sex of deceased and certification by coroner in (1) all cases of non-violent death and (2) deaths from circulatory disorders, in a sample of 415 deaths, Belfast, 1981	57
3.3	The relationship between occupational class, age and certification by coroner, in a sample of 415 deaths, Belfast, 1981	57
3.4	The relationship between marital status, age and certification by coroner in a sample of 415 deaths, Belfast, 1981	58
3.5	The relationship between gender, place of death and certification by Coroner in a sample of 415 deaths, Belfast, 1981	59
4.1	Distribution of autopsy by gender and age in a sample of 168 mortuary cases, Belfast, 1982	82
4.2	Distribution of autopsies by gender and age in 92 cases of death from circulatory conditions	82
4.3	Distribution of autopsies by diagnostic category, gender and occupational class in a sample of 168 mortuary cases, Belfast, 1982	84
6.1	The distribution of deaths by wards/ clinical specialism in a Belfast hospital, 1982	131
7.1	Mean number of obituary notices in a 10 per cent sample of deaths in Belfast 1981, according to occupational grouping, sex, age and marital status of deceased	144

7.2	Mean number of 'religious' obituary notices in a 10 per cent sample of deaths in Belfast 1981, according to occupational grouping, denomination, sex, age and marital status of deceased	148
9.1	The distribution of violent deaths by sex and age of deceased in a sample of 453 deaths, Belfast, 1981	182
9.2	The distribution of violent deaths by denomination and occupational class of deceased in a sample of 453 deaths, Belfast, 1981	183
9.3	Average number of newspaper citations for those who died by (1) non-violent and (2) violent causes, in a sample of 453 deaths, Belfast, 1981	192
9.4	Mean number of obituary notices for those who died by violence in a sample of 453 deaths in Belfast, 1981, according to sex, occupational class, denomination and age-group of deceased	192

Preface

This particular book about death began life as a doctoral thesis. Consequently it has undergone a number of transformations and, I hope, improvements since its inception. Death is not, of course, one of the most attractive of topics and I am not absolutely certain why I ever adopted it as a subject for study in the first place. I suspect, however, that from the very earliest stage it had something to do with my desire to investigate and examine a phenomenon which seemed to be incontrovertibly and unambiguously physical rather than social in its nature; that is, something about which there could be very little equivocation. In that sense death seemed to fit the bill. After all, one is either dead or alive; or so it would seem. Unlike various other phenomena such as suicide, or forms of mental illness such as schizophrenia, or even modes of behaviour such as drunkenness or aggression, death is unambiguous. It was, perhaps, to confirm my faith in this simple fact that I devoted my first day of field research to visiting a mortuary. (Fortunately, and given my initial abhorrence of such places, the building was empty of corpses).

One of the great joys of sociology is, of course, its capacity to encourage one to adopt a healthy degree of scepticism about the nature of the world, and the events and processes within it. And so it was with my study of death. Not that I ever questioned or doubted the status of death as a physical occurrence. No, what impressed me was the way in which in the mortuary (as in so many other locations) death was reduced solely to the status of a physical event. Indeed, death was regarded and organised first and foremost as a bio-physical fact, and the manifold nature of the materialist discourse which I first encountered in the morgue confronted me with a basic and fundamental problem. It was a problem which was pointedly raised by a rather sceptical pathologist who asked of me, 'what can sociology possibly have to say about the causes of death?'

I mentioned above that this book has undergone a series of alterations during the past number of years. One of the features which has remained constant, however, has been my reliance on, and debt towards, the ideas of a relatively small number of writers, all of whom throughout their lives remained critical of the claims of biology. The writers to whom I refer are Durkheim, his nephew Marcel Mauss, his associate Robert Hertz and, quite independently of the latter three, Michel Foucault. Among the enormous and multifarious achievements of all these writers

was one which had a special appeal to me. Namely, their unmistakable and unparalleled ability to put human biology 'in its place'; that is, to regard it as a background to social life rather than as its determining force. For them, sociology was more than entitled to talk about and to question the accepted wisdom on such things as suicide, left-handedness, death, life, the causes of death and, of course, biology itself. I have therefore, and in a very modest way, sought to follow in their monumental footsteps and to examine physical death as an essentially social process. Consequently, I have chosen to focus on the forms of knowledge and schemes of social practice which surround the dead from the moment at which physical death is announced until the moment of disposal. Naturally, only some of those schemes of knowledge are rooted in the materialist modes of thought to which I alluded earlier, but, as will become clear from this study, materialist discourse determines virtually everything that occurs to the dead of the modern world. Indeed, it is the study of such discourse, together with the study of other related discourses on death which forms the rationale of the study.

As one might expect, in the course of completing this book (and the empirical work on which it is based) I have accumulated endless social and intellectual debts. Unfortunately, it would not be realistic to name every one of my creditors and I shall therefore restrict my acknowledgements to those to whom I owe a special thanks for the help which they very kindly gave to me during the various stages of research and writing.

I would like to open my list of acknowledgements by recording the help I received throughout the entire length of this study from the library staff of the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. Their assistance persistently underlined for me the indispensability of librarians to the academic researcher. I also received invaluable and generous assistance from the staff of the statistics section of the General Register Office, Belfast (1981–83) and from the staff at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland. In addition, I would like to record my gratitude to each and every one of my informants, none of whom, I suspect, realised how invaluable their information actually was.

I am particularly grateful to a number of individuals for all manner of ideas and suggestions which they seemed happy to offer and which I was only too glad to accept. They are, David Armstrong, Mel Bartley, Robert Dingwall, Mike Hepworth, Robert Moore and Michael Shannon. A particular thanks is due also to Derek Carson who was usually rather puzzled by my interest in death, but who was always kind enough to answer my questions in full measure. My thanks to my friend Roger Byrne who produced the original sketches of the mortuary and of the

funeral directors' premises which appear in Chapters 4 and 8, and last but by no means least, to my wife Pip for her unfailing help and encouragement. Finally, I should mention that some of the material contained in this book has previously formed the basis for a small number of journal articles. In particular, elements of Chapters 3, 4 and 5 have appeared in greater or lesser detail in: *Sociological Review* 1985, 31 (1), *Sociology* 1987, 21 (3) and *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 1985, 7 (2).

LINDSAY PRIOR