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A Culture of Memorialization: Examining Public Grief Through Funeral Programs

Bethany Rykhus

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Abstract: Grief can be expressed in a vast number of ways, each unique to the person experiencing it. But are there wider trends in the manner in which this grief is displayed publicly? In this research, I examine a collection of Christian funeral programs in Blue Earth County spanning the 1960s to the 2010s. By examining the linguistic and symbolic features of these programs, I identify commonalities in the imagery, bible verses, poetry, or other tributes to the deceased and analyze them across several factors including specific genders, ages, and time periods. This examination reflects a larger culture of memorialization amongst local Christian mourners as they participate in the grieving process. Furthermore, it contributes to larger conversations of grief, mourning, memorialization, and religious ideologies in the Southern Minnesota area.

Death is a fact of life, and every human culture around the world has developed their own way to conceptualize and process it. Since death is inarguably one of the greatest uncertainties encountered in the human lifetime, it makes sense that there be a wide variety of interpretations and approaches to this topic. While much anthropological research has been done on the way that different cultures around the world approach this issue, there has not been nearly as much research done on the Western approach, more specifically that of English-speaking Midwestern Americans. This research seeks to fill a part of that gap in the literature by examining the ways in which funeral programs – a common, yet underutilized resource in many funerary traditions worldwide – can be an expression of grief and memory, and also a part of a larger culture of memorialization in the Midwest.

Approximately two published research papers have been done on funeral programs in the past. The first, published in 1988 and written by scholar Joan Omoruyi, examines the ways in which funeral programs in Nigeria can be a rich demographical resource for historians and other documentarians in respect to the information commonly contained within their pages. The second study, published in 2016 and written by scholar Mbulaheni Musehane, examines the implications of orthographical convergence or divergence from linguistic norms in funeral programs in South Africa.

This research is most similar to Omoruyi's study in that it examines the demographics included within the collection of funeral programs. However, this research goes further in that the focus is not the demographics themselves, but rather the implications of these demographics in relation to larger traditions of grief and memorialization. This research also examines the potential relationships between the demographics studied and looks for causal and correlated relationships therein.

The collection of funeral programs used in this study was gathered from the Blue Earth County Historical Society's research lab. Only funeral programs from the research lab were included; no outside programs were gathered. Funeral programs were defined as a program or handout from a funeral that consisted of one single piece of paper, often folded to make a card. Funeral programs that had more than these four pages were excluded from the study, along with funeral programs that were excessively large (more than seven inches length-wise), and funeral announcements. Announcements were excluded because they would not have been present at the funeral itself and thus did not contain the same amount of information or format as the funeral program. The other types of funeral programs were excluded for two reasons: 1) because they diverged from the norm, when this research was focused exclusively on broader commonalities, and 2) because they were difficult and more expensive to photograph.

The data was collected from a section of filing cabinets in the BECHS research lab that are devoted to different families in Blue Earth County. The folders are organized alphabetically by surname and also contain a variety of newspaper clippings, genealogical research, and magazine articles related to the family. The data was collected over a period of twenty four hours, and consisted of photographs of both the front and the back of the funeral program. These photos were then uploaded onto a personal laptop and labeled by name in the format of 'lastname\_firstname1' for the outer portion of the program, and 'lastname\_firstname2' for the inner portion. The names on each program were also put into a numbered list, again in alphabetical order, to determine the identification number that would be assigned to them when they were put into a codebook.

The raw data was entered into a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet codebook so that it could be more conveniently measured and compared. Once the information was coded, Pivot Tables

were used to determine the parameters of the population, i.e. counts and percentages of each variable in respect to the overall population. After these comprehensive counts were determined, the main demographical variables were compared with the other variables to establish potential relationships between them.

The factors that received codes were divided into three different categories: demographics, linguistics, and imagery. The demographical categories selected were age, sex, date of death, and religious denomination. Age was divided into categories, all based on the stages of the human life cycle theory found in the fields of biology and nutrition (Brown XV-XVII). While this theory divides the ages into nine categories, these categories were combined or reduced to four official categories and one unofficial category for the sake of this research, namely in the case of different stages of childhood. The prenatal category was eliminated, as funerals are not often held for miscarriages. The next four categories, infancy and toddlerhood, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence, were combined for two reasons. The first was an attempt to even out the age categories so that one category didn't consist of a span of two years, while another category consisted of fifty. The second reason was based on the idea that the loss of a minor would be difficult at any age. Thus, the four official categories used in the codebook were 1) Child, ages 0-18; 2) Young Adult, ages 19-31; 3) Middle Aged, ages 32-50; and 4) Senior, ages 51 and onward. The final, unofficial category was 5) Unknown, which was for funeral programs that did not include a birth date or age of the deceased.

Sex was divided into three categories: 1) Male, 2) Female, and 3) Unknown. Sex was inferred from three factors, which included pronouns used in obituaries, titles such as 'Mr.' or 'Mrs.,' and explicitly gendered names. When none of these things were present and the sex of the deceased could not be inferred, the funeral program was coded as unknown sex.

The next demographical category, date of death, was separated into categories based on decade, from the 1960s to the 2010s. The six categories were 1) 1960-1969, 2) 1970-1979, 3) 1980-1989, 4) 1990-1999, 5) 2000-2009, and 6) 2010-present.

Religious denomination was separated into categories based off of the denominations used throughout the collection of funeral programs. There were seven categories in total: Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist, and Other/Unknown. The religious denomination was inferred either from the church listed as the host of the funeral, or from the obituary if the deceased was listed as being a member of any specific church. If the church name didn't infer any kind of denomination, this information was gleaned from the church's web site. Funeral programs that did not list a denominational affiliation or that listed a denomination that was rare within the population were coded as having an 'Other/Unknown' denomination.

The linguistic categories that received codes included obituaries, poems, stories, sayings and prayers, and bible verses. Obituaries included both full-length obituaries and lists of survivors, and were coded as either present or absent. Poems, stories, and sayings and prayers were divided into categories of 1) Absent; 2) Present, Religious; and 3) Present, Non-religious. Poems were determined to be written in verse format; stories were in long-form prose and often included characters or dialogue; and sayings and prayers were in prose and included proverbs, prayers, and linguistic features that didn't fall into the other categories. Religious poems were separated from nonreligious poems by the presence of mentions of God or Jesus. Finally, bible verses were divided into the most popular repeating verses, which included 1) Psalm 23, 2) Psalm 121, 3) The Lord's Prayer, 4) Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, and 5) 2 Timothy 4:7-8. An 6) Other

category was included for verses that were not common or often repeated, and an 7) Absent category for programs that did not include a bible verse.

There were many categories in the imagery section, but overall they fell into four divisions. These divisions consisted of religious imagery, naturalistic imagery, patriotic imagery, and other imagery. Religious imagery included crosses – divided into regular crosses, crosses bearing Jesus, and rosaries; Praying hands; Jesus – divided into Jesus alone, Jesus with children, Jesus with sheep, and Jesus with Mary; Churches – divided into the outside of a church, the sanctuary of a church, church windows, and church building or other; and Bibles. Naturalistic imagery included Farms; Birds – including doves, eagles, loons, songbirds, and other/unknown birds; Deer; Foliage – including single trees, flowers, wheat, grass fields, forests, and other/unknown kinds of foliage; Sun – including sun or sunsets; Bodies of water – including lakes and rivers; and Mountains. Patriotic imagery included American flags and bald eagles. Lastly, other imagery included photos of the deceased and images that did not fall into any of the other categories. All of the images that did not fall into the other categories were listed by name in this final category. Some examples included trellises, teddy bears, and sheep.

This project did have some limitations, mainly regarding the population makeup. While the population was fairly evenly split between male and female, the age and denominational categories were heavily skewed. Close to 90% of the funeral programs were from people who fell into the senior age category, which means that the relationships examined in the other age categories are more tenuous than those examined within this category. This was also the case in the denominational categories; ‘Catholic,’ ‘Lutheran,’ and ‘Other’ were by far the most common categories, thus the relationships found in the other denominational categories were significantly weaker than those found in these three categories.

The main idea backing the project was that funerary practices are often not a clear, objective representation of the deceased; instead, they are a representation of the subjective lens through which their loved ones remember them or want them to be remembered. Thus, in addition to a memorial of the deceased person's life, funerals can also be a reflection of certain aspects of the mourners as well. According to anthropological scholar Christopher Carr, "institutionalized beliefs and world views, in addition to social organization, fundamentally affect a society's mortuary rites and forms" (Carr 110). Along these lines, funerary practices – including the activities throughout the funeral itself, and also documents involved in the process such as funeral programs – have the potential to reflect underlying religious and philosophical beliefs of the mourners, along with the ways in which these mourners organize themselves socially. Carr continues, "in turn, the multiple, redundant symbols [used in funerary and burial practices]...that reflect multiple, particular beliefs could indicate the organization of those beliefs into broader philosophical themes" (Carr 118). Thus, different forms of symbolism used throughout these funerary objects and practices may be directly correlated to specific religious and philosophical ideas about life and death. Scholars Sue Adamson and Margaret Holloway detail a shift in funerary practices in the 1980s from religious conformance to a more personalized, secular ritual. They state that mourners "may rely on symbols to create and convey meanings which are otherwise difficult to articulate" (Adamson and Holloway 151). Even in more secularized funerals, traditionally religious imagery was still often used. However, if nonreligious symbols were used in the funeral, they were frequently used "for the same purposes and functioning in the same way as traditional religious symbolism" (Adamson and Holloway 151). Thus, even symbolism such as naturalistic imagery may still provide some sort of comfort to the mourners.

Once the theoretical underpinnings of the project were understood, the demographics of the total population were examined. The age range of the population was wide – there was at

<b>Table 1</b>	
Age Category	Percent of Total Population
Child	1%
Young Adult	2%
Middle Aged	5%
Senior	90%
Unknown	1%

least one funeral program for an infant and a few for elders over 100 years of age (see Table 1). However, the majority (90%) of the funeral programs were for people that fell into the ‘senior’ age category, while 5% of programs fell into the ‘middle aged’ category, 2% of programs fell into the ‘young adult’ category, and only

1% of programs fell into the ‘child category. The smallest category by a slight margin, making up only 1% of the total number of programs, was the ‘unknown’ age category.

There were slightly more men making up the total population; around 55% of the total funeral programs were for people of the male sex, while 44% were female. A total of 1% of the funeral programs fell into the ‘unknown sex’ category.

Regarding the decade in which the funeral program was made, there was an unequal distribution within the population. A majority of funeral programs were from the 2000s, making

<b>Table 2</b>	
Decade	Percentage
1960s	7%
1970s	20%
1980s	15%
1990s	17%
2000s	34%
2010s	7%

up 34% of the total population (see Table 2). Programs from the 1960s made up 7% of the total population, and programs from the 1970s made up 20%. Programs from the 1980s made up 15% of the population, while programs from the 1990s made up 17% of the population. Finally, programs from the 2010s made up an additional

7% of the total population.

Of the six denominations and one ‘Other’ category, the denominations of Lutheran and Catholic were the most prominent numerically, making up 35% and 34% of the total population,

<b>Table 3</b>	
Denomination	Percentage
Lutheran	35%
Catholic	34%
Other	16%
Episcopalian	8%
Methodist	4%
Presbyterian	2%
Baptist	2%

respectively (see Table 3). The ‘Other’ category was the next largest, with 16% of funeral programs being classified in this group. This was followed by the Episcopalian denomination, making up 8% of the total population; then Methodist, making up 4% of the population; and finally, Presbyterian and Baptist were tied with 2% of the population falling into each of their categories.

Regarding the linguistic features of the funeral programs, nearly 50% included a bible verse of some sort and/or an obituary. However, while bible verses were included in funeral programs from every decade, obituaries only became commonplace from the 1990s onward with few exceptions. Of the six different bible verse categories, Psalm 23 took a strong lead and was present in 35% of the total population of the funeral programs. It was followed by Psalm 121 at 7%, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and the ‘Other’ category at 3%, and finally Matthew 6:9-13 and 2 Timothy 4:7-8 were tied at 0.5%.

Poems were the next most prominent, making up close to 40% of the total population. Three out of four poems were religious in nature, while the remaining ones were nonreligious. Poems were followed by sayings and prayers, which made up 10% of the total population. Of this 10%, 8% were religious and only 2% were nonreligious. Lastly, stories were the least common linguistic feature in the funeral programs and only made up 3% of the total population. Around 2 out of 3 stories contained religious content, while the remaining third were nonreligious.

The fact that bible verses were the most common linguistic feature, and that the other creative linguistic features all favor religious iterations over nonreligious iterations indicates a

preference towards religious ideas to help the mourners grieve. They may be finding comfort by drawing on religious writings or ideas. Many of the nonreligious creative linguistic features still included ideas of life after death; for example, a popular nonreligious poem titled ‘To Those Whom I Love & Those Who Love Me’ includes lines about the deceased always being near to the mourner despite the mourner not being able to see them. Other nonreligious poems often included messages from the deceased meant to comfort the mourners. This focus on the mourner and comfort indicate that the programs are just as much for the comfort of the living as for the memorialization of the dead.

Funeral programs often contained more than one kind of imagery; therefore, many of the following percentages include funeral programs that were counted twice or even more times depending on the number of variables that they contained. For example, one funeral program may contain only a cross and thus only be counted in one category, while another funeral program may contain a deer, a forest, and a bird and would thus be counted three times – once for each variable.

The two most common forms of imagery (see Table 4) were photos of the deceased and crosses, both tied at 23% of the total population. Photos of the deceased only started appearing regularly in the 2000s with some exceptions. The ‘Crosses’ category included regular crosses, crosses bearing Jesus, and rosaries, each making up 20%, 2%, and 1% of the population, respectively. The next most common form of imagery was flowers, making up 19% of the total population. This was followed by forest imagery at 11%, praying hands at 9%, and birds at 8% of the total population. Lakes, wheat, and churches were tied at 7%, while singular trees made up 6% of the population and images of Jesus made up 5%. Rivers and sunsets made up 4%, and the

American flag and farming imagery made up 3%. It was discovered that American flags were exclusively associated with veterans in this population. Mountains, bibles, fields, deer, and

<b>Table 4</b>	
Imagery	Percentage of Pop.
Photo of Deceased	23%
Cross	23%
Flowers	19%
Forest	11%
Praying Hands	9%
Birds	8%
Lake	7%
Wheat	7%
Church	7%
Tree	6%
Jesus	5%
River	4%
Sunset	4%
American Flag	3%
Farm	3%
Mountains	2%
Bible	2%
Field	2%
Other Foliage	2%
Deer	2%
Sun	1%
Candles	1%

assorted other foliage all made up 2% of the total population, while the least common forms of imagery were suns and candles, both at 1%. ‘Other’ imagery (not included in Table 4), typically unique to the singular funeral program in which it was found, was present in 14% of the total funeral programs.

The fact that variables such as obituaries and photos of the deceased only began appearing regularly in the 1990s and 2000s was attributed to two factors. The first factor was greater access to technology – with the advent of the home computer, mourners were able to

include more information in their funeral programs with ease. The second factor was a decreased readership of public newspapers due to the digital age. Information such as obituaries and photos of the deceased would typically have been included in the newspaper; however, when online newspapers became more common, local papers’ reader numbers dipped. Therefore, this information could possibly have been moved to the funeral program so that it was still read and remembered.

Once these parameters of the population were established, Pivot Tables were used to examine potential relationships between the demographical variables and the other two

categories. The first demographical variable examined was age. It was discovered that children (ages 0-18) were significantly more likely to have poems in their funeral programs than other ages – in fact, 70% of child funeral programs included a poem of some sort. The majority of these poems were religious (71%), but there was still a relatively significant number of nonreligious poems present (29%). Around 40% of the child funeral programs included an obituary of some sort; this was the second most common linguistic feature, but the number is still slightly smaller than any other age group. Verses were found in 20% of the programs, and all of these instances were Psalm 23. Stories were found in 10% of the programs, and they were all religious in nature; meanwhile, sayings and prayers were not found in any of the child programs. The considerable differences between the linguistic features present in these programs as opposed to programs falling under different age categories indicates that mourners could potentially have a different approach to grief and the expression thereof if the deceased was under a certain age.

Naturalistic imagery was the most common in these programs, with forests, flowers, and bodies of water taking precedence over other kinds of imagery that were more popular in the general population, such as religious imagery. This age category also had the highest number of programs that fell into the ‘Other’ imagery category, with a total of 30% of programs being classified this way. Around 30% of child programs also included a photo of the deceased, which was the highest percentage of the different categories by a slight margin. There was no patriotic imagery present in these programs, which made sense as none of the deceased would have been old enough to participate in the armed forces.

The young adult category’s most popular linguistic feature was the obituary, which was present in 48% of programs. This category seemed to have slightly more variation in the

linguistic features than the child category; all of the linguistic features were present, and many of them included both religious and nonreligious iterations. The bible verse was the next most popular feature, making up 43% of the total funeral programs. The verses included in order of prominence were Psalm 23, Psalm 121, and Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Poems were found in 29% of the programs, with religious poems being more common than nonreligious ones. Sayings and prayers were the next most common, included in 19% of the programs. This category had examples of both religious and nonreligious sayings and prayers, although religious ones were again more popular. Finally, stories were the least common in this age category, and only were found in 10% of the total population. This category only had religious examples.

Regarding imagery, foliage was the most prominent and made up 36% of the total programs, followed by photos of the deceased which made up 29% of the programs. Religious imagery was slightly more prominent in this age category than the previous one, with crosses, portraits of Jesus, churches, and bibles being present. This category also included a small number of programs with American flags.

Obituaries were again the most popular feature of the next age category, which was for middle aged individuals. They were included in 60% of the total population, and followed by poems, which were included in 46% of the population. Verses made up 37% of the total population, and there was slightly greater variation in the verses that appeared. Psalm 23 was still the most popular, but Psalm 121, Other verses, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, and 2 Timothy 4:7-8 were also present in that order of prominence. Religious and nonreligious iterations were seen in the poem, story, and sayings categories, although religious versions were far more common.

Imagery focused more so on naturalistic imagery such as foliage, bodies of water, birds, and sunsets. Religious imagery was present, but in fewer programs overall. Around 13% of

funeral programs in this category included photos of the deceased, while 12% of programs included imagery that fell into the 'Other' category. American flag imagery was present in 4% of programs.

The senior age category was the largest of the four main categories. Bible verses and obituaries were tied as the most prominent linguistic category, both being present in around 50% of the total programs. The bible verses in this category exhibit the greatest variation, with Psalm 23, Psalm 121, Other verses, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 2 Timothy 4:7-8, and Matthew 6:9-13 being present in that order of prominence. Poems were present in 39% of programs, followed by sayings and prayers which were present in 11% of programs. Finally, stories made up only 2% of the population. Each of these three categories included religious and nonreligious variations, but religious variations were consistently more prominent. Interestingly, there didn't seem to be a particular relationship between age and the presence or absence of an obituary. Despite having far fewer years in their lives, children were almost as likely to have an obituary in their funeral program as seniors.

The senior age category also had the greatest amount of variation in the imagery present in the funeral programs. This category also had a more consistent mix of naturalistic and religious imagery throughout, with the two most prominent forms of imagery being foliage at 47%, and crosses at 24%. Photos of the deceased were present in 23% of programs, and 14% of programs included imagery that fell into the 'Other' category. American flag imagery was present in 3% of the total programs.

The next demographical variable that was examined was the sex category. There was no significant difference in the linguistic features present in the male and female categories; in fact, each linguistic feature made up similar percentages of each population in the exact same order of

prominence. The order was as follows: bible verses and obituaries, both at around 50% of the total programs in each category; poems, both around 40%; sayings and prayers, both around 10%; and stories, both around 2-3% of the populations. Poems, stories, and sayings and prayers all included religious and nonreligious iterations, but religious iterations were favored significantly.

Foliage was the most prominent form of imagery in both the male and female categories, but the types of foliage that were most popular were different. There was a significant relationship between floral imagery and the female sex category; 32% of the population included floral imagery, as opposed to only 9% of the male population. The female category was also slightly more likely to include photos of the deceased, with 26% of programs including this form of imagery and only 20% of male programs including them. Religious imagery appeared to be slightly more common in the female funeral programs, while more naturalistic imagery was more common in the male programs. American flags were only present in the funeral programs falling under the male category. The instances of differential gendered inclusion and exclusion of floral imagery vs. patriotic imagery has the potential to reveal underlying ideas about sex and gender in this cultural context. Women are associated with flowers – an image associated with funerals and formal occasions in general, but also associated with fragility, femininity, and a short lifespan. Men were generally associated with things like forests and wheat, and also patriotic imagery. Forests are more enduring, though wheat is an exception. However, patriotic imagery and patriotism have implications of strength that potentially link back to gendered stereotypes.

The next demographical variable studied was date of death. There appeared to be a linear progression of variation in linguistic features throughout the decades examined. In the 1960s, 93% of funeral programs included a bible verse, specifically Psalm 23. There were a few

instances of sayings and prayers being used – 3% of the total category – and poems were fewer still at only 1%. Both of these categories only included religious iterations. Obituaries and stories were not present in any of the programs.

Likewise, religious imagery was highly common throughout this decade. Churches, portraits of Jesus, crosses, and bibles made up some of the most popular imagery categories. There was also a prominence of foliage imagery, and images that fell into the ‘Other’ category were found in 25% of the total programs. Only 1% of programs included a photo of the deceased, and 1% of programs included American flag imagery.

The 1970s exhibited slightly more diversity in linguistic features than the 1960s. While bible verses still were the most common category, being present in 93% of funeral programs, now Psalm 23 was not the only verse found despite still being significantly more popular. Psalm 121 and verses falling into the ‘Other’ category were also present. Poems and sayings/prayers were also present in 7% and 1% of the programs, respectively. They were again only present in religious forms. Obituaries were first seen in this decade, and were found in around 1% of the total funeral programs. Stories were not present in any of the programs

Regarding imagery in the 1970s, religious imagery was significantly more prominent than other forms. While foliage was still a fairly common form of imagery in the 1960s, it dropped in popularity throughout the 1970s. Instead, imagery such as crosses, praying hands, churches, and bibles were commonly seen. Imagery falling into the ‘Other’ category was present in nearly 30% of programs, while no programs contained photos of the deceased or American flag imagery.

The use of bible verses in funeral programs from the 1980s dropped slightly; they were only present in 62% of the total programs, despite still being the most popular linguistic feature.

Poems and sayings/prayers were both present in around 20% of the total programs, and here both religious and nonreligious forms begin to be seen. Obituaries also became slightly more prominent, now seen in 6% of the total programs as opposed to 1% of programs in the 1970s. Stories remained absent in this category of funeral programs.

While religious imagery such as crosses, praying hands, and churches remained prominent throughout the 1980s, more naturalistic imagery like foliage and birds began to become more popular. Only 8% of programs from this decade included imagery that fell into the 'Other' category, which could indicate less overall variation. Much like the 1970s, there were no programs that included photos of the deceased and no programs that included American flag imagery.

There was a certain shift in the 1990s regarding variation of linguistic features. Obituaries suddenly became the most popular linguistic category, with around 67% of the funeral programs containing one in some shape or form. Poems overtook bible verses as the most popular of the other linguistic features, being found in 46% of the programs. Bible verses were found in 40% of the programs, and while Psalm 23 was again the most prominent verse, verses falling into the 'Other' category, 2 Timothy 4:7-8, and Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 were also seen. Sayings and prayers were found in 13% of programs, while stories begin to appear in this decade. Poems and sayings/prayers were found in both religious and nonreligious iterations, while stories were only seen in religious iterations throughout this decade.

Naturalistic imagery definitely began to take an upturn in popularity during the 1990s. Imagery such as foliage, bodies of water, and suns were some of the most popular forms, while more religious imagery such as crosses, praying hands, and bibles appeared to decrease in popularity. Around 9% of funeral programs included imagery that fell into the 'Other' category,

and 6% of programs included a photo of the deceased. Patriotic imagery such as American flags and bald eagles became more popular once again, making up 3% of the category's population.

Obituaries continued gaining prominence into the 2000s, and were present in 87% of the total programs that fell into this category. Poems continued to be the most popular of the other linguistic features and actually rose in popularity, being found in 67% of the programs in this category. Bible verses were only present in 19% of programs and Psalm 23 was still the most prominent, but this time by a lesser margin. 'Other' verses and verses such as Psalm 121, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Matthew 6:9-13, and 2 Timothy 4:7-8. Sayings and prayers were found in 12% of the programs, while stories were found in 5%. Both religious and nonreligious versions were found in poems, sayings and prayers, and stories.

Naturalistic imagery took a definitive lead in prominence over religious imagery in this decade. All of the highest percentages are forms of imagery such as foliage, bodies of water, suns, birds, and farms; or photos of the deceased and imagery falling into the 'Other' category. These two categories made up 46% and 11% of the population, respectively. Religious imagery was still present, but to a lesser extent than before. Around 5% of funeral programs included patriotic imagery such as American flags and bald eagles.

The final decade was the 2010s, and despite a complete data set not being available for this decade, there was still significant variation in the linguistic features present. Obituaries became even more prominent, and were found in 96% of the funeral programs. Poems maintained the next most common position at 62% of total programs. Bible verses were again the next most prominent, making up 25% of the programs. The verses used were less varied than the previous two decades, with Psalm 23 again being the most popular, followed by 'Other' verses, 2 Timothy 4:7-8, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, and Psalm 121. Sayings and prayers made up around 15% of

the programs, and along with the poems were found in both religious and nonreligious iterations. Stories were not present in any of the funeral programs.

Photos of the deceased increased in popularity significantly in this decade, with photos being present in 75% of the total programs. Naturalistic imagery remained the most popular form over religious imagery; in fact, no form of religious imagery made up more than 4% of the programs from this decade. Both patriotic imagery and ‘Other’ imagery made up 5% of the total programs.

The linear progression seen in linguistic variation also appeared to be present in imagery and general program makeup. Programs from the 1960s and 1970s had significantly more religious imagery than succeeding decades. Beginning in the 1980s, naturalistic imagery began to be seen equally with religious imagery, and this shift continued into the later decades. This could indicate a distancing of mourners from more traditional religious practices and beliefs. However, due to the fact that religious imagery and linguistic features were still present throughout more recent decades, it is likely that this distancing wasn’t complete.

There also seemed to be a sort of linear progression from conformity and repetition to variety and individualistic expression throughout the programs. Again, many programs from the 1960s and 1970s appeared to have used a template of sorts; dozens of programs from each decade had repeating imagery and linguistic features, while only the names and dates were different. However, in subsequent decades these trends were taken over by a greater amount of variability. Programs from the 2000s onward in particular seemed to use different personalized imagery and linguistic features to a much greater extent than the decades before. These factors could be explained by a greater access to technology, giving the mourning families more control

over certain aspects of the funeral; or it could indicate changing practices by the funeral homes which allowed for greater personalization and variation in the programs.

The final demographical variable studied was Christian denomination. The Catholic denomination had the most unique distribution of linguistic features; while every other denomination's most prominent linguistic feature was the bible verse, the most prominent linguistic features in the Catholic category were the obituary and the poem. Obituaries were found in 73% of funeral programs, followed by poems which made up nearly 60% of programs. Verses only made up 20% of the total programs, with the order of popularity being Psalm 23, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, Other, Psalm 121, Matthew 6:9-13, and 2 Timothy 4:7-8. Sayings and prayers also made up nearly 20% of programs, and stories were the least common with only 6% of programs containing them. Poems, sayings and prayers, and stories all were found to have both religious and nonreligious versions. Catholic funeral programs were also slightly more likely to have nonreligious iterations of the linguistic features; the uniqueness of programs falling into this category could indicate slight differences in attitudes and beliefs about death that separate Catholic mourners from Protestant ones.

Naturalistic imagery was significantly more common in Catholic funeral programs than other forms of imagery, with the exception of crosses. Foliage, bodies of water, birds, suns, and farms were all prominent. Crosses were present in unique forms in Catholic funeral programs; for example, most other denominations included simple crosses, but Catholic programs often included crosses bearing Jesus or crosses in the form of rosaries. Around 27% of programs included photos of the deceased, while 10% of programs included imagery that fell into the 'other' category. American flag and bald eagle imagery were present in 5% of the programs.

In the Lutheran funeral programs, bible verses were the most popular linguistic feature, found in 63% of the total programs. Psalm 23 was the most prominent, followed by Psalm 121, other verses, Matthew 6:9-13, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, and 2 Timothy 4:7-8 in order of popularity. Obituaries were found to be the next most common feature, with nearly 50% of programs including them. Poems made up 33% of programs, while sayings/prayers and stories made up 4% and 1% of the funeral programs, respectively. All three of these categories included both religious and nonreligious variations.

There appeared to be a fairly even ratio of religious imagery to naturalistic imagery throughout the Lutheran funeral programs. Foliage was the most popular category, followed by crosses, praying hands, and bodies of water. Around 20% of programs included photos of the deceased, while 16% included imagery that fell into the 'other' category. American flags and bald eagles were present in around 2% of the programs.

The Presbyterian funeral programs also had bible verses as the most prominent linguistic feature. However, they only were present in around 40% of the total programs, and the only verses used were Psalm 23 and Psalm 121. Obituaries were present in 44% of the total funeral programs, and 33% of programs included religious poems exclusively. Sayings and prayers, however, had both religious and nonreligious iterations and were found in 17% of the total programs. Stories were not present in this category.

Naturalistic and religious imagery again were both prominent in the Presbyterian funeral programs, though naturalistic imagery was slightly more so. Imagery that fell into the 'other' category made up 22% of the funeral programs, while photos of the deceased were present in 11% of programs. American flag imagery was present in 6% of the programs in total.

Methodist funeral programs also included bible verses as the most prominent linguistic feature, with 60% of programs featuring them. The only verses used in this denominational category were Psalm 23, Psalm 121, and verses labeled ‘other,’ in that order of popularity. Obituaries were present in 50% of the programs, while poems – religious and nonreligious – were present in 40% of programs. Interestingly, religious stories were present in 2% of the programs, while sayings and prayers were completely absent.

Naturalistic and religious imagery were both prominent in this denominational category. Foliage, crosses, praying hands, and bodies of water all were some of the most popular forms of imagery. Photos of the deceased were present in nearly 25% of the funeral programs, while ‘other’ imagery made up 14%. Patriotic imagery only made up 2% of the total programs.

Episcopalian funeral programs were unique in that bible verses were the most prominent linguistic feature almost to the exclusion of every other feature. Nearly 90% of the programs included a bible verse; the verses included were limited to Psalm 23, Psalm 121, and Matthew 6:9-13, in order of popularity. Religious and nonreligious poems were only found in 9% of the programs, while both religious sayings/prayers and obituaries were present in 4% of programs. Stories were not found in any program within this denominational category.

The majority of the top forms of imagery were religious in nature, with the exception of foliage which only made up 12% of the programs. Crosses, churches, praying hands, and portraits of Jesus were the most prominent. Around 27% of the imagery did fall into the ‘other’ category, while only 2% of programs contained photos of the deceased. No flag or bald eagle imagery was found in this category of programs. The greater presence of explicitly religious imagery and linguistic features could be indicative of religious and philosophical attitudes towards death that are unique to this denomination.

The funeral programs falling under the Baptist denominational category favored bible verses as the most popular linguistic feature. The verses used included Psalm 23, Psalm 121, ‘Other’ verses, Matthew 6:9-13, and Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Obituaries were present in 37% of programs, while religious and nonreligious poems were present in 32% of programs. Sayings and prayers were found in 16% of programs, while stories were found in 5%. Sayings and prayers included both religious and nonreligious iterations, while stories only included nonreligious iterations.

Religious and naturalistic imagery was used fairly evenly throughout the programs, with foliage, praying hands, suns, crosses, and portraits of Jesus being prominent. Around 26% of programs included photos of the deceased, while 21% included imagery that fell into the ‘other’ category. None of the funeral programs in this denominational category included patriotic imagery of any kind.

The final denominational category was for funeral programs that included an unknown or other denomination. Similar to the majority of the other denominational categories, bible verses were the most prominent linguistic feature. The verses included, in order of prominence, were Psalm 23, Psalm 121, ‘other’ verses, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, and 2 Timothy 4:7-8. Poems were the next most popular category, found in 29% of programs and having both religious and nonreligious forms present. Obituaries were the next most common feature, with 27% of programs containing one. Sayings and prayers were seen in religious and nonreligious forms, and made up 12% of the population. Finally, stories were seen in exclusively religious iterations and were found in 2% of the programs.

Both naturalistic and religious imagery were found to be fairly prominent in this denominational category. Foliage, crosses, churches, and birds were some of the most common

forms of imagery present. Photos of the deceased were present in only 9% of the funeral programs, while imagery falling into the ‘other’ category made up 12% of the programs. Patriotic imagery, such as flags and bald eagles, was found in 2% of the total programs in this category. The fact that religious imagery was still so prominent in this category was interesting, since the denominational affiliation (or even religious leanings) of the deceased often remained unknown.

One factor that remained constant throughout the process of data analysis was that the larger categories contained much more variation. One of the foundational research questions of this paper was whether there were wider trends found in funeral programs that may be indicative of larger cultural beliefs and practices surrounding death; it was found that while there definitely were wider trends, there also were a great deal of individualistic representations throughout the funeral programs, especially in more recent decades. This could indicate that grief and memorialization have a certain individualistic element to them, despite other parts of the funeral program conforming to more general trends and norms. However, this relationship between larger categories and increased variation beg the question of whether there would be significant changes in the overall results if the data set wasn’t so skewed. For example, if the age categories were to be made even numerically, it would be interesting to examine whether the levels of variation and overall results changed.

Another interesting point was the overall continued prominence of explicitly religious linguistic features present in the funeral programs, even as the overall imagery went from favoring religious imagery to favoring naturalistic imagery. This disconnect between the kinds of imagery and linguistic features used throughout the funeral programs makes it difficult to say

that there was definitive break from religious mourning and memorialization to a more secular format.

Future directions for this research mainly include looking further into the ways in which funeral programs are made and whether this has changed over the past decades. This stage of research would be completed through a series of interviews with local funeral directors and/or local families that have planned and held funerals. Topics to cover would include factors such as cost, the amount of control the families had over the contents of the program, and whether current practices have diverged from past practices.

In conclusion, the most prominent demographical categories present in BECHS's collection of funeral programs were the senior age category and the Lutheran and Catholic denominational categories. Male and female programs were fairly evenly split, with male programs being favored slightly. Each of these more prominent categories had more variation overall than the categories with smaller populations. Certain categories diverged from the overall norm, such as child or Catholic programs, which potentially indicates different approaches or beliefs surrounding life and death for members of these categories. There appeared to be a linear progression from religious to secular modes of grief and memorialization, and also from repetition and conformation to a more individualistic approach. Overall, these trends and relationships indicate that even a small aspect of the funerary ritual – such as a funeral program – can still be a reflection of larger changing attitudes and beliefs surrounding death and memorialization.

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