

AN ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS CONCERNING BODY DISPOSAL

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the body disposal preferences of college students at The Pennsylvania State University, and to identify factors related to their choice in order to draw implications to strengthen death education programming. In this study, 184 undergraduate students were asked to complete a short questionnaire regarding body disposal preferences and related concerns. A variety of independent variables were identified.

Significant interrelationships were found between the independent variables; primary reason for choice of body disposal, religious affiliations, perceived reasonable costs, desire to utilize the services of a funeral director, and the dependent variable, choice of body disposal. These data also indicate that college age students prefer non-traditional burial modalities. The educational implication of these findings are discussed.

Article:

Introduction

Americans spend more money on funerals than any other nation in the world. The "traditional American funeral" provides a wide range of goods and services to a vulnerable group that typically does not know what to expect in terms of merchandise, prices, or procedures. This vulnerability is often a function of the characteristics of the typical funeral consumer. He/she tends to be unaware of the goods and services they will have to purchase and their role as a funeral consumer. In addition, the funeral consumer is often guilt stricken, emotionally drained, dependent on the advice of others and working under the pressure of time constraints. Because of the situation surrounding the purchase of these goods and services, this group is generally not in a position to bargain. Although the traditional American funeral (embalming, viewing, grave side service) is thought by many to be an overpriced, and considered by some as an unaesthetic means of body disposal, approximately 95 percent of the American population is buried by traditional means (1). These mourning customs have a definite historical basis.

The funeral industry in the United States began to emerge during the 19th century as carpenters and cabinet makers found the sale of coffins to be profitable. Gradually these tradesmen began to offer other services along with the sale of coffins, and consequently, undertaking as a profession blossomed. The process of embalming was initially developed by physicians and chemists so the remains could be preserved long enough to allow the family to gather for the wake and funeral. The popularity of embalming increased following the civil war, especially in the northern and eastern sections of the country. Soldiers from the north who died in battle in the south were generally returned to their home states for ground burials. This practice necessitated embalming. As a result, the technical skills related to embalming were improved and the preservation of the remains through embalming gained public acceptance. As the popularity of embalming increased, physicians and chemists skilled in embalming began to conduct training sessions on embalming techniques. The obvious trainees for such programs were those tradesmen who were already providing coffins and transportation services. By the late 1800's, the undertaking trade emerged as a "profession" that sold merchandise and provided related services (embalming, transportation, hosting the viewing, etc.). Today, there are over 20,000 funeral homes and

approximately 50,000 licensed funeral directors who generate revenues in excess of 3.5 billion dollars annually (2).

As a result of the presence of an influential and visible funeral industry coupled with the characteristics of the funeral consumer (emotional trauma, ignorance, dependency and guilt), the traditional American funeral has emerged as the socially accepted mode of body disposal. Although most individuals are aware that there are alternatives to the traditional funeral (e.g., cremation, body donation and simple burial), only about five percent of the American population is disposed of by these means.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain student attitudes and beliefs toward body disposal. In addition, some characteristics of those choosing traditional versus those choosing non-traditional methods of body disposal were examined.

Methodology

An 11 item questionnaire was developed to determine preferred methods of body disposal, reasons for selecting a mode of body disposal, beliefs concerning the funeral industry and funeral director and beliefs and opinions concerning the cost of body disposal. In addition, the questionnaire gathered appropriate demographic data (i.e., age, sex, academic background, religious affiliation, community size, etc.). The questionnaire was administered to 184 undergraduate students at The Pennsylvania State University. Eighty-three subjects had just completed a one credit death education course while the remaining 101 students were enrolled in other one credit health related courses during that same term.

For the purpose of this investigation a two category nominal scale indicating choice of body disposal was chosen as the dependent variable. Students could either indicate a preference for the traditional methods of body disposal or one of the non-traditional methods. From the available data, several independent variables were selected which the investigators believed had potential for explaining preference of body disposal. These included exposure to a formal death education experience, religious affiliation, attitudes towards the funeral industry and funeral director and the primary reason for deciding on the preferred method of body disposal.

Analysis of Data

With regard to the reasons for selecting traditional and non-traditional methods of body disposal, the data clearly show a significant difference. (Table 1) Those who preferred the traditional method did so because of reasons related to religion, family considerations or social acceptability, while those expressing a desire for non-traditional methods did so out of economic, simplicity or altruistic concerns. These data support the notion that societal, religious and other factors influence the person's decision regarding body disposal preference. One variable of interest was exposure to a formal death education course and its relationship to choice of traditional or non-traditional body disposal. It was hypothesized that exposure to such a course would increase the likelihood of choosing a non-traditional method of body disposal as compared to those with no such exposure. This hypothesis was based on the notion that an informed populace would be more likely to realistically assess alternatives and make a decision congruent with personal attitudes, beliefs and concerns instead of simply selecting the traditional funeral process because of its familiarity and social acceptability. A tabular analysis was used to generate Table 2 and a χ^2 for contingency using a Yates correction was calculated to determine significance.

The analysis indicated that there was no significant difference (.05 level) between the two groups with regard to their body disposal preferences. It is interesting to note that the majority of both groups stated a preference for non-traditional methods of body disposal. In addition, the percentage of subjects stating a preference for non-traditional means is much higher than what actually occurs among the American population. These findings may indicate a reversing trend, at least among college age students. Or, perhaps, this discrepancy relates to the notion that unless detailed plans are made prior to death, it is difficult for the funeral consumer to opt for a non-traditional method of body disposal.

TABLE 1. Interrelationship between Primary Reasons for Selection of Body Disposal and Choice of Body Disposal

	Traditional	Nontraditional	Totals
Religious	11 (65%)	6 (35%)	17 (100%)
Family consideration	48 (75%)	16 (25%)	64 (100%)
Social acceptability	7 (88%)	1 (12%)	8 (100%)
Economic consideration	0 (0%)	13 (100%)	13 (100%)
Simplicity	1 (2%)	48 (98%)	49 (100%)
Altruistic concerns	3 (12%)	23 (88%)	26 (100%)
Total	70	107	177

$\chi^2 = 91.75$; significant .001; df = .05.

TABLE 2. Interrelationship between Exposure to Death Education and Preference of Body Disposal

	Traditional	Nontraditional	Totals
Death education course	32 (39%)	52 (61%)	84 (100%)
No death education course	43 (43%)	58 (57%)	101 (100%)
Totals	75	184	

$\chi^2 = .22$; not significant df = 1.

It is also possible that what one says in response to such a study, and the emotional strength and communication skills necessary to relate these preferences to a significant other are disparate. Many consumer groups contend that the death of a close friend or relative brings about profound emotional and psychological trauma which hinders rational decision-making. As a result, the funeral consumer who is not absolutely sure of the deceased's wishes related to body disposal may feel guilty by not providing an elaborate and "socially acceptable" funeral. From an educational standpoint, it is important for the consumer to be aware of the need to preplan and make certain that body disposal preferences are clearly understood by close relatives and friends. For it is much easier to make a rational decision when not confronted with the trauma of death.

TABLE 3. Interrelationship between Religious Affiliation and Choice of Body Disposal

	Traditional	Nontraditional	Totals
Catholic	39 (57%)	30 (43%)	69 (100%)
Jewish	6 (30%)	14 (70%)	20 (100%)
Protestant	24 (36%)	43 (64%)	67 (100%)
Total	69	87	156*

$\chi^2 = 7.8$; significant .05; df = 2.

*The N has dropped to 156 due to students who chose other minor religions, were atheists, or left the question blank.

A significant interrelationship was found between religious affiliation and choice of body disposal. (Table 3) Catholics were more likely to state a preference for traditional methods of body disposal, while the Jewish and Protestant faiths were more likely to state a preference for non-traditional methods. These findings were congruent with religious views related to the traditional method of body disposal alternatives. For example, many Jewish sects advocate a simple funeral process. Also, the most common alternative, cremation, is

generally discouraged by Catholics, while it is acceptable or thought to be an individual decision by most protestant sects. These religious views may explain the interrelationship among these groups.

One of the survey questions asked students to indicate what they believed to be a reasonable cost for body disposal. (Table 4) As might be expected, those that indicated a preference for traditional methods of body disposal accepted higher costs as being reasonable. While those who indicated a preference for non-traditional methods felt reasonable costs to be lower. It should be noted that the perception of the participants concerning what constitutes a reasonable cost for body disposal was much lower than the average cost of body disposal in the United States. This finding lends support to the notion that although Americans often believe they spend too much money for body disposal, they seldom adequately preplan funeral arrangements, a factor which would most likely reduce costs significantly.

TABLE 4. Interrelationship between Perceived Reasonable Cost for Body Disposal and Choice of Body Disposal

	Traditional	Nontraditional	Total
0-\$250	3 (8%)	33 (92%)	36 (100%)
\$250-500	13 (22%)	45 (78%)	58 (100%)
\$500-1000	34 (61%)	22 (39%)	56 (100%)
\$1000-2000	17 (73%)	6 (26%)	23 (100%)
Over \$2000	8 (73%)	3 (27%)	11 (100%)
Total	75	109	184

$\chi^2 = 48.1$; significant .001; df = 4.

In an effort to determine student preferences with regard to the use of a funeral director, the following yes-no question was asked, "For the mode of body disposal you selected, would you seek the services of a funeral director?" (Table 5)

As might be expected, the majority of participants selecting the traditional burial modality stated a desire to consult a funeral director when making burial arrangements. For participants selecting non-traditional burial means there was a greater likelihood to express a desire not to utilize the services of a funeral director. Another finding of interest is that the two variables, desire to utilize a funeral director's services and choice of body disposal, have an interaction effect with exposure to the death education course. For those selecting non-traditional methods of body disposal, the desire to use a funeral director's services depends on exposure to the death education course. Those who had the course prefer not to use a funeral director for non-traditional methods of body disposal, but those that did not have the course the majority preferred to use a funeral director for non-traditional methods of body disposal. For those selecting traditional methods of body disposal, the preference was to use a funeral director, regardless of the course. Table 5 presents a tabular analysis of this interaction. For the analysis of these data, a Z-test for significance of the difference between the two differences was utilized. These findings may have resulted from an increased level of cognition in the death education group.

TABLE 5. Interrelationship between Desire to Utilize a Funeral Director's Services, Choice of Body Disposal, and Exposure to a Death Education Course.

	Death education course		No death education course	
	Traditional	Nontraditional	Traditional	Nontraditional
Yes	32 (100%)	23 (46%)	41 (98%)	35 (64%)
No	0 (0%)	27 (54%)	1 (2%)	20 (36%)
Total	32 (100%)	50 (100%)	42 (100%)	55 (100%)

Z = 2.03; significant .05.

Students who are aware of what their options and alternatives are concerning body disposal, seemed to be more confident in their abilities to deal personally with these matters without assistance from a funeral director. It

should be stressed that the death education course did not promote the idea of handling body disposal without a funeral director. The death education course outlined the traditional American funeral and appropriate alternatives. In addition, the role and function of the funeral director, along with the limitations of the funeral director, were discussed. The major objective of this presentation was to enhance the students' ability to make responsible and informed funeral decisions.

Discussion and Educational Implications

The results of this study show that many of the college age students studied would prefer to be buried by non-traditional means. This preference could relate to a variety of factors; simplicity, economic and altruistic concerns. If this preference is also found in other cohorts, death education geared for adult populations should provide students with the skills necessary to preplan their funerals.

Knott (3) has identified three goals of death education: information sharing, values clarification and coping behaviors. These goals have definite implications for instruction related to selected burial modalities. An examination of each follows.

Information Sharing

The American populace generally does not know what their body disposal options are, nor, do they have a knowledge of the relative costs. In addition, a variety of misconceptions have developed over the years related to body disposal (e.g., public health laws universally mandate embalming or the body must be placed in a casket for cremation). As a result there is a need to share with students this information, which is not generally widespread in our culture.

Values Clarification

The values clarification process tries to encourage students to weigh the pro's and con's of value laden issues prior to deciding on a course of action. With regard to body disposal, it is important for individuals to look at the potential impact of their decision on all parties involved. For example, before a person decides to donate his/her body for anatomical study, they should consult with close family members and clarify the beliefs and concerns related to body donation.

Coping Behaviors

Skills in problem solving and decision making are the focal points of any consumer education endeavor. When you strip away the emotional, cultural and social aspects of this concern, selecting a mode of body disposal is primarily a consumer education task. Students need to be provided with a variety of skills to effectively plan their funeral and subsequent method of body disposal. Communication skills are needed so that a student can communicate his/her decision to family and friends. This is vital since these people are ultimately responsible for carrying out the funeral plans. Skills are needed relating to the actual techniques of preplanning a funeral. - Questions such as, What needs to be done? Who needs to be contacted? and When arrangements need to be made? should be discussed during a death education course which deal with consumer aspects of dying and death.

The results of this study indicated that the majority of college students questioned would prefer a non-traditional method of body disposal. It must be reiterated, however, that discussion about funerals and methods of body disposal are not widespread in our culture. Therefore, unless these students take the opportunity to plan their funeral and make their wishes known, chances are their survivors are going to purchase a traditional funeral package. It is important that death educators enhance students' ability to make decisions congruent with personal philosophical beliefs and provide the skills necessary to translate these decisions into action. This requires critical analysis of factors related to burial and funeral services, and challenges students to explore their attitudes toward death and body disposal. Attention must be directed toward the economic, social, religious and emotional elements of rational decision making in the consumerism of dying and death.

References

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