Original Papers

Igor Pietkiewicz*

Burial rituals and cultural changes in the polish community – a qualitative study

Abstract*: The aim of this study was to explore cultural factors affecting burial rituals in Poland. Thirty-four university students collected data from their relatives and created written narratives about deaths in their families or community. Ten additional interviews were conducted with community members, a priest, and medical personnel as part of theoretical sampling and verification of emerging theories. The qualitative material was administered with NVivo and analysed using the Grounded Theory techniques to produce a complex description of folk beliefs, superstitions, as well as symbolic and psychological meaning ascribed to traditional customs. Some of the practices were found susceptible to extinction due to industrialisation, globalisation, and cultural development.*

Keywords*: death & dying, burial rituals, funeral, death ceremonies, rituals of passage*

The psychosocial dimension of death and dying

Thanatology literature describes two major attitudes towards death: one that involves accepting it as a natural part of life and embracing it consciously, and the other characterised by rejection and denial of its existence (Giblin and Hug, 2006). The former attitude is more likely to be observed in collective cultures or agrarian communities, whereas the latter is specific of modern, industrialised, urban cultures. When individuals are able to confront the fact that everything is impermanent and integrate death into daily existence (respect it as part of the life cycle) it often results in a more sacred way of living. This may lead to greater peace and strength to deal with life adversities, as well as more reflexive attitude towards life (Pietkiewicz, 2008). On the other hand, denying the fear of death also leads to denial of other healthy parts of the psyche. Subsequently, opportunities for personal growth are missed (Giblin and Hug, 2006). According to sociological surveys conducted by Derczyński (1994, 2001) and Boguszewski (2005), the majority of Poles believed in life after death (57% out of 1184 respondents in 1994, 69% out of 1020 respondents in 2001, and 65% out of 1052 respondents in 2005). However, only 36% of them solely linked the

concept of afterlife with religion and the teachings of the Church (Derczyński, 1994). Simonides (2007) observes that contemplating death in modern times seems to grow less common in Polish society in comparison with the past. In 1994, 63% of the surveyed population declared thinking of death from time to time, and in 2001 only 29% reported having it on their minds often, while 45% of respondents maintained that it was better not to think about death at all (Derczyński, 1994, 2001). Boguszewski (2005) reports that 45% of people surveyed in 2005 said they would never or very rarely think about death. The way people perceived death also depended on the context. The survey in 1994 indicated that inhabitants of rural areas were more likely to treat death as something natural, which they needed to come into terms with (Derczyński, 1994). When it comes to preparation for death, 47% of respondents in both the 1994 and 2005 studies said it was important to make necessary arrangements beforehand; however only 6% prepared their last will and 23% had arranged a place at a cemetery for themselves (Derczyński, 2001). Only 26% of the group in 1994, 36% in 2001, and 35% in 2005, said they would like to die consciously (Derczyński, 1994, 2001; Boguszewski, 2005). Data on the numbers of death by place collected by the Central Statistical Office (2011b) shows that there is a

* University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty in Katowice, Poland
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Igor Pietkiewicz, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Faculty in Katowice, Kossutha 9, 40-844 Katowice, Poland. e-mail: ipietkiewicz@swps.edu.pl

steady increase in deaths in hospital and other out-patient clinics and a decline of deaths at home. On the other hand, Boguszewski (2005) notes that a majority of respondents declared they would rather die at home.
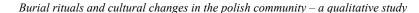
Death of a family member affects the whole family system; intense grief is usually experienced and roles need to be renegotiated. To fulfil obligations towards the deceased and foster adaptation to loss and subsequent changes, rituals are often employed. Funeral and bereavement rituals have been universal phenomena across times and cultures. They are often perceived as the primary duty to the deceased and represent a culturally sanctioned framework for dealing with loss, associated grief, and the change within a social system when one of its members is gone. They constitute a pathway of culturally normative and socially supported behaviours for the mourners – how one should express and contain strong emotions, what roles one should adopt, and how to go on with one's life. In this way, funeral rituals provide meaningful and affirming experiences for the bereaved and mediate the transitions for both deceased and mourners – from life to death or one social status to another (Romanoff and Terenzio, 1998). For this reason, they have been described as significant rites of passage. Hunter (2007) draws upon the traditional van Gennep's three-stage model to describe how the deceased and his or her family go through 1. separation, 2. transition, and 3. reintegration, which represent the shift from being a member of the community to belonging to another realm, or from being a wife/husband to becoming a widow(-er), etc. In this way funerals mediate the passage from one status to another. In Poland, qualitative research on death rituals, their social meaning, and psychological significance is limited in scope and number. The results of ethnographic studies of folk culture done by Simonides (2007) in villages located in the Opole district (south-western Poland) are limited in area, but provide interesting examples of local beliefs and customs (including those which relate to death and dying). She describes how people prepared for death and what measures were taken to arrange funerals. There is no evidence, however, that these practices can also be found in the general population.

Burials take different forms depending on local customs and tradition, as well as the religious background of the dead person and his or her family. Walter (2005) identifies three main types of funeral organisation which refer to management of the corpse until its final disposition, namely religious, municipal, and commercial. He also describes a number of mixed types. Popularity (under- or overutilisation) of a given institutional type depends on wider cultural context. He observes that two countries with the same religion can still have radically different death practices. There is no statistical information regarding the popularity of different types of funeral organisation in Poland. However, the national surveys cited previously draw some light on Poles' preferences regarding the choice

between inhumation and cremation. Whereas in 1994, 55% of the population were convinced that dead people should be buried in coffins and only 37% accepted cremation as an option (Derczyński, 1994), these attitudes have changed over time. In 2005, only 46% reported strong adherence towards inhumation – a traditional type of burial in the Catholic Church – and 44% expressed their openness to having the body cremated and their ashes buried in an urn. The number of people who accepted cremation increased with the density of population in the area but there was a negative correlation with age – the younger the respondents were, the fewer objections they had to cremation. People with higher religious involvement also preferred the traditional form of burial (Boguszewski, 2005). No studies have been found, however, which analyse values and beliefs responsible for making these choices.

Literature also highlights the impact of cultural change on death-related rituals. Walter (2005) explains that, with the rapid growth of population and still high death rates until the second half of the 19th century, a burial crisis was experienced by many urbanised and industrialised societies, which had to find rational and effective ways of disposing of the dead bodies. Subsequently, in some countries death registration was taken over from the Church by the state, and large out-of-town cemeteries were promoted, as well as grave re-use. Giblin and Hug (2006) also note that mourners in highly mobile countries, less connected to their families and communities, were often detached from traditional funeral customs and reliant in that aspect on funeral experts. New specialists also emerged, such as registrars, pathologists, funeral directors, or cemetery entrepreneurs and managers. Urbanisation, industrialisation, and scientific orientation in the western world often resulted in abandoning of numerous traditional customs. Due to limited understanding of their meaning, some of them became inauthentic or a hollow and rigid practice, incapable of offering genuine healing (Romanoff and Terenzio, 1998). Furthermore, a deterioration of bereavement rituals has been observed. Once they used to provide structure to the grieving and aided the process of transition into a new social status. Nowadays, they are often one-time events, which may subsequently result in insufficient grieving and inadequate resolution of grief. According to Hunter (2007) in non-agrarian, individualistic societies, public displays of sadness beyond the funeral is usually associated with "not being well" and makes others feel uncomfortable. Subsequently, professional support in the form of counselling or psychiatric intervention is likely to be offered as a substitute for a variety of coping strategies characteristic of collective societies (including the many aspects of religious coping).

When religion is involved in funerals, it becomes a potentially significant source of coping strategies. Religion is not understood merely in terms of institutions, rituals, symbols, agents, but also its functions. A popular

functional definition of religion describes it as: "whatever we as individuals do to come to grips personally with the questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are alive and that we will die" (Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis, 1993:8). It encompasses one's spirituality, life philosophy, and provides answers to questions of eschatological nature. It also mediates answers to questions, such as: "What is the meaning and purpose of my life? How should I relate to others? How do I deal with the fact that I am going to die? What should I do about my shortcomings? The psychologists of religion point to some salutary aspects of religion – for many people it is a method to find meaning by re-defining the stressor through the lens of religious beliefs, gain a sense of control and predictability, gain comfort and closeness to God or deities, intimacy and support of others (spiritual community and leaders). It also aids and motivates personal transformation or transgression (Pargament, 1997; Pargament, Koenig and Perez, 2000). Apart from that some pathogenic and pathoplastic aspects of religion can also be distinguished, which are exemplified by negative religious coping (Pargament, 1997; Pietkiewicz, 2008).

According to the Central Statistical Office (2011a), the Catholic Church is the largest religious denomination in Poland. The number of adherents has been calculated based on baptism records. Although statistics indicate that 97% of population is Catholic, it does not take into account that a number of people were baptised as infants but have not got involved in religious activities nor received formal religious socialisation. The National Census of Population and Housing, performed in 2011, should provide more information about the distribution of the faithful in rural and urban areas, but results are not available yet. Still, the influence of the Catholic tradition on values and social axioms[1] in the Polish population is apparent. Simonides (2007) notes that Poles living in rural areas often combined the teachings of the Church with folk beliefs and practices (some of which were rooted in Paganism). This type of religious syncretism seems characteristic of folk spirituality, just like the tendency to sacralise the world and integrate the harvesting (or agricultural) calendar with the calendar of religious holidays (Burszta, 1998).

Some death and bereavement rituals, according to Hunter (2007), focus on the deceased, and others on the bereaved. In the former case, rituals are performed to purify the spirit and aid its transition process from the realm of the living toward the realm of the dead. They are also aimed at pacifying and protecting the community from malicious spirits. Simonides (2007) observes that people in Polish folk culture often feared being haunted and harmed by dead people or lost souls, and engaged themselves in numerous activities to prevent this. Story-telling as a way of constructing and reconstructing

memory of the dead was part of the process which marked the completion of their earthly existence. The latter aspect of rituals (focussing on the bereaved) relates to providing social support, setting cultural obligations (eg., a dress code, isolation of mourners or restrictions of behaviours such as participating in parties, remarriage) and defining limitations on formal mourning.

Whereas some researchers restrict mourning to social, public, or ritualised responses to loss, others include all kinds of intra- and interpsychic processes associated with adaptation to loss and grief. Corr and Corr (2007) enumerate a few significant tasks of mourning, such as:

1. Accepting the reality of the loss and overcoming disbelief and denial of death.

2. Experiencing or working through the pain associated with grief. Unless the pain becomes overwhelming for the bereaved and makes them decompensate, it is regarded as something appropriate in a productive process of mourning.

3. Adjustment to a new environment where the dead person is no longer available. This requires a renegotiation of roles – identifying the ones formerly played by the deceased and developing new skills to take over some these tasks. Finally, adjustment also requires finding ways to memorialise the deceased. Simonides (2007) describes a few local customs to cherish the memory of the ancestors, which include taking care of the grave, leaving flowers and candles, as well as setting an extra place at table during Christmas.

From the psychoanalytical perspective presented by Freud (1917), mourning involves a withdrawal of the libidinal energy investment and shifting it onto other objects (ie. reinvesting in other relationships). It is argued, however, to what extent this cathectic withdrawal from an object is possible. Object relations psychology, attachment theory or self-psychology highlight that one develops inner bonds with significant others by internalising various aspects of the object. Complete relinquishment seems impossible, because significant relationships always leave some kind of imprint in an individual's mind – bonds are created and remain even when physical proximity is not available. Memories of good experiences or inflicted harm may still evoke emotional reactions after some time (even though they are likely to grow weaker), but barely ever become utterly neutral. Abundant literature on transference also shows how individual relational patterns can be activated in later life with people who come to represent the object (or a part of it). Contemporary researchers who study bereavement highlight the aspect of ongoing attachment expressed in cherishing memory of the deceased and engaging oneself in various actions to sustain a relationship with them. They regard this form of continuing bonds as important in the bereavement process

[1] The term coined by Leung et al. (2002) to describe generalised beliefs about oneself, the social, physical, and spiritual world.

(Field, Gao and Paderna, 2005; Field 2006; Klass 2006). Although Field (2006) concentrates on the internal aspect of this connection type between the living and the dead, Klass (2006) highlights it is important to analyse a wider, cultural context, as bonds also remain integrated within the family or community. As such, continuing bonds can be manifested in collective activities or customs, and shared by the group. We still know little about bonds and how to measure them, apart from observing explicit behaviours and analysing object representations revealed in individual narratives. Little do we understand phenomena such as having an unexpected, irrational, vivid memory of someone we have not seen or thought about for years, and receiving a telephone call from that person or a message about his or her sudden death. Fenwick and Fenwick (2008) provide many interesting accounts of similar events, which they label "deathbed coincidences". Such stories, often shared among community members, reveal the richness of human experience (sometimes beyond scientific understanding in a positivist sense), reflect and strengthen social axioms – common beliefs about life, the nature of the world, and spirituality – which are embedded in a given culture. In other words, one's cultural background and religious beliefs may influence the way continuing bonds are expressed (Field, 2006; Klass, 2006). Yet, such phenomena should be studied carefully – avoiding a temptation to reduce them merely to social, political, psychological or psychiatric mechanisms.

Considering the above, different parts of the dying process, post-mortem rituals and customs may address specific psychological and social needs. They also reflect specific social axioms and values embedded within a given community. This study aims to contribute to existing knowledge and provide answers to the following general questions: How do Poles relate to death? What factors affect the choice of the type of burial and accompanying rituals or customs? What meaning is ascribed to particular customs and what is their social role and psychological significance? How do religious beliefs affect the burial tradition in Poland?

Method

This study was conducted at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities by the author who is an academic teacher and researcher, as well as a psychotherapist and supervisor with clinical experience (including counselling of dying people and their families). The investigator's theoretical understanding of human behaviour is primarily influenced by his psychodynamic background and practice in this paradigm. The study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

Participants

Following ethical approval, students of the Cultural Psychology and Anthropology course were invited to take part in research on burial rituals. Participation in the study was voluntary and addressed at those who wanted to practise their skills in collecting qualitative data and deepen their understanding of cultural psychology and anthropology. Thirty-four students (seven men and 27 women) between 20 and 48 (mean age 25.5), out of 99 taking the course decided to participate (see: Table 1). The students represented populations inhabiting both rural and urban regions of Poland (mostly in the south). For further theoretical sampling additional interviews were conducted by the researcher with local community members, a priest, and medical personnel. Four men and six women between the age of 30 and 80 were interviewed (see: Table 2). They were recruited through personal contacts and the selection was based on their knowledge and field-related experience.

Data collection

The majority of qualitative data includes 34 written accounts of burial rituals in their family tradition produced by students of the Cultural Psychology and Anthropology course. Prior to data collection, students were given methodological instructions and presented with a list of open-ended questions which referred to various aspects of death, dying, and burial rituals (see: Table 3) as guidelines to help them gather necessary information via self-reflection and semi-structured interviews. During the national holiday on All Saints' Day, students were asked to collect information from their parents and grandparents and make detailed notes about deceased relatives and family burial traditions. Subsequently, they were asked to produce comprehensive accounts based on their own memories and reflections, as well as stories shared by their family members. The accounts took the form of comprehensive, chronological descriptions of the dying process and activities carried out after death. Students were asked to present raw data, without any theoretical analysis. Some of the narratives were supplemented with pictures taken during burial rituals. After having submitted their reports, students discussed their findings in class. An initial analysis of data was then performed by the author, using the grounded theory coding procedures. For further theoretical sampling and verification of emerging theories, ten additional interviews were conducted by the investigator with local community members, priests, and medical personnel. The interviews were between 15-30 minutes in length, semi-structured and focused on specific areas under investigation. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, additional materials were analysed, such as: websites of funeral companies and parishes, newspaper articles, internet blogs and forums. At a later stage, field observation was also done by the investigator, which involved participation in two lay and two Catholic funerals. Field notes were taken and coded right after the event.

Table 1 Participants characteristics - students who submitted written narratives (N=34)

Code	Gender	Age	Region type	Deceased person(s) referred to
BM01	F	21	Urban	Grandfather
DK03	F	21	Rural, urban	Aunt, uncle
DJ04	F	42	Rural, urban	Grandfather, son
GM05	F	22	Urban	Grandparents
HO06	F	20	Urban	Great-grandparents, uncle
JK07	F	21	Rural, urban	Local community members
KK09	F	20	Rural, urban	Local community members
KA10	F	21	Rural, urban	Grandfather, local community members
KK11	F	20	Rural	Local community members
LM13	F	23	Urban (small town)	Grandmother
LD14	F	21	Rural	Grandmother
LS15	F	19	Urban (small town)	Local community members
LL17	F	33	Rural	Local community members
NP19	F	20	Urban	Friends
NJ20	F	48	Urban (small town)	Local community members
PN21	F	24	Urban	Grandfather
PI22	F	20	Urban	Grandparents
RP23	F	20	Urban	Local community members
SK24	F	22	Urban	Father, grandparents
SK25	F	21	Urban (small town)	Local community members
SS26	F	22	Urban	Grandfather
SM28	F	22	Rural	Great-grandmother
SM29	F	42	Urban (small town)	Aunt
SP30	F	20	Rural (north-east Poland)	Uncle
WB32	F	44	Urban	Father
WD33	F	48	Urban	Grandmother, children
ZD34	F	27	Urban	Aunt
DJ02	M	22	Rural	Local community members
KK08	M	20	Rural, urban	Local community members
LA12	M	23	Urban	Local community members
LS16	M	36	Urban	Jewish community members
MJ18	M	23	Urban (small town)	Local community members
SG27	M	20	Urban	Grandfather
WT31	M	21	Urban	Local community members

Table2 Participants characteristics - interviewed by the author (N=10)

Code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Region type	Deceased person(s) referred to
KE36	F	48	Housewife	Rural	Grandparents, friends
PE37	F	66	Office worker	Urban	Relatives, friends
SD38	F	80	Academic teacher	Rural, urban	Relatives, friends
BE39	F	61	Teacher	Urban	Local community members
FT40	F	76	Medical doctor	Urban	Local community members
RU43	F	30	Psychologist	Urban	Local community members
TK35	M	39	Psychiatrist	Rural, urban	Mother, aunts, uncles
JP41	M	30	Psychologist	Urban	Local community members
RP42	M	35	Oncologist	Urban	Local community members
KW44	M	44	Priest	Rural, Urban	Local community members

Table 3 Sample questions given to students

What did people in your family do when someone was seriously ill and going to die?
Where and how would that person spend the last moments of his or her life?
Who would normally look after the dying relative and how?
What did people in your family do when someone had just died?
What would happen with the body?
How was a funeral arranged and by whom?
Who prepared the body for burial and how?
If there were any special beliefs or superstitions related to death or burial in your family, what were they?
How long did it take to bury a person after his or her death, and why?
What dress code would funeral participants follow if any?
What were the exact steps of the burial ritual and what was their meaning?
What happened after the funeral?
How did family members behave during and after a funeral? If there were any norms or expectations addressed to them, what were they?
If there were any special customs in your family related to death and dying, what were they?
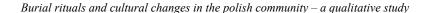
Table 4 Sample, randomly selected free nodes

catholic funeral, changes in funeral customs, contemplating death, cremating bodies, displaying the corpse, dying at home, dying in medical institutions, family responsibilities, folk beliefs and superstitions, folk culture characteristics, funeral industry, lay ceremonies, mourning customs, mourning in cities, objects in a coffin, organising village funerals, participating in funeral feast, participating in wake, preparing for death, preparing body for funeral, publishing obituaries, religious involvement, setting date for funeral, signing death certificates, stopping clocks, transporting dead bodies, using morgues

Table 5 Sample, randomly selected tree nodes

folk beliefs and superstitions: approaching dead bodies, clinical death, setting date of burial, using mirrors, wondering soul;
death type: committing suicide, dying at home, dying at night, dying in hospital, dying unexpectedly, children dying, old people dying;
funeral ceremony: religious, lay, municipal, commercial;
displaying body and wake: cities, villages

Data analysis

Data in the form of written accounts and field observation notes was analysed with NVIVO[2], using three types of the grounded theory procedures (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) originally designed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) with further modifications by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Open coding involved identifying meaningful chunks of texts and labelling them as free nodes (see: Table 4). Similarities and differences between items were also analysed to produce any emerging subcategories. As coding progressed, higher-level categories were identified and labeled with conceptual names (tree nodes) to integrate lower-level categories (free nodes) into meaningful units (see: Table 5). At a later stage, the relationships between various nodes were analysed to identify patterns and associations. Negative cases exceptions to the rule were also sought. In axial coding, phenomena were specified in terms of conditions, context, actions, and consequences. Finally, selective coding was applied which involved the analysis of interrelationships between categories at a more abstract level. The results section gives an overview of the main categories and subcategories, as well as links between them (see: Willig, 2008).

Results

The analysis of qualitative data revealed a complexity of factors affecting burial and bereavement rites in Poland. The emerging patterns and influencing variables are described in this paper. Analysing the relationship between various factors enabled hypotheses to be formulated and tested against field data.

At an early stage of analysing the codes and relationships between them, two main categories were identified which pertained to the context where death and funerals took place, namely "dying in rural areas" and "dying in the city". The former category referred to small towns and villages, inhabited by relatively homogenous communities, fairly collectivistic, and highly involved in family and religious tradition. Many accounts referred to people having extended families and living in cottages in the countryside. Most of these narratives involved a religious type of funeral organisation. The second category, on the other hand, related to more densely populated areas, where the variety of lifestyles was more diverse, people pursued many different careers, were more individualistic, mobile, and more exposed to other cultures or the effects of industrialisation and globalisation. They were more likely to live in nuclear families or lead a single life in a block of flats rather than a house. In such a context they could feel more anonymous. People in the cities also had greater access to healthcare institutions and providers of funeral services. The narra-

tives exemplified two main types of funeral organisation in urban areas, namely municipal and commercial, both of which could take the form of a religious or lay ceremony. The majority of accounts referred to people affiliated with Catholicism, which is the largest denomination in Poland. A few examples also described burial rituals in the Jewish, Pentecostal, and Evangelican-Lutheran communities.

How Poles view death

Polish folk culture attributed a different meaning to death as compared to views shared by members of modern society. Throughout their lives, season by season, the inhabitants of rural areas observed their fields, orchards, and forests, contemplating impermanence. They also held a strong sense of being part of a community and faith in life after death. Whenever someone died, it would become even more evident to them that one day they will die too. They acknowledged death as something natural and to be expected, especially in old age. For this reason, death was often part of a daily discourse.

> My parents and grandparents mentioned death on various occasions. They reminded us that we could enjoy health, by the grace of God, but there would come a time for all us to depart. The older they grew, the more often they touched upon that topic as if they were getting ready for that journey to the other side. They instructed us what we should do, once they are gone. They talked about it as if it were something ordinary. (KE36)

A contemporary perception of death, especially in towns and cities, differs from how rural culture viewed it. According to respondents and field observation, in our modern society it has become rationalised or rejected as a taboo topic, something dirty, unwanted, and terrifying. Whereas respondents talked about a growing movement in healthcare to promote a humanistic approach towards death and dying, satisfy the needs of paliative patients, and help them experience "decent" death, irrespective of their social status, it is still seen as a failure by doctors working in the biomedical paradigm. Even when there is no hope of recovery, dramatic actions are often taken to prolong life (and often patient's agony). In many cases, a patient's life becomes artificially sustained and it is hard to accept that one had no control over life and death.

> My uncle's body was exhausted by cancer. He could not eat or drink and was half conscious. They gave him morphine to reduce pain and fed him intravenously. I knew he was ready to die and suggested to the doctor from the home hospice that perhaps we should stop artificial nourishing. She said it would kill him and that he should die of cancer and not starvation. (JP41)

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[2] NVIVO - software for administration and analysis of qualitative data

Respondents also stressed that medicalised and sterile death, characteristic of the urban, developed, and individualistic society, often involved dying alone in a hospital or hospice unit – away from home and accompanied by nurses and sounds produced by medical equipment, rather than close relatives. According to field data, modern Poles often pretend that death does not concern them; thoughts about it are disturbing, and the topic is likely to be avoided in everyday communication.

I think we often ridicule death or make jokes about it. I personally feel sort of emotionally separate from it and would rather concentrate on youth and beautiful bodies. I think most of us associate death with a computer war game, a thriller on TV, a short report about thousands of earthquake victims, a colourful Halloween pumpkin. I try to avoid visiting cemeteries or taking part in funerals, as it reminds me that we are all powerless in the face of death. (KK09)

It is especially uncommon for young people to contemplate death. Recurring thoughts about it are often associated with clinical problems (for example, symptoms of depression, personality disorders) and arouse suspicion that psychological or psychiatric intervention may be necessary.

Whereas in rural areas individual death was a collective event for the whole village, in urban areas it usually involved only small groups of people (such as family and friends of the deceased) and – unless a famous person has died – a discreet funeral which would not disturb anyone.

Attitudes towards death were often influenced by religious or spiritual beliefs. Respondents observed that people involved in some kind of spiritual practice were able to face loss of someone close, or their own death, in a more relaxed way. Faith in some kind of continuous existence, support from priests or parish members provided hope, strength, and solace. Religious beliefs also helped them find meaning in challenging situations and a sense of control. They often addressed a Higher Power for support (e.g., prayed to Jesus, Virgin Mary or the archangels). There were also individuals who received a degree of formal or informal religious socialisation but were not affiliated with any church and expressed their spirituality in an autonomous, private way. Nevertheless, they often referred to sacrum when approaching death and believed in some form of afterlife (existence in another dimension or becoming part of nature). Some narratives also referred to individuals who were not able to come to terms with the fact that life was impermanent; these people experienced tension and were likely to avoid talking about death matters.

I have a friend who is a professor in chemistry. Science is her religion. She thinks there is nothing after she dies – a black hole or void. She perceives most experiences and feelings in terms of brain function. Whatever matters to her is here and now, although she cannot stop thinking that she has less and less time left. She was recently diagnosed with cancer and she is truly terrified. Everything seems meaningless to her, even the work she valued so much. (RP42)

How Poles perceived death apparently affected the way they prepared for it. The latter aspect was identified as a separate category analysed during this study.

Preparing for death

Different ways of preparation for death were reported by the respondents. In the past, wealthy landlords and peasants were buried in different places. People used to book or buy places in cemeteries. This is still practised by some people in both rural and urban areas.

Elderly people in rural areas were aware that the day will come when they die, so they booked a place in a local cemetery where their body could be buried after death. This is less common in cities, but I heard a story of someone who bought a tomb for his daughter as a wedding gift. I think it was so weird! I also saw reserved grave pits with a label, including a name and the date of birth on it only. (KK11)

In rural areas, preparation may have also involved ordering and storing of a coffin for oneself, as well as a special, elegant outfit – usually a shirt, suit, or dress they wore for their wedding or other special occasions. Village folk often kept these items in the attic. The casket might be used to store corn or similar things. Contemporarily, however, it is uncommon to keep a coffin at home.

Women would sometimes lie in the coffin to see how they would look when they die. I think this can be associated somehow with common stories about vampires. (SD38)

Village folk made these preparations to relieve their families and neighbours of additional costs or to avoid being buried at the expense of the parish, which would indicate utmost poverty. It was also to remind one about the futility and vanity of earthly life. Death was often discussed openly, even in the presence of small children. If someone sensed their own approaching death, they often assembled relatives and gave instructions about how they wished to be buried. They often tried to appease conflicts between people or shared some pieces of wisdom with their families. Folk culture equipped people with specific cognitive and behavioural patterns associated with death, so people knew what to do when an old man was dying or how to approach the death of a child.

My grandmother lived in her village till an advanced age. One day she said to the family: "Bring me the blessed candle for I will die tonight." Everyone thought that grandma was being silly but she insisted that we do so. She put on her nicest dress, lied down in her bed ... and she died. (TK35)

Field observation and interview data gathered in urban areas show that, despite a general reluctance to think and talk about death, people wondered from time to time what would happen to them after death. They imagined details of a burial ceremony and thought about grief experienced by the mourners. Some reported feeling moved by the thought that relatives and friends acknowledged a great loss or experienced remorse, others identified with the pain of the mourners, and still others imagined a very small funeral, felt unimportant and forgotten.

Most people referred to in the narratives preferred to die at home, surrounded by family. Even in urban areas, patients would often be taken home from hospital to die in a familiar setting, surrounded by people they loved. Goodbyes were said and, having symbolically broken ties with the living, religious people often asked for a priest, invoked God's mercy, made confession and asked for redemption, and peaceful death. The family would assist with prayers.

If the dying person was strong enough, he or she would sing religious songs together with the gathering. If still conscious, the family would tell him or her about the funeral he or she would have. (KK09)
Family were summoned to the death-bed to pray, to help the dying person. They would light a special candle, put it in his or her hands and send for a priest who would give the last sacrament. (SD38)

It was common in the past to call upon neighbours and friends, and have one's last will written down and signed by everyone. Nowadays, this is done much earlier, in the presence of a notary. This aspect of preparation for the upcoming death was barely mentioned in students' narratives.

Assisting the dying person was a chance to come to terms with him or her and to prepare oneself for the upcoming loss. In Catholic families, a priest was invited to visit and perform the anointing of the sick. People usually started to grieve at this stage, anticipating the forthcoming loss. It is a very significant process, especially when people manage to resolve old issues, say meaningful things that had not been expressed earlier, ask for forgiveness and give blessing. There is often no chance for that in cases of unexpected death (by accident, suicide, homicide, or sudden collapse of one's health). Some respondents reported feeling bad for

not assisting their beloved ones during death, especially if they were enjoying themselves (such as at a party or on holiday) at that time. On the other hand, some people said that being present during someone's death was scary and they did not know how to behave.

Special customs before death

In rural areas, additional customs were performed in cases of prolonged agony. The family would think out loud what could be done to help the dying person depart from his or her body. It was expected that he or she would communicate what the obstacle was with the head, eye, hand, or some other movement. Different interpretations were offered regarding why the person refrained from dying – he or she may be awaiting some dear relative to come and say goodbye, or wish to receive forgiveness from someone who harboured grief towards the sufferer. However, if agony still persisted for no apparent reason, other folk rituals may be performed. Some of them related to the teaching of the Church, others were more magical. Such customs belong to the past as there is no evidence they are still practised.

A cushion would be removed from under the dying person's head (especially if it was made of chicken feathers) and a blessed candle[3] was lit again. It was believed that something must have been forgotten during the first act of lighting it. If this did not work, the dying person would be laid on the ground on a hard straw mattress or directly on the floor sprinkled with sand. Silence was kept, as people thought that loud talk, screaming or laughter might prevent the person from dying. Village people believed that a soul which is suspended between life and death can turn into a vampire or a demon. It was thus important to make sure that the person was really dead. (SD38)

Some respondents also reported censing the body with blessed herbs and sprinkling it with holy water. When the sufferer finally showed signs of death, a mirror was held close to the mouth to check if breathing had really stopped or if steam appeared on the surface. Following death, numerous symbolic activities were performed in rural areas, which are rather uncommon in urban areas. These post-mortem rites included opening and closing of doors and windows, covering windows and mirrors with cloth, and stopping clocks. First, people would open doors and windows for a short while to help the soul leave the body. However, it was important to shut them again after a moment because the soul could come back and cause threat or scare inmates. According to folk beliefs this might happen if the deceased had unsettled accounts with anyone, unpaid debts, or had harmed someone and not been

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[3] A candle which helped a person die would later be hidden well in the house. Folk people believed it offered protection from thieves.

forgiven. These rites are likely to disappear as more and more people die in medical institutions and/or their bodies are removed to a local morgue soon after death.

> All doors and windows were opened, so that the soul could leave the dead body. When someone has died, his or her soul still wanders around the room. After my grandmother passed away, the floor still creaked in her room, as if she were walking. She had her favourite plant and a closet which was always supposed to be open when she was alive. The day after she died, we found the plant in another place and the closet door shut, even though no one in the family had touched it. KE36

Windows were also covered with cloth to prevent sunlight coming in. A dark, cool room slowed body decay.

Numerous beliefs about how death of one person in a family can lead to another were also reported, and people took various precautions.

> Eyes and mouth of the deceased person are kept shut, so that he does not pull someone with him. If the eyes of the dead person opened and he looked at you, you would soon die as well. (KK09)
> We also cover mirrors with cloth. People believe that the image of the dead person may appear in a mirror and take you with them. (KE36)

Actions were performed to symbolise that the dead person no longer belonged to the earthly realm (his or her time has ceased).

> Watches were stopped at the time of death and kept off while the dead body remained home. Sometimes, however, the clock would stop working by itself. (DJ02)

Funeral organisation

According to field data, most village funerals are performed by the Church due to lack of alternatives (lay ministers). Cemeteries are often owned by the Church and local morgues may sometimes be available. In cities, all deaths must be registered in a municipal unit for funeral organisation which owns most cemeteries, and families can choose between municipal or commercial organisations. In the former case, burial is administered and/or organised by the municipal unit for funeral organisation – the owner of most urban cemeteries. Administration involves registration, morgue, transportation of the body, a grave, and undertaker services. To save money, families can handle responsibilities such as finding someone to conduct the ceremony, publishing obituaries, or taking care of the aesthetic aspects of burial (flowers, music, etc) by themselves or they can order such services from the municipal unit. The commercial type of funeral organisation involves hiring a private company to perform the above actions, including formalities at the municipal unit. Additionally, some funeral homes provide their own venue to welcome funeral participants and perform the ceremony (instead of using chapels located at cemeteries and owned by the municipality). Private companies usually have a wider repertoire of services compared to their municipal competitor. Using higher qualities of specialised services obviously requires a larger budget. Whether burials are handled by the municipal unit for funeral organisation or a private company, the family can choose between a religious or lay ceremony.

Death announcement

In villages, people used to hear about a death in their community when a special bell was rung in a chapel.

> When the sound of this bell was heard, everyone removed their hats, inclined their heads, made a sign of the holy cross and said: "Give him, my Lord, eternal rest and let perpetual light shine on him forever. Amen." (SD38)

In some rural areas, if a landowner died it was customary for the family to announce the sad news in ritualistic form to the whole estate: the horses, cows, pigs, chickens, orchards and even single trees. The family would visit them one by one, saying: "I bring you sad news. Your landlord departed from this world to God. Amen." These customs were commonly performed in the past and it is not clear how often they are practised nowadays.

In urban areas, death is traditionally announced with an obituary in local papers, as well as notices left on information boards, trees and bus stops in the area where the deceased had lived. Close friends are usually informed about death by word of mouth. It is also common for the deceased's employers and/or work colleagues to publish official condolences to the family in newspapers.

Preparation and display of the corpse

Cleaning and dressing the body are the first actions of preparation for a funeral. In rural areas, these are usually performed by close family members. Sometimes another community member with relevant experience was asked for help.

> I prepared three bodies for funeral by myself – my grandmother's, my father's, and my brother's. It was a terrible experience I remember. I felt such despair. I was using water, soap and a cotton cloth to clean them. Some people would use vinegar or spirit, but I never did. I was once offered 500 pln [ca. €125] to prepare someone's corpse for burial but I refused. It evoked too much pain. (KE36)

In some villages, in the past, these actions were not performed by family members specifically to indicate that the dead man no longer belonged to the family.

In cities, where comprehensive funeral services have become widely available, professionals (either municipal or private) are often commissioned to take over these duties from the family.

> Nowadays, we often pay funeral companies to prepare the body for funeral. Only ten years ago, these actions would rather be performed by family members. (KK08)
> I hummed his favourite songs to my son, removed the peripheral venous catheter and gastrostomy, cleaned my child and dressed him in clean clothes. On the day of his burial, his body was properly dressed by the workers of the funeral house. (DJ04)

According to the regulations, if death occurs in a medical institution, the hospital personnel or someone designated by the hospital rules is obliged to clean, dress, and hand the body to a person entitled to bury it, ensuring that the body of the deceased is handled with decency and respect. No fee is charged for that. However, these actions do not include preparation of the corpse for burial. A funeral home may charge extra for post-mortem cosmetics (for protection against leaking of the body openings) but even though they often rent mortuary space from hospitals, they are not allowed to provide such services on its premises. These regulations are often neglected and violated.

When death was caused by murder, suicide or its reasons were uncertain, an autopsy was performed. After the procedure, the same rules apply as described above.

> He died at 7.30pm on Sunday. Next day his body was transported to the morgue where they performed an autopsy, dressed the body and prepared for funeral. (PN21)

Practices in the Polish funeral industry (known for being highly corrupt) has led to many scandals and crimes, such as: emergency unit personnel trading information about acute conditions to funeral home directors whose transportation units arrived at the deceased's home right after the ambulance. At some hospitals, employees of the funeral industry literally fought for corpses.

> My grandfather's body was taken somewhere and no one knew where it was. After some time, it turned out that it was at a funeral company, even though we had not decided who would take care of his burial. My mother was furious and desperate, so she recovered grandpa's body and handed it to another firm. (JK07)

There were interesting descriptions of how families managed the technical aspects of preparing a body for funeral, especially in rural areas where professional funeral services were not available or were underutilised. People used no special technology for that purpose. Bodies were often cleaned with vinegar, spirit, or water with soap. Apart from covering the windows with cloth to produce shade and lower temperatures, other techniques were used to postpone the body's decay.

> You had to prepare the corpse for burial by cleaning and dressing it. Clothes were usually put on the day before the funeral. In summertime, they would lie the body on a bed sheet sprinkled with sand. People did this to prevent it from swelling up during thunderstorms. Village people believed that you should provide the person with best possible care after death, otherwise he or she would haunt the family in their dreams. For this reason, any wishes or last will the person made had to be respected. (KK11)
> The corpse changes as a result of summer thunderstorms; the face and hands swell up. It happened sometimes, especially when it was kept at home, that the body would burst, spreading poison around the room. We called this "poison". Sometimes they did special injections to prevent that. Nuns specialised in that. (KE36)

Numerous respondents pointed to a specific custom of talking affectionately to the dead person while dressing him or her; this was believed to soften the rigid body.

> People tried to dress the body right after death before it gets stiff. If it did, however, they would talk to the deceased person in a soft, loving manner, asking for help in the process. They would say: "OK, Jimmy, give me your hand. Yes, you are so helpful. Now, turn around." They believed it really affected the body. (SK25)

Once the body was clean, it was dressed. In many cases, especially in villages, people choose their funeral outfit before they die. In other cases, the family select clean, elegant clothes. A specific, culture bound dress code applied in terms of colours. Dark shades (dark blue or black) are used for old people. Younger people were dressed in wedding clothes (to compensate for premature death). A myrtle wreath and veil is put on a girl's head. Children, on the other hand, are dressed in white clothes and covered with religious pictures.

> It is customary for all children who visit a small friend or a baby who died to bring a holy picture with sacred motives in it, and place it on the dead child's body. (SD38)

According to field observation, women in urban areas were buried in clothes of different colours and men usually wear black, dark or grey suits. Not so much attention is paid to the shades, as long as their outfit is elegant and clean. One of the respondents rationalised it in the following way:

> She was wearing a light-coloured shingle. We believe that this colour symbolises a new life after death. (NP19)

In folk culture, shoes were also considered an important part of the dead person's outfit, as people believed that one could not enter heaven barefooted. On the other hand, some respondents reported that it was customary in some areas to use shoes with holes in them, to prevent the deceased person from coming back. This custom is now lost.

Eyelids of the dead man had to be closed tight. Otherwise, people believed that one look of a dead person might lead to someone's death.

> Sometimes, they would tie up the chin with a bandage and put coins on the dead person's eyes to make sure that mouth and eye-lids remain closed. If he looked at you, he might choose you and pull you back with him. (DJ02)

Hands clasped together with a rosary (symbolising faith and religious affiliation) wrapped around them, and a prayer book, would customarily rest on the stomach. A coin might also be put into a pocket. This was either interpreted in terms of payment for the person's hard work or providing him or her with an offering to redeem their sins.

The body, prepared in this way, was placed on a bed or in an open coffin, supported on stools in the middle of the room. Various items were also put inside the coffin. These included some personal belongings, objects of everyday use or things the dead person had been attached to, such as glasses, a pipe, a handkerchief, cotton thread. It was also common in rural areas to attach a small bottle of holy water, which was believed necessary on the Final Judgement day to ward off evil spirits that might lure the soul to hell. Villagers people put a bag with herbs blessed during Pentecost under the head of the deceased. Consecrated candles were placed and lit at the head of the coffin as well.

> My grandma said: "Bring me the candles before I die. It will be dark there. Candlelight will dispel the shadows and show me the right path." (TK35)

In many rural areas, the body was displayed in this way for public display, for family and friends to come and say goodbye. It was often kept at home. In recent years, however, people are expected to use local morgues which have become more and more available in small towns.

> The body of my aunt was kept at home for three days until burial. People from the Cold Storage came to change the cooling substrate. The coffin with the body lay in the central place of a living room. (ZD34)
> In our town nowadays, corpses are stored in a morgue. Ten years ago, we collected money for a special refrigerator which is kept in a room next to the chapel. The priest did not approve of bodies being kept at home for sanitary reasons. Because of where bodies are now stored, there are no more funeral processions through the whole village. (KE36)

In urban areas, responsibilities which were traditionally carried out by the family are now carried out by funeral professionals, and keeping the body at home has not been reported. Instead bodies are stored in morgues owned by private companies or the municipal unit for funeral organisation. This has also affected the traditional form of wake at the bedside or at the coffin of the deceased relative. Respondents reported many practical reasons for not keeping corpses at home, mainly attributed to different living conditions (for example, it would be difficult to transport a body in a coffin through a staircase in a block of flats). Once stored in a morgue, a coffin is then transported to a local chapel on the day of the funeral and the body is displayed to the public. If it were deformed, however, due to accident or an autopsy, the family might order to keep the coffin closed. Sometimes, despite keeping the body in a morgue, family and neighbours still meet at home to make prayers. In cities, however, this is very rare.

> We planned the burial to take place a few days later. In the meantime, the body was prepared and stored by a funeral company in a morgue adjacent to the Church. Still, we put a cross and a holy picture in the house. We also brought a few kneelers. The family, friends, and everyone who wanted to join the prayers would come at six o'clock. (MJ18)
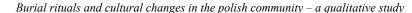
In folk culture, certain beliefs specified where one should stand or who should not approach the coffin. Informants who described death rituals in rural areas reported:

> It is interesting that pregnant women were forbidden to come near the dead body. The same applied to sowers. It was believed that contact with death had a negative effect on fertility. (KK09)
> Village people believed that it was better to stand at the feet of the dead body and not by his or her side. Otherwise, the dead might choose you and wish to take you with him or her. (SD38)

Meanings ascribed to burial dates

It was customary to arrange funerals three days after death. This period depended on organisational factors,

weather conditions, and causes of death. For example, if death was caused by homicide, an autopsy would be required so the burial might take place after a week. Burials were also postponed if they conflicted with other holidays. In summertime, people also tried to perform burials sooner than in winter to prevent the body from decay. There were different conceptualisations associated with funeral time arrangement. Some respondents explained that in terms of religious beliefs:

> It was customary to bury people three days after they died. This was associated with the teachings about the resurrection of the Christ three days after lying in a grave. (SM29)

However, an alternative and very practical reason was also reported by numerous respondents. Before it became required, after World War I, for doctors to officially certify deaths, people felt uncertain about interpreting the symptoms of it. There were narratives about people who fell into comas and were subsequently buried alive; for example women who fainted during childbirth and were thought to be dead, or young brides who died during a wedding ceremony. Such stories evoked much fear.

> We often heard stories about some particular disease which caused clinical death, often mistaken for biological death. A person would wake up after three days. It happened, once, that a young girl was buried too soon. A gravedigger who stayed at the cemetery to finish his work heard someone groaning under the earth. He was terrified and thought the girl's spirit was calling him from the world of the dead. The priest ordered the coffin to be dug out immediately, but it was too late. A witness said she had suffocated. When they opened the coffin her nails were broken. She apparently scratched herself and pulled out her hair. Since that, they always made sure that at least three days would pass before funeral is performed. This is to make sure your relative does not wake up. (KK11)
> The wake was a chance to perform prayers but it also provided the opportunity to watch the body carefully and avoid burying it alive. If it moved, family and neighbours would notice. (LM13)

Another popular superstition was reported by many respondents with reference to burial settings, namely a belief that if a deceased person lies unburied on Sunday, he or she will take someone from the family to the land of the dead.

> People always had a strong fear of keeping a dead body at home over Sunday. Even those who said they did not believe in superstitions were afraid that this might cause another death in the family in the same

year. To avoid such a situation, they might arrange an earlier funeral – on the second day following death for instance. (WD33)

The burial date and time is usually arranged with the cemetery owner – the Church or the municipal unit for funeral organisation. In urban areas, most burial grounds belong to the latter institution.

The wake

The wake was an integral part of death rituals. In villages, where dead bodies were kept at home, people gathered at the bedside or at the coffin to pray for the soul of the deceased. Collectively performed prayers were a valuable religious coping strategy – it helped control one's emotions and feelings, provided social support and feelings of closeness to community members and/or God.

> In some rural areas, a special singer of religious songs was invited to lead prayers. This person was usually familiar with traditional funeral songs. The repertoire would be different, depending on which village the singer came from. It was also chosen according to the age of the dying person's (there were different songs for elderly people and small children) gender, social status, and cause of death (whether sudden or not). Everyone knew these songs and prayers by heart. After this, the whole gathering was offered food and drink (including alcoholic). On the day before the funeral, family alone would participate in wake. (SD38)

Since storing corpses at home is prohibited in cities and is growing less frequent in villages where special facilities designed for that purpose became available, this tradition is also likely to fade away. In some religious families, a wake is still performed at home without the presence of the dead body. In cities, where lifestyle has become more individualistic, religious people prefer to visit a church and pray for the deceased individually.

Saying goodbye

In villages, family and friends often gathered at home again on the day of the burial to say goodbye to the dead person (if the body was stored there). Nowadays, people usually do that in a chapel just before the funeral ceremony. It has been customary, both in rural and urban areas, to touch or kiss the body to say goodbye.

> We have a custom in our village to touch the tips of the dead person's feet (shoes) for farewell. People believe it will prevent the dead man from scaring you, if he comes in your sleep. (KE36)
> All family members approached the coffin to make their last goodbye. Some would touch the dead man's hand with their hand and others might kiss him or her

on a cheek or forehead. I never liked that and I still remember that unpleasant feeling of my grandpa's cold body when I kissed him. (PI22)

Closing and departure of the coffin

When it was common to keep the dead body at home in village areas, people used to close the coffin and take it out of the chamber in a ritualistic way. It was customary to carry a coffin with a body, feet first, and to hit the coffin against the threshold of the house three times as a symbolic farewell of the landlord or the landlady with the family and the farm. The coffin was then carried round the farm as a last goodbye and then taken to a local chapel or church. Funeral processions often still go through the whole village.

People stopped at the border of the village or at a local chapel to pray for the soul of the dead man. One of the elderly landlords would speak to the folk on behalf of the deceased, asking to forgive any insults that may have been made to anyone. (KK09)

The coffin was transported by a carriage or on men's shoulders. In the first case, when the funeral was over, the driver returned home and turned the cart wheels up. Villagers also turned stools and chairs upside-down once the coffin was removed from the house. It was believed to prevent the soul from staying at home.

No such rituals have been reported in cities or small towns, where preparation of the body, its storage in a morgue, and transportation to a chapel is frequently handled by a funeral company.

The body is taken by a funeral company which you can hire. It is kept in a special fridge in their premises. They also take care of the cosmetics and dressing up. Then, they would transport the dead man directly to a chapel near the church (never home), where the holy mass would be carried out for his or her soul. (KK08)

If a Catholic funeral were performed in a village, a priest might accompany the procession from home to the chapel or wait for everyone at the church gate.

A funeral procession was formed which accompanied the body on its way to the chapel. People prayed on their way or sang funeral songs. When they approached the church, bells would start ringing and the dead man would be welcomed by the priest with his altar servers. (SM29)

Not everyone has been allowed to have a full Catholic funeral, though. Special rules applied to the followers of other faiths, non-believers, anabaptised children, or individuals who committed suicide.

People who committed suicide and children who have not been baptised were buried in a, so called, unconsecrated cemetery situated by a fence, away from the rest of the graves and people who have not been buried in sin. No holy masses were held for them and it was forbidden for their bodies to enter the church. All other ceremonies were kept to a minimum. When these people died, bells were not rung, nor notices about the funeral put on the message board owned by the church. (DJ02)
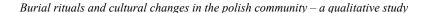
In recent years, however, the attitude towards suicidal death and anabaptised children has changed. As a sign of respect for the dead and to help the family deal with an additional burden associated with the type of death, a simplified (or sometimes full) ceremony is likely to be performed. According to Catholic Church law, an ordinary may allow for a Catholic funeral of children whose parents intended to baptise them, but who died before it was done. This takes into consideration the good of the parents, demonstrating sensitivity and tact. Instead of aspersion[4], commonly performed in the past (despite there being no canonical, nor liturgical reasons for it), a special type of ritual for anabaptised children is now recommended. A specific kind of funeral mass may also be performed on parent's demand, where priests are dressed in white vestments (liturgical clothing).

An ordinary can also agree to admit baptised Non-Catholics if no other minister is available, and the dead person had not opposed that. Church representatives also hold that notorious apostates, heretics, and schismatics, individuals who chose cremation for motives conflicting with the Christian faith, as well as individuals who openly committed sins and whose funeral would cause "a public scandal among people of faith" should be deprived of the privilege of a Catholic burial. According to the respondents, the attitude of Church ministers was sometimes influenced by their personal relationships with the family of the dead person or offerings that were made by them.

Jasmine got pregnant and had difficulties in her family. She hanged herself in a hallway of the block of flats. After an autopsy, her body was cremated and she had a normal burial. The ceremony was beautiful, with a church choir singing, and there were many people present. She had a traditional funeral with a mass performed by a priest who was a friend of the family. (LM13)
My father did not practise, nor attend confession. He often criticised the Church. When he died, I came to the

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[4] In a religious context, aspersion refers to the act of sprinkling with water, especially holy water.

priest with an envelope. He only asked: "How much do you have there?" I told him I had 600 PLN [€150], which was OK for him. If it were less, he would loiter. There was also a man in our village who hanged himself, which is a great sin. The priest had to bury him, as there were no funeral homes in this area. He could have refused taking him to the church and might order that the body be transported from the morgue, directly to the cemetery where the ceremony would be held. However, the family lived in Germany and paid in Deutsch marks. It was a lot then. (KE36)

A ceremony at the chapel and the cemetery

A church or a chapel ceremony is usually brief. The priest makes a speech in which he refers to the principles of faith, consoles mourning relatives and friends, and offers prayers for the deceased. In some cases the coffin is open and in others it remains closed. One of the respondents also reported:

In the past there were no obituaries. Instead, a priest would inform the whole community about upcoming funerals after daily worships. The whole community was expected to participate in the event, to support the family and friends. It was meant to remind the relatives that they were not alone. Controlling one's pain and sorrow was a normative behaviour, especially for men, who were expected to be tough. (SD38)

In the case of lay funerals, the ceremony is led by the state official or a person hired for that purpose. He or she greets the gathering and makes a speech. Some poetry or philosophical thoughts might also be shared. Family and friends can then say goodbye to the dead relative before the coffin is closed (if it were kept open). Classical music might be played live, and in some cases a choir sings, if the family could afford that. Otherwise, tape recordings would be used. It is a modern tradition and adds to the pathos of the whole event.

Following the liturgy or the ceremony, the coffin is escorted to the graveyard by a procession. There is a certain hierarchy to this pageant: a boy or a man holding a cross stands at the front and is followed by a priest, the hearse (or men carrying the coffin on their shoulders), and then the closest family, remote relatives, finally friends, neighbours, and those who knew the deceased and wanted to assist them in that 'last journey'. Another informant referred to the beliefs associated with the soul:

People believed that the soul of the dead man returns to the body during the holy mass. Men who carried coffins on their shoulders often claimed it was heavier on the way from the chapel to the graveyard than when they carried it into the chapel. (BM01)

Once the procession reaches the grave (sometimes a simple pit dug in soil, or decorated with a cloth or a walled grave) another short liturgy is performed by the priest. During lay funerals, the master of the ceremony might share some memories associated with the dead person and do some recitation. In the past, before the coffin was lowered into the grave, a representative of the family would thank everyone for coming and – on behalf of the dead person – ask again for forgiveness and prayer. Nowadays, this is often done by the priest or the master of the ceremony. The Lord's Prayer is often performed at the end of Catholic funerals, in accordance with the wishes of the deceased and closest family. Once the coffin is in its grave, the leader of the ceremony throws a clod of earth onto it, saying: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." According to a respondent, people believe this helps the soul leave the body. Many also reported strong negative feelings associated with the hollow sound of the earth hitting the lid of the coffin. Gravediggers then fill in the pit with earth or cover it with cement boards, and flowers and candles are placed on top. At this point condolences might be shared and the whole gathering usually dismissed. If a grave stone were ordered, it is often installed days later. The style of the grave usually depends on the social and financial status of the family.

Nowadays, most people have gravestones. Some of them are quite elaborate. In the past, if you were poor, they would fill the grave with earth and cover it with chestnuts, branches, or leaves. Sometimes they put flowers picked in a meadow. They also used standard, plain candles, which they cut in the middle to produce more of them. Some made decorations of white tissues. (DJ02)

Meanings ascribed to cremation

Cremation is a relatively new burial solution in Poland. There was a significant resistance towards it and only a few crematoria have been built. This is partially associated with a strong Catholic background in Poland as well as the country's history. For many years, clergy discouraged people from choosing cremation. Polish Episcopate strongly opposed the practice of performing funerals after cremation and treating the ashes as an equivalent of the body and a coffin. Nowadays, it is accepted more often, on condition it was not done for reasons conflicting with Christian teachings. Church representatives are concerned that it would undermine the faith in the resurrection of the body.

We should remind our community about the primacy of traditional burials. We prefer that form because it expresses our faith in resurrection more fully. It is also a way to give homage to the body of the dead person. It is the body and not the ashes that is worshipped during the liturgy. (KW44)

Cremation as a way of disposal of a human body was also reported to evoke negative connotations, especially among the older generation. This was attributed to the tragedy of people exterminated in concentration camps built in Poland by the Nazis during World War II. A few respondents touched upon that aspect.

In our family, cremating a dead person would not be accepted. This is certainly due to our Jewish ancestry and the history of the Holocaust, where millions of Jews were killed and burnt in the Nazi concentration camps. (LS16)

Still, some people prefer cremation to traditional forms. They explain their choices in terms of aesthetic preferences, ecology and environmental architecture (lack of area for spacious cemeteries), or their ability to go beyond literal understanding of religious scriptures, to more symbolic. This may be influenced by extensive cultural diffusion and secularisation movements.

Despite our Catholic background, my parents want to be cremated after they die. My father, contrary to the recommendation of the Church, wants half of his ashes to be scattered in the mountains and the other half placed in a family tomb. (PI22)

The funeral feast

The funeral feast was reported as a psychologically and socially significant part of funeral rites which helped coping with loss. The family usually organised it at home, where relatives and neighbours brought food and drinks to celebrate and commemorate the dead person.

In villages, the funeral feast was often held in the same chamber where the coffin with the body was kept and where the wake took place. (WD33)

In urban areas, it is often held in restaurants which specialise in this domain. The funeral feast was a symbolic transgression from deep sorrow to normal life; a unique apotheosis of life. An empty seat was normally kept for the invisible soul of the dead person (a similar custom is held on Christmas Eves). People are invited on behalf of the dead person, to express gratitude for help and support, as well as for attending the funeral. Memories of the dead, funny stories and his or her good qualities were discussed among banqueters.

It is a good opportunity for family reunion, especially when family members have not seen one another for a long time, due to distance or lack of time. They usually talk about the dead relative and recall good moments spent together. It is inappropriate to talk ill of the dead, because he or she could not defend themself. People

also believed it was better not to risk upsetting the deceased. (WT31)

Unlike in the cities, where condolences were made at the end of the funeral, villagers usually expressed their sympathy with the family during the funeral feast, which was often held in a local shed. Everyone was invited to join in, including the priest. (KK08)

When the gathering came to an end, people were sometimes reminded about the mass in memory of deceased and the family on the following day. This ceremony was repeated after a month and after a year (terminating the traditional mourning period). Some families also order a series of liturgies, held daily for a month, or a custom called 'memories'.

Memories in the church involve paying the priest for reading the name of the deceased between the prayers during the holy mass. The annual cost of memories is about €10, nowadays. (BM91)
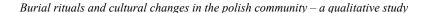
Memory of the dead is also celebrated on All Saints Days, a holiday called "Zaduszki" (meaning "for the souls") on November 2nd, as well as Christmas Eves. People believed that souls of those who died would gather in churches at midnight on Zaduszki day, to participate in the holy mass. They would then visit their former homes. It was thus important to keep the gate, windows, and doors open. One should not fear them, but pray for them instead.

On November 2nd my family always celebrates the memory of our deceased relatives. A preparation for that is made a week before this holiday. We clean and decorate graves, gather at the cemetery and light candles. Their light has a particular meaning – symbolising that we remember them and keep them in our hearts. (LL17)

It is a time of reflection for Christians. We put flowers on the graves and participate in masses and worship. According to Catholic tradition, All Saints Day is to celebrate the memory of those who reached salvation and enjoy eternal life. Zaduszki, on the other hand, commemorates those who repent for their sins in purgatory and await salvation. The whole community prays for that. (NJ20)

On Christmas Eve people often visit the cemetery as well. They always leave an empty chair and plate at table, as if waiting for those who were gone and so that no one is scared about their arrival.

According to folk tradition, the living and the dead had a unique contact. The deceased would visit the living, try to repair unfinished business, and guard their loved ones. They would give them instructions

about taking care of the household and remind them to attend confession and behave properly to avoid terrible suffering. (SD38)

Customs related to All Saints Day or Zaduszki are still cherished in religious families in most areas. They are also adopted by some non-religious families, who may still celebrate these holidays alongside Christmas Eve or Easter, treating them as part of the culture they live in, for the sake of following tradition without ascribing any particular meaning to them.

Mourning customs

In Poland, it is generally expected to show mourning by wearing black clothes or an item symbolising it, as well as abstaining from singing, dancing, participating in parties, and weddings. It is a culturally sanctioned way to express one's sorrow, longing, and other difficult emotions. This period is thought to be appropriate for contemplation, reflecting upon life values, and dealing with grief.

Your partner and children should be in mourning for a year when you die. It is six months for grandchildren or your mother- and father-in-law. If your brother or sister dies, you are expected to show mourning for three months. You can express that by wearing black, or stitching a black velvet ribbon on the collar or the right sleeve of a jacket or a coat. (WB32)

People in rural areas seem to be more attached to the custom of wearing black, whereas the expression of mourning in urban places is more diversified and there is less social pressure to expose it.

It is customary for funeral-goers to wear mourning clothes. Close relatives would continue to wear black for a year. When my father died, I only did that for a month, because everyone asked me about it and it caused additional pain. (SK24)
I did not wear black clothes after my mother died. She did not want that because she thought it would have a bad effect on my own health and the baby I was carrying. The same applied to my younger sister. Mom thought that a teenager should not get depressed in this way. My observations are that people scarcely wear mourning clothes, nowadays. (NJ20)

Although mourners try to avoid participating in events of public amusement, there are no strict social rules imposed on them and it is more up to an individual to decide if they feel like attending a party or dances. Mourning has become more of a private matter and in some places (such as a work environment) one may even be expected to express it in a more subtle way, and not cause discomfort in others. However, some respondents observed that if a widow or a widower engaged in a new relationship too soon, people might question his or her true feelings towards the deceased and they may be criticised by the deceased's family. It was also reported that inhibition of feelings and emotions associated with the deceased and the loss often led to psychological problems. Unresolved issues and conflicts with the deceased were seen as an important contributing factor in this process. When symptoms were intense and impaired everyday functioning, some sought professional help.

Some respondents also highlighted cultural differences associated with expressions of grief and talking about sorrow. In village areas, emotional pain mainly seemed to be expressed behaviourally, marked by the way people dressed, and handled by participating in collective rituals. However, people seldom spoke about feelings or emotions. Even though children witnessed death and were involved in rituals, they were given little attention and explanation. On the other hand, respondents reported that modern society was more open to discussing feelings and provided more opportunities to do that – such as support from friends or professionals.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to produce a detailed and contextually grounded description of burial rituals in Poland, providing answers to four major questions: 1. How do Poles relate to death? 2. What factors affect the choice of the type of burial and accompanying rituals or customs? 3. What meaning is ascribed to particular customs and what is their social role and psychological significance? 4. How do religious beliefs affect the burial tradition in Poland?

The qualitative data gathered during this study includes many interesting accounts of Polish customs and tradition related to funerals. Contextual differences were examined in the process of analysis as narratives related to both past and present situations observed in rural or urban areas. A cultural change has been observed over the years in social values, beliefs, and the way of living. This can be attributed to industrialisation, migration of people from rural areas to cities, development of small towns, development of transportation and telecommunication, various aspects of globalisation, and reforms in education. In rural areas, involvement with the local community was stressed and people often identified themselves with the group. They gathered regularly to celebrate holidays and special occasions (including funerals), and shared information about community members. Urban lifestyle, on the other hand, was reported more intimate and individualistically oriented. People are expected to be more independent in making their own choices (rather than asking parents for permission) and solving problems. Various aspects of life, like eating, sleeping, courting and dating, ways of expressing one's religiosity (or spirituality), following

rituals and customs have become privatised. The mentioned characteristics relate to the classic dimension of collectivism-individualism by Hofstede (1991).

How do Poles relate to death?

Results of this study indicate that cultural transformation and development mentioned earlier have resulted in significant changes in three domains, namely values, social axioms, and practices, which has subsequently affected the perception of death and death-related rituals in Poland. Narratives which refer to rural life in recent past are compatible with the descriptions of traditional folk cultures made by Simonides (2007) or Burszta (1998), who observed this collective (communitarian) aspect, among other characteristics such as isolationism (in a geographical sense but also separation from the elite culture), traditionalism (an imperative to pass over beliefs, knowledge, and skills from one generation to another), prevalence of oral transmission, and a unique expression of spirituality marked by a tendency towards sacralisation of the world, religious syncretism, and manifesting religiosity in family and community customs. An interesting exemplum of religious syncretism was shown in narratives which described how village people combined the teachings of the Church with folk beliefs and customs rooted in Paganism to help a person suffering a prolonged agony to die. Even though contemporary Polish villages undergo significant social and economic changes (e.g. development of the educational, healthcare, or telecommunication sectors, migration), many of the old customs and values remain. Consistently with Derczyński (1994) and Simonides (2007), this study shows that people in rural areas treated death as something natural, often contemplated it and explicitly referred to it. Yet, many people feared death irrespective of the culture they lived in. It may be stipulated that for some people this constant referral to the subject was a strategy to tame death-related anxieties.

The accounts of death and dying, as well as funeral customs in more developed areas (characterised by modern, individualistic, and educated society, highly diffused due to mobility, acculturation, and globalisation) revealed significant cultural differences. In this achievement-oriented culture, with its high pace of life and great demands, people (especially the youth) think about death less often. Furthermore, people who report reflecting upon death on a daily basis may be suspected of being depressed and motivated to consult a health professional. This observation is compatible with Simonides (2007).

Current data was also consistent with studies by Derczyński (1994, 2001) and Boguszawski (2005) according to whom most Poles believe in afterlife. Present narratives exemplifying eschatological beliefs either referred to religious or ecological concepts. Respondents talked about being with God, entering heaven, living with angels, burning in hell, or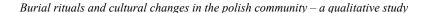 becoming a part of nature. Belief in the existence of a spiritual world was also expressed in stories about ghosts or evil spirits who were able to haunt people, disturb them in their sleep, or cause them other harm. On the other hand, respondents also believed that spirits of people they were on good terms with, and who were very close to them, could protect them or guide them in their sleep. Similar beliefs were shared by village people interviewed by Simonides (2007). This study found such examples in both rural and urban cultures.

Interesting examples of how people prepared for death were also found, which complements statistical data provided by Derczyński (2001). Apart from a common tradition across Poland to own a plot at a cemetery (either for oneself or the whole family), in rural areas people often prepared an elegant outfit and kept a coffin at home. Nowadays, the latter example is less common. Preparing a will was barely mentioned, which may indicate that it is still unpopular. This would be consistent with Derczyński (op. cit.).

What factors affect the choice of the type of burial and accompanying rituals or customs?

Cultural development in recent years brought about many changes in funeral organisation and regulations governing the disposal of dead bodies. Morgues are becoming accessible in small towns and some villages. Subsequently, bodies are seldom kept at home, which affects many customs related to that stage or funeral arrangement. Whereas cleaning and dressing the body may still be handled by families in rural areas, in towns and cities these actions are often performed by professionals.

Most village funerals are performed by the priests who administer burial grounds attached to their churches, and because of a lack of alternatives (lay ministers). In cities, however, municipal or commercial funeral organisations are predominant and the choice is usually affected by financial factors. Either may involve a religious or lay burial ceremony, depending on the religious affiliation of the deceased. There are examples of both Catholic and lay funerals organised by the municipal unit or private entrepreneurs, which indicates a greater complexity and goes beyond the three main types and mixed types of funeral organisation discussed by Walter (2005). In other words, the type of funeral organisation and the type of funeral ceremony should be viewed as distinct categories. Due to the development of the funeral industry in Poland, many responsibilities which were traditionally handled by the family are passed over to professionals who are becoming experts and trendsetters for new burial rituals and customs, when people cannot refer to family tradition or religion. This observation is consistent with Giblin and Hug (2006). Such situations may increase in mobile, individualistic, pre-figurative societies, where family ties are loose and intergenerational transmission of "know how" is limited.

Not only does faith affect the choice of ceremony, but it is also associated with preferences towards a type of burial. Current results are consistent with Derczyński (1994) whose statistical analysis showed that the majority of Poles preferred inhumation. On the other hand, cremation is significantly underutilised according to field data. This can be attributed to religious socialisation and Polish national history. Reluctance to cremation was particularly reported by the representatives of the older generation, some of whom associated it with genocide in concentration camps and disposal of dead bodies in large crematoria built by the Nazis in occupied Poland. However, it would require further investigation of a quantitative nature to check how many Poles share this perception. Most negative attitudes are probably associated with religion and strengthened by Church ministers who promoted traditional Catholic burials and discouraged the use of alternative forms.

Another factor affecting death-related rituals and customs involves rapid development of healthcare institutions and the growing number of deaths in hospitals and hospices. Subsequently, many of the traditional customs described in this paper become irrelevant. This aspect was also highlighted by Romanoff and Terenzio (1998). Young people are usually unaware of them and the meanings ascribed to certain actions, such as why people opened and closed doors and windows after someone had died, why they covered mirrors with a cloth, stopped clocks, or turned chairs upside-down.

Finally, respondents attributed many changes in rituals and customs to cultural development in both rural and urban areas. Multiple forces governing this development have already been mentioned, including mobility of the population, education, cultural diffusion (exposure to other cultures and adopting its products), secularisation tendencies, and various aspects of globalisation. Many examples of group behaviours practised in the collective, agrarian, Polish folk culture would not fit a modern, individualistic lifestyle anymore, where people value privacy, independence, and pursuing personal goals. In a way, this indicates high pragmatism and adjustment to changing times and values. On the other hand, it may be at the cost of losing meaningful customs, such as wakes or participation in funeral feasts, which strengthened a sense of solidarity, community, and cultural roots.

Education also results in growing health awareness, as well as better understanding of psychological problems and needs. Suicides, once viewed solely in terms of sin and socially punished by post-mortem marginalisation – a person would be denied a Catholic funeral or burial on holy ground, subsequently causing shame and additional burden to the family – are now perceived as an expression of mental disorder and evoke more sympathy. Stillborn children were also deprived of full religious burials and little attention was paid to the mental condition of their mothers. Current results show, however, that the policy of the Church has changed and become more flexible. Families can still order a simplified form of religious funeral for those who committed suicide or were born dead. Professional counselling services are also available and utilised more often, as part of help-seeking behaviour.

What meaning is ascribed to particular customs and what is their social role and psychological significance?

The results of this study present numerous death-related customs in Poland and what they mean to study participants. People gain understanding of their symbolic meaning or functions via cultural socialisation process. Most participants obtained detailed explanations from their parents or grandparents about the funeral tradition. However, some of the customs which have been common in rural areas and small towns are now unfamiliar to people who have been brought up and live in the cities (for example, turning chairs upside-down, covering mirrors, stopping clocks, or knocking the coffin against a threshold). The symbolic meaning of these rituals, described in more detail in the results section, is consistent with data presented by Simonides (2007) and, apparently, such customs are not limited to the Opole district but have been reported in many areas across Poland.

The qualitative data reveals multiple social and psychological functions of death-related rituals. First of all, they provide a meaningful, culturally normative framework for the expression of feelings and adjustment to change. In other words, they manifest shared knowledge of what is expected from people, what are the norms for exhibiting sorrow and mourning, and how and when one can readapt after experiencing a loss and start new life. In many cases they mark a transition from one status to another for both deceased and the mourners – an aspect discussed by Romanoff and Terenzio (1998). Formerly, leaving the realm of the living used to be marked by stopping of clocks, ritualistic announcement of death of a landlord, or ringing of a death bell. Nowadays, these rituals are replaced with a doctor's official statement of death, issuing of a death certificate, and publishing obituaries. Data was also gathered on the intermediate period, when the deceased was neither alive nor fully gone. Study participants reported beliefs that a soul left a body but stayed close to it. A belief that someone is not fully dead at this stage is revealed in a custom of talking affectionately to the dead body while cleaning and dressing it. In places, where family members still perform these responsibilities, it is believed that the deceased can hear, understand, and respond to verbal commands, which people hoped would soften the rigid body. To help the spirit move on to higher realms people engaged in various spiritual actions (including prayers, holy sacraments, aspersion, turning the chairs and stools upside-down, or throwing a clod of earth on a coffin). Final relinquishment of the earthly realm and entering heaven or purgatory was believed to be obtainable once full burial

procedure has been performed in a proper way. Even though such rituals concentrated on the deceased, not the bereaved (a distinction made by Hunter, 2007), significant latent functions which served the second group can also be attributed – this aspect is discussed later.
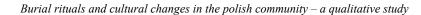
The bereaved, on the other hand, transitioned from the status defined by their former relationship with the deceased (e.g., wife/husband, daughter/son), through mourning manifested by a special dress code and/or abstaining from various activities or behaviours, into a new status (e.g. widow/widower) in which it was socially acceptable to engage in new relationships or participate in events of public amusement. The time for entering this last stage is defined by certain norms and may involve participation in a religious ritual, such as a holy mass celebrating the anniversary of the funeral and terminating mourning. While mourning is expressed more subtly in modern culture, absence of its signs may be interpreted as not having truly loved the deceased. Mourning is thus not only a cultural framework for expressing sorrow, but also lets mourners re-invest their energy into another relationship, not feeling guilty and disloyal towards the deceased and his or her family. Data gathered during the present study exemplifies peculiar beliefs and behaviours which mark these consecutive stages, analysed by Hunter (2007) in terms of van Gennep's rites de passage.

Another social function of death-related rituals is associated with defining roles and establishing social order. This aspect can be exemplified by norms governing who can approach the body of the deceased and when, or the structure of a funeral procession. Certain rules were applied to indicate formal relationship to the deceased. Thirdly, collectively preformed rituals act as a socially unifying mechanism – they bring community together and offer support. This aspect has been well exemplified by customs performed in rural areas (traditional wakes, funeral processions attended by the entire village). It is also represented by funeral feasts, organised for the family attending a burial. Fourthly, knowledge and application of death-related rituals confirmed and reinforced social axioms – general beliefs about the nature of the world or what is there after death. They reflected people's views of what was sacred and what was profane (e.g., in relation to a body). Many customs discussed in the results (opening and shutting windows and doors, lighting a blessed candle, or putting certain items into a coffin) strengthened beliefs in the spiritual world and afterlife. In the case of people who affiliated themselves with religion, rituals also reinforced the authority of the Church and its ministers. Thus, the present study contributes to theoretical studies on the social functions of ceremonials.

Another area under discussion relates to the psychological dimension of death-related rituals and customs. They are examined in terms of their capacity to control fear, contain grief, and provide social support. Among a variety of

fears which may be triggered by death, participants often reported fear of dead bodies, fear of spirits, and fear of being buried alive. Fear of corpses refers to the very manifestation of death – a subject often discussed in rural, collective cultures but frequently avoided and denied in modern culture. A corpse can represent something cold, hollow, devoid of love and life, and contagious. Several participants reported fear of touching the body or standing close to it, as this might lead to another death. Many viewed the deceased's body or spirit as a reaper who may select someone from the family or community to accompany him or her. To control such fears, people performed actions such as covering mirrors, letting the spirit fly away through a window or door, putting objects on eyelids to make sure they would not open and gaze at someone. Similar fears are reflected in a common reluctance to be in the presence of dead bodies. The growing funeral industry allows people to transfer duties, such as cleaning and preparing the body for burial, to professionals. Physical contact with the corpse is usually limited to the last goodbye, when people still touch or kiss the deceased in a chapel. Results also show a decline in the tradition of keeping the body at home and performing a wake in its presence. There may be an emotional element to this decline, in addition to practical reasons and sanitary regulations, and the greater availability of facilities such as morgues. It is hard to stipulate, though, whether fear of dead bodies contributed to lesser involvement with them, or whether the lesser contact has contributed to the growing fear.

Fear of wandering spirits who remain attached to the earthly realm was common in both rural and urban areas. It confirmed a general belief in some kind of afterlife. How people think about spirits may depend on former relationships with the deceased. In some cases, participants reported having some kind of mental or spiritual connection with a dead person, who provided them with support or inspiration at difficult times. Some reported having dreams in which their relatives gave them guidance or warning signs. It is also very common in all areas to commemorate those who have died, celebrating Zaduszki and All Saints Day, or leaving an empty chair and plate at the table during Christmas. From an analytical perspective, these examples can be understood as having internalised the good aspect of an object or a positive expression of continuous bonds discussed by Field, Gao and Paderna (2005), Field (2006), or Klass (2006). On the other hand, people frequently feared being haunted by ghosts – spirits of those who had unresolved business in the earthly realm – who came to disturb or punish people they once knew. The only way to protect oneself was to arrange a proper funeral and fulfil all the wishes the deceased had made before dying. In many cases, this fear may be associated with a projection of one's own feelings towards the deceased, such as anger, resentment, envy, or grief. Specific rituals could then be used to control these externalised feelings and associated fear. Narratives

collected in this study provide examples of measures people took to make sure they fulfilled all the requests of the deceased and did nothing to annoy him or her.

Finally, this study also identified a fear of being buried alive. This fear was strengthened by commonly shared stories about individuals who went into a coma, were thought to be dead and subsequently buried, only to regain consciousness in a coffin and die from suffocation. Certain rituals aimed at preventing such incidents, without having a religious or symbolic meaning. A wake, for example, was rationalised as a collective spiritual activity to help the soul of the deceased by means of prayers. At the same time, it was an opportunity to watch the body carefully, in case it moved or displayed any sign of life. In addition it provided emotional support and reassurance, as well as specific assistance to the mourning family (bringing or preparing food, helping to clean up the house). Loud nailing of the coffin lid or knocking it against the threshold three times when removing the body from the house (apart from symbolising farewell to the household) was also believed to be an opportunity to wake someone up, in case they were not fully dead. Once doctors were required to state death and death certificates were introduced, the latent function of these rituals lost their significance. At the same time, a decline in the wake tradition in modern, individualistic culture deprived people of an opportunity to express solidarity with mourners, and for the family to receive help and emotional support from friends and neighbours. Mourning customs are also declining and bereavement is expected to be expressed in a subtle and private way.

Current data also reveals that it was traditional to accompany a dying relative during the last stages of his or her life, and people often died at home. Nowadays, however, it has become increasingly common to die in a medical setting. This is consistent with statistical data provided by Boguszewski (2005). From the perspective of the patient, this new dying culture provides people with a degree of hope and security that they can die without much pain and discomfort (e.g, problems breathing). Support from health professionals may also relieve a family from feeling lost and helpless when assisting the death of a close person who is suffering. On the other hand, this increases the likelihood of dying alone and not having a chance to make final goodbyes. Taking into account the grieving process, this may deprive mourners of the possibility of resolving issues and missing an opportunity for potential healing.

As a result of death medicalisation and a decline of wake and other collective rituals in a modern society, people need to seek alternative ways to find closeness, support, and comfort from others. They are often expected to be more independent in finding ways to cope. When their resources in this domain are limited, some feel alienated and/or may utilise professional help. This is congruent with reflections made by Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) or Hunter (2005). On the other hand, modern culture also provides new opportunities such as professional counselling, support groups, internet forums, which partially fill in that gap.

How do religious beliefs affect the burial tradition in Poland?

Many narratives analysed in this study referred to religion as an important factor mediating values, social axioms, and behaviours in Polish society. This influence was especially noticeable in folk culture, where religion seemed interwoven with everyday activities. Such observations are consistent with descriptions of the unique folk spirituality and religious syncretism by Burszta (1998) or Simonides (2007). How people combined the teachings of the Church with folk beliefs and practices of magical nature was well exemplified by the rituals performed when someone could not die. Religion also provided people with answers about what was right and wrong and gave directions for moral conduct. This expresses some of its latent functions, namely controlling personal behaviour and social order. People abstained from practices defined as immoral or sinful, for the fear of being punished for them after death. Religion also informed beliefs about the nature of the world and what happens after death, and provided a framework for numerous social activities, customs, and celebrations, which was well exemplified by the qualitative material gathered in present study.

The current study shows that religious beliefs are strongly connected with the overutilisation of inhumation as a preferred type of burial, and underutilisation of cremation. Representatives of the Church often discouraged community members from using the latter form, interpreting it as threatening to traditional Catholic belief in resurrection. In a culture influenced so much by Christian philosophy, the human body is viewed as sacred, despite a strong focus on the world of spirit.

The study also provides interesting examples of religious coping, elaborated on by Pargament (1997) or Pargament, Koenig and Perez (2000). Namely, it helped people make sense of life events and re-define someone's death through the lens of religious beliefs (for example, my child is not suffering any more but enjoys eternal peace and happiness among angels), gain a feeling of control and predictability by performing certain rituals or referring to Higher Power for help, gain comfort and closeness to God (through prayer, contemplation, or Eucharist), gain intimacy and support of others (spiritual community or priests). It also motivated personal growth and efforts to be "a better person". On the other hand, current data also reveals some of the pathogenic function of religion. Some narratives talked about aggravated stress in family members, when the deceased died in sin (e.g. suicidal death) or a child was stillborn and they were denied "a proper Catholic burial". On the other hand, descriptions of people's intense fear of

ghosts or evil spirits may reflect its pathoplastic aspect (see: Pietkiewicz, 2008). From an analytical perspective, certain rituals may be viewed for some individuals as a projection of their own negative feelings onto the object of a spirit, and an attempt to control these feelings via actions such as covering mirrors, opening and closing windows and doors, leaving some personal belongings of the deceased in the coffin, performing prayers for his or her soul, and a religious ceremony as well. These actions were an antidote to many common fears and provided people with a feeling they could control fate and escape negative consequences of neglect towards the deceased and his or her anger.

Finally, this study shows that in urban areas lay types of funeral ceremonies are also common, which indicates that the deceased was not affiliated with the Church. The ceremony was often solemn, in the spirit of humanism, and devoid of reference to any established religions.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. First of all, it was limited in area, as most narratives referred to funerals in southern Poland. Although customs described by respondents were similar, local specifics were also observed (especially in rural areas, where people adhered to tradition more). Moreover, the majority of respondents either referred to the Christian Catholic tradition (predominant in Poland) or lay funerals. Little information was found on burials of people who represented other faiths. Further elaboration of certain topics would be required, such as how contemporary funeral culture and modern expression of mourning affect the bereavement process.

Conclusion

Material gathered during field work is a valuable source of information on Polish customs and tradition relating to funerals. Many of them are becoming extinct, especially in urbanised areas. Some of them are repeated as part of the tradition, with little understanding of their meaning. Information presented in this paper describes typical procedures – from the time when death is expected until the final body disposal and completion of mourning. It is still necessary to broaden the research field and conduct further studies on burial rituals and customs observed among members of other religions or representatives of other ethnic minorities acculturating in Poland. It might be a valuable source of information about culturally-specific needs and expectations of the dying people and their families.

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