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Emotional Capital and Professional Socialization: The Case of Mortuary Science Students (and Me)*

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This article is based on an ethnographic study of an accredited mortuary science program. It describes a variety of ways in which this program and its students' social lives normalize work with and around the dead. It also draws contrasts between the successful mortuary science students' emotional reactions to the work of funeral direction and those of unsuccessful students (and my own), and explains those contrasts in terms of biographical backgrounds. Drawing on these observations, I introduce the concept of "emotional capital" and explore how it may be implicated in processes of professional socialization and of occupational selection and exclusion, and in the social reproduction of status distinctions in general.

In 1958, Everett Hughes (1958:120) called for "studies which will discover the course of passage from the laymen's estate to that of the professional." Since then a number of students of social life have heeded his call for studies of professional socialization. Apparently convinced that physicians are the archetypal professionals, many have focused on medical students (e.g., Becker et al. 1961; Fox 1957; Haas and Shaffir 1977, 1982); others have studied the professional socialization of teachers (Lortie 1968), the clergy (Kleinman 1984), nurses (e.g., Davis 1968; Stimson 1967), social workers (Loseke and Cahill 1986), and lawyers (e.g., Granfield 1992). Funeral directors, however, are strangely absent from this list. Students of social life have given a good deal of attention to funeral directors in view of their relatively small number¹ (e.g.,

Barley 1983; Habenstein and Lamers 1981; Howarth 1996; Pine 1975; Turner and Edgley [1976] 1990; Unruh 1979). Yet we have inexplicably ignored their occupational socialization.

This neglect is especially perplexing when we consider recent interest among students of social life in the emotional demands and dynamics of work (e.g., Hochschild 1983; Stenross and Kleinman 1989) and of occupational socialization (e.g., Loseke and Cahill 1986; Smith and Kleinman 1989). From a lay perspective, the work of funeral directors appears emotionally overwhelming. Funeral directors constantly face the specter of mortality. They routinely handle and live among corpses. Their embalming work exposes them to sights and smells that most of the lay public would find disgusting and repellent. They must dispassionately discuss with grief-stricken clients, without seeming callous, death certificates, obituaries, funeral arrangements, interment, the costs and features of mortuary merchandise, and methods of payment. Funeral direction clearly involves "affective neutrality" (Parsons 1951) toward matters about which the lay public feels anything but neutral. Thus the occupational socialization of funeral directors would seem at least as emotionally charged and potentially instructive as that of the often studied physician.

Here I examine part of the process of becoming a funeral director, with special attention to its emotional demands and

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¹ As one indication of funeral directors' relatively small numbers, in 1990 approximately 1,600 students graduated from the 40 accredited mortuary science schools and programs in the United States (Emmons 1991:E4). In that year the nation's 124 medical schools granted 15,075 MD degrees; its 182 law schools granted 36,485 LLB and JD degrees (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994:191).

dynamics. This paper is based on my five months of participant observation of an accredited mortuary science program at a community college that I simply call Community College.

Aspiring funeral directors' formal education in mortuary science is only one part of their occupational socialization. More than a few have had at least some contact with funeral direction or directors before enrolling in mortuary science programs or schools, as I discuss below in greater detail. Also, in most states, they are required to complete not only an accredited program of study in mortuary science but also an apprenticeship. The program in which I participated, for example, is located in a state that requires aspiring funeral directors, after they complete their studies, to serve a 12-month apprenticeship in a licensed funeral home that conducts at least 40 funerals a year and to pass the nationally standardized examination administered by the Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards. Only then can they take the state board examination and, if successful, receive their license to practice. Yet, their formal education in mortuary science is a significant part of their professional socialization. Mortuary science schools and programs collectively immerse their students in the occupational culture of funeral direction, providing an extended professional baptism.

In this article, I focus on the emotional demands and dynamics of mortuary science education. I examine the more general lessons they suggest about the emotional requirements and consequences of occupational socialization and about the emotional reproduction of status distinctions. I begin with a brief description of the mortuary science program in which I participated and of my own participant observation. Then I describe and analyze how the settings of aspiring funeral directors' formal education, their restricted social networks, and the language of mortuary science education work together to neutralize the emotional implications of lay attitudes toward death and the dead. Next I consider the mortuary science students' accounts of their own emotional reactions to their work with the dead and of

the biographical paths that lead them to such work.

On the basis of that information and those analyses, I make the following proposal: The theoretically reasonable assumption that "becoming professional . . . involves . . . a psychological transformation" (Haas and Shaffir 1982:194) has blinded students of social life to what aspirants' bring emotionally to their occupational socialization and may have to bring to survive its emotional ordeals. Borrowing from Bourdieu ([1979] 1984), I introduce the concept of "emotional capital" and argue that the case of mortuary science students suggests some general lessons about emotional processes of occupational selection and exclusion, socialization, and status reproduction.

STUDYING MORTUARY SCIENCE AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The mortuary science program at Community College consists of a wide variety of required courses that generally take two academic years to complete. It includes courses in funeral service and grief counseling, management and accounting, human anatomy and pathology, "restorative art," and a two-course sequence on embalming that involves both lectures and practical "laboratory" experience. In addition, students are also required to take a few liberal arts courses offered by other departments.

The mortuary science department at Community College is a division of the School of Health Sciences. Although the departmental and faculty offices are located in the Health Sciences Building, all but two of the mortuary science classes—anatomy and pathology—are held in the basement of another building, which also houses the student center. The ground slopes downward at one end of that long rectangular building, where the basement opens onto a small paved parking area. Concrete steps lead from that area up to a loading dock and metal double doors that are painted gray. The doors bear fluorescent orange signs with black lettering that boldly announce "Authorized Personnel Only."

These double doors open onto the embalming laboratory, or what the mortuary

science students and faculty often call the morgue. Through a door to the left is the classroom where most of the mortuary science classes are held. That classroom is also accessible through a door to an emergency exit around the corner of the building from the loading dock and through a door at the back of an auditorium stage. Both of these doors open onto a small lounge between two sizable bathrooms with shower stalls. A door on the opposite wall of the lounge leads into a "display room" filled with caskets and other funeral paraphernalia; the door at the opposite end of the display room opens onto the classroom. Mortuary science classes at Community College are not easily accessible.

I gained access to those classes through the director of the mortuary science program at Community College. We first met in her office, where I explained my interests and plans. Although she could not allow me to participate in embalmings because of state regulations,² she was otherwise amenable.

The next morning we walked from the director's office to the loading dock and double doors leading into the morgue. After a brief tour of the embalming laboratory and display room, she introduced me to the students in the Health and Sanitation Science class. Again I explained my interest and plans. The students, after some often uncomfortable questioning about my intentions,³ agreed unanimously, although perhaps unenthusiastically, to accept my pres-

ence. Whatever their unspoken reservations, I was heartened when three of the students invited me, after class, to join them in the cafeteria for coffee.

Over the next 4½ months, I regularly attended classes in health and sanitation science, psychology of grief, and embalming, and I visited a few other classes less regularly. I also talked informally with the students. I often joined them for lunch, coffee, and conversation in the student center, and visited a few of them at their homes and the funeral homes where they worked. I also interviewed eight of the students more formally.⁴ I kept extensive field notes and tape recorded the interviews and later transcribed them in full.

I also kept written and mental notes of my emotional reactions to what I saw and heard at and near Community College. In analyzing my field notes and interview transcripts, I became convinced that important lessons could be drawn from the contrast between the mortuary science students' emotional reactions and my reactions to the work of funeral direction. Thus, in what follows, I observe Kleinman and Copp's (1993:54) advice, weaving my own "feelings into the analysis rather than relegate[ing] them to the beginning or end of the story." Although this process reveals that I was far from a perfectly empathetic researcher at Community College, it also demonstrates the importance of earlier emotional socialization to occupational socialization, and perhaps to the reproduction of status distinctions.

LIVING AND WORKING WITH DEATH

Before beginning my observation at Community College, I had had little contact with death and the dead. I was and still am frightened and repulsed by the very idea;

² State law prohibited anyone except licensed apprentice and fully licensed funeral directors, registered mortuary science students, and members of the deceased person's immediate family who so request from witnessing an embalming, much less participating. Thus, to attend the embalming lab, I would have had to register as a mortuary science student with the state department of health. That would have required more deception than I was willing to perpetrate, and more than the director of the mortuary science program at Community College was willing to aid and abet.

³ The most disconcerting questions seemed to be designed to reveal my prejudices, which I labored to conceal. For example, one student abruptly asked if "we look like you expected us to look." After some stammering, I answered that I did not know what I expected, conveniently concealing my surprise that they looked like typical undergraduates.

⁴ Three of the eight students whom I interviewed were women; five were men. The three women were 21, 25, and 35 years old; the men's ages ranged from 20 to 36. I interviewed one of these students at the funeral home where he worked, two at their homes, and the other five at various locations on the campus of Community College. The interviews ranged in length from 1½ to 4½ hours.

therefore I gave them (and still give them) little thought. I doubt that I am unusual in these respects, at least among contemporary North Americans. The historic decline in mortality rates and the associated increase in life expectancy "means that for many of us, the first personally meaningful deaths we will encounter will be those of our parents and these will occur when we are middle aged" (Lofland 1985:177).⁵ Even when death makes an appearance in our lives, it often remains safely concealed behind the walls of "specialized dying institutions" such as hospitals and nursing homes (Blauner 1966:384). There death assumes the "repellent form of the serious illness and the care it required" (Aries 1981:612). As Aries argues, modern medicine's heroic struggles with death have increased its horror while decreasing its fascination.

Perhaps we now talk and write about death almost obsessively. Since the 1950s, when Gorer (1955) condemned the discursive prudery toward death and dying in "Anglo-Saxon societies," they have become, in Lofland's words, "very 'in' topics."

They are celebrated in college classrooms, in a torrential outpouring of books, in newspapers, magazine and journal articles, in seminars and conferences, in television documentaries and talk shows, and in newly organized or rejuvenated research clearing houses and foundations. (Lofland 1975:243)

Yet such talk and such texts can be emotionally cheap. The cover of intellectual insulation that they may provide keeps death's fascinating horrors out of our everyday thoughts and conversations.⁶ Most of the

time, most of us go about our everyday lives as if death did not exist.

This is not possible for funeral directors or mortuary science students. They are unique even among those who routinely deal with death in their working lives. Unlike physicians and nurses, they cannot leave the handling of corpses to underlings (Sudnow 1967:43); unlike those aides and orderlies, they cannot "systematically attempt to avoid the task" (Sudnow 1967:82). Even morgue attendants and medical examiners eventually turn the dead over to funeral directors, who often must clean up the mess that others have made of the deceased. Death is not merely a routine part of funeral directors' work but its reason for existing. Working with the dead and around constant reminders of death is the crux of their job rather than one distasteful aspect. Mortuary science education normalizes that work; at least it does so at Community College.

Normalizing Scenes

The mortuary science students at Community College cannot escape vestiges and symbols of death. They pass several times each weekday through either the embalming laboratory or the display room on their way to and from their mortuary science classes. The normal scenes of their everyday lives are furnished with refrigerated compartments that often hold corpses, shiny stainless steel "preparation" tables on which bodies are embalmed three afternoons each week, and caskets for occupancy by the dead.

The classroom provides no respite from reminders of the students' intimate association with death. When seated at their desks, they face a number of plastic busts whose features replicate the ravages of disease and

⁵ Contemporary North Americans' experience with death certainly varies greatly. Yet in comparison with our ancestors and with people in many other parts of the world today, all but a very few of us are inexperienced with death. Before the "mortality revolution" in western Europe and North America during the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century (Goldscheider 1971), death was a constant in almost everyone's experience. In North America today, such experience is the rare exception rather than the rule.

⁶ Foucault's (1978) analysis of the modern obsession with talking and writing about sexuality has potentially instructive implications for the contemporary compulsion to talk and write about death. The

former discursively captured and disciplined bodily pleasures under the rubric of sexuality; the latter may well be discursively taming the emotional turbulence surrounding death. Normative standards such as Kubler-Ross's (1969) widely known sequence of emotional reactions to impending death, which is now often generalized to grief as well, determine the normality or pathology of those emotions and justify the therapeutic correction of abnormal responses by variously titled engineers of emotions.

serious head injuries. Those busts, on which the students practice their restorative art, are stored facing forward on two high shelves that run the length of the wall at the front of the classroom. To me, one of the uninitiated, they were the stuff of nightmares rather than of normal, everyday life. Their constant presence is apparently part of the mortuary science students' professional initiation. So too is the instructors' standard practice of spreading their notes on a body gurney and lecturing from behind the gurney. If no gurney is present in the classroom, they wheel one in from the embalming laboratory rather than using the always-present lectern and table. The lectern and table are mere decorations; the gurney is a familiar, normal tool of the trade.

It is also standard practice for the instructors and students to leave the doors open between the classroom and both the embalming laboratory and the display room. One or the other of these adjacent rooms is visible from almost every desk in the classroom. Although the bodies for the embalming lab⁷ are stored out of sight in the refrigerated compartments, the lingering smell of badly decomposed corpses sometimes drifts into the classroom. On one such occasion, a student turned to a classmate sitting behind him and remarked, "Whew, are you guys gonna have fun in lab today." On another (admittedly exceptional) occasion, a rather substantial draped body lay on one of the preparation tables in the morgue throughout the hour-long lecture on embalming. It was clearly visible from where I was sitting; despite my best efforts, I could not keep from looking at it and thinking about it. If I could judge from the discussions and the furious note taking that surrounded me, the other students felt no such compulsion.

I saw a door to the classroom closed only once, when a student was sent into the display room to take a quiz that he had missed earlier because of illness. He completed the quiz behind that door, sitting

among caskets. None of this was abnormal in the mortuary science classroom at Community College. What was apparently unusual was my own discomfort with the blank stares of grotesque busts, the sight of a corpse, and the very idea of sitting alone among caskets.

Normalizing Associations

However normal the mortuary science students consider their classroom experiences, most other students at Community College regard them otherwise. One of the mortuary science students told me, "When I meet someone at a party or something, I always try to talk to them for a while before telling them my major. Even then, that's usually the end of the conversation." Another student described the reception that he and two other mortuary science students faced when purchasing their textbooks at the campus bookstore: "The cashier and person approving checks are talking to everyone who comes through the line. We put our books on the counter; they just shut up. They wouldn't even look up." I had a similar experience when buying the text for the embalming class. The student cashier greeted me with a smile and pleasant hello, picked up the book to find the price, saw that the title was *The Principles and Practice of Embalming* (Frederick and Strub 1989), coldly told me the price, and studiously avoided my eyes throughout the remainder of our transaction.

Other mortuary science students complained that even when other students do talk to them, as one woman recounted, "they ask all these dumb questions. Like, do you take the brains out? Or like, I wear a lot of bracelets, and people ask if I take them off the bodies." Only one of the mortuary science students with whom I became acquainted maintained that her major was not a social handicap. She once boasted, "I'm always being asked out, and I've never gone with one of these [mortuary science] guys." Interestingly, she was the only student who withdrew from the mortuary science program during my period of participant observation. The distance she proudly placed between herself and her classmates may

⁷ The mortuary science program received so-called "life donor" bodies for use in the embalming lab. Once embalmed, those bodies were transported to the medical school at the local university for use in the infamous gross anatomy class.

have kept her from reaching her occupational goal.

Shunned by the other students and weary of their morbid curiosity, most of the mortuary science students at Community College stick together. They often live together: Four of the eight women in the program shared an apartment, and a number of the men were roommates. Their apartments were often the settings for parties attended primarily by other mortuary science students. Yet not all of the students were included in this informal social circle. The two African American students lived with their families, who operated funeral homes, and three older students, who had come to the mortuary science program at Community College after pursuing other careers, seldom associated with the other students outside the classroom. Among these three older students, each of the two men was married to the daughter of a funeral director, for whom he worked; the woman was married to a funeral director. One of the younger students also had little contact with the other mortuary science students away from campus; he lived in the third floor apartment of a stately Victorian house that had long held a family-owned-and-operated funeral home. While living there, this student was befriended by the sister and brother who owned and operated the funeral home, and who lived on the second floor. Thus even among those students who did not socialize with their classmates off campus, everyday social life revolved around funeral direction.

On campus, the students' casual conversations also revolve often around funeral direction. They regularly gather around a table in the cafeteria of the student center, to which they have a standing claim. Even when the cafeteria is otherwise filled to capacity, that table is left open for them. During the many hours I spent at that table, I never saw another student address the mortuary science students except to request the salt, pepper, or ketchup.

The conversations that were held at that table covered the usual topics of concern to college students: past and current loves, plans for the weekend, and classwork. The mortuary science students' discussions of

classwork were far from ordinary, however. One woman, who had the embalming lab on Friday, complained more than once that the students in the Wednesday lab "got all the bodies. At this rate, we're only gonna get ten or twelve this semester. It's not fair."

On another occasion, a woman (K) and a man (M) had the following discussion over lunch.

M: Did you see that one we got last time?

K: The one that bled and everything.

M: That wasn't blood. That was shit. When we pumped up the cavities, it shit all over everything.

K: They always do that.

M: [holding up the forefingers of each hand about two feet apart] That big!

This was usual fare for the mortuary science students at Community College.

Normalizing Talk

The mortuary science students' intimate contact with the dead and with death is normalized not only by what they talk about but also by how they talk and how instructors talk to them. Like nursing and medical education (Davis 1968:249; Haas and Shaffir 1977:77), mortuary science education requires students to adopt an occupational rhetoric and esoteric language that communicate professional authority and a calm composure toward matters that most of the lay public finds emotionally upsetting. That language, like the scientific, clinical language of medical education (Smith and Kleinman 1989), encourages students' "analytic transformation" of their potentially unsettling contact with human bodies. The corpse is no longer a dead person but an interconnected system of arteries and veins with numerous convenient points of entry and exit for injecting chemicals and draining blood. Students learn to think of the corpse as a series of technical puzzles and problems posed by the cause of death, the previously ingested substances that it may still contain, the chemical changes that it is undergoing, and the injuries that it sustained before, at, or after death.

The mortuary science students at Community College have little choice but to adopt that language and analytic perspective toward the bodies of the dead. During one embalming lecture, for example, a student asked if "we have to recite all this for the National Boards." The instructor replied, "You're going to have to know it better than you do now." She then continued her lecture, and the students continued taking notes that probably read something like the following excerpt from my own notes for that day:

There are advantages to using the axillary artery as a point of injection. It is near the center of embalming circulation. The companion, axillary vein is near the center of venous drainage. Both vessels are comparatively superficial and near the face.

Such language is more than a collection of words; it transforms corpses into "cases."

The embalming laboratory demands such analytic transformation of lifeless bodies into objects of technical concern. The lab instructor often requires students, using red and blue markers, to trace particular arteries and veins on bodies before they are embalmed. The students' technical fascination with the bodies that they are embalming sometimes exceeds the instructors' interest. As one student explained to me,

We were shooting fluid up this side of the head . . . and the fluid was going up . . . this side of the face was filling up because it was going back down the vein. But this side was all getting purple and clogging up. And the vein had been tied up; the jugular had been tied off for some reason. He [the laboratory instructor] told us to tie it off, but I said, "Mr. McDraw,⁸ you know what? We could get this color out, this blood, if we opened up this jugular and let the vein drain out." "Yeah probably so," like he could have cared less. Like, "get it done. I want to go home and have dinner with my wife."

This student and probably many others are engrossed by the normal talk and work of mortuary science education.

As I suggested previously, the normal talk of the mortuary science classroom and embalming laboratory at Community College is often also the talk of the students' casual conversation. During one lunchtime conversation about cranial autopsy, I remarked, "it probably takes some restorative work." One of the students replied quickly and enthusiastically.

Actually, you'd be surprised. It really doesn't unless the person is bald. Because they just cut the scalp from there to there [indicating the imaginary incision on his own head]. And they just pull the skin back, and then they take the calvarium up to take the brain out. Then they fill up the head with cotton or what have you, put the calvarium back, and pull it [the scalp] right back. That side's on the pillow, so nobody sees it anyhow.

He then finished his lunch, but I did not finish mine. His "case" was my horror.

Although not for me, the talk and the scenes of mortuary science education at Community College and the students' circumscribed social contacts apparently normalize death and work with the dead for most of them, helping them to acquire the emotional perceptions, judgments, and emotion management skills required for admittance to their chosen occupation.⁹ Yet from all appearances and according to the students' own reports, they experience less emotional difficulty with the work of funeral direction than I encountered while observing it. At least that seemed to be the case for those who either had completed the pro-

⁹ Many practicing funeral directors work not only with the dead but also with their grieving survivors. Those funeral directors must shift skillfully from the affective neutrality of the preparation room, where embalming occurs, to the sympathetic concern of the consultation office. Mortuary science students at Community College receive explicit instruction in "funeral service counseling" in one of their required courses, and some students repeatedly expressed their interest in grief therapy and "helping the families." Yet faculty and students seem to treat sympathetic concern for grieving clients as "only natural." At least the mortuary science program does not cultivate such sympathetic concern as extensively, although implicitly, as it encourages calm composure in handling the dead.

⁸ This and other proper names used here are pseudonyms.

gram or remained enrolled at the end of semester I spent at Community College.

EMOTIONAL DIRECTIONS TOWARD FUNERAL DIRECTION

At the beginning of the academic year in which I attended classes at Community College, 28 students were enrolled in the mortuary science program. By the seventh week of the spring semester, 24 remained. Two students withdrew during the fall semester shortly after watching a film of an autopsy in the required anatomy class, which many of the students call "Gross I." According to the director of the mortuary science program, both had become ill during the film and decided that they were "not cut out" for a career in funeral direction. Another student was expelled from the program for failing "Gross I" because of excessive absences.

The students who remained in the program had little sympathy for these former classmates. As one of those remaining students said, "It's a business where unless you really want to do it, you won't. That was their problem." They had even less sympathy for the woman mentioned earlier, who withdrew from the program during my period of participant observation.¹⁰ One of her former partners in the embalming lab told me the following:

You should be able to make your incisions and raise arteries in five minutes at the most—a minute is all it should take. She took fifty-five minutes just to find the two

arteries and pull them up. So we're sitting there twiddling our thumbs, while she's like some anorexic pawing at meat . . . You've got to get your hands in and do it.

The more successful mortuary science students at Community College had little respect for their classmates who did not "get their hands in" and do the work of their chosen occupation. These students reported doing so, and having done so, with only minor difficulty.

Emotional Undertakings

Few of the mortuary science students at Community College claimed that they never had problems working around and with the dead. Although three told me that they "never had any trouble," most reported, in the words of one, that they had trouble "just the first time we started to do the lab itself. I think you have to get used to it—the things that go on." Another student described his first embalming "case" and the attendant difficulties in some detail:

My first one actually was a mongoloid case. It was pretty sad. Like twenty-two, and he looked sixty. And it was difficult to embalm because it was difficult to find the vents [veins for blood drainage]. I mean, it was gruesome . . . I sat down . . . you feel uncomfortable at first; don't get me wrong. I felt real queasy. I admit that I did. And then . . . I got used to it. It doesn't bother me anymore.

Like this student, most of the mortuary science students who remained at Community College admitted some aspects of embalming initially bothered them but reported that it seldom happened "anymore."

Some students admitted that they still had occasional difficulties with the dirty work of funeral direction. Smells were a common cause. As one student explained, "The sight, you've probably seen worst things on television. The smell is probably the worst." Along similar lines, another student reported that although she generally did not find embalming unsettling, "if I have a touch of the flu or drank too much the night before, the smell can be really nauseating. But so far, I've always been able to keep it down." Some students also told me that

¹⁰ The family backgrounds of the students who withdrew or were expelled from the program are significant to subsequent arguments. According to one of the students whom I interviewed, none of the three students who left the program before the spring semester began were, in his words, "from the business." Although the father of the woman who withdrew from the program during the spring semester was a licensed funeral director, he was employed as a specialized "director" in a large funeral establishment some distance from the family home. In such large establishments, the labor of funeral direction is commonly divided among specialized "directors," who make the actual funeral and burial arrangements, "counselors," who deal directly with clients; embalmers; and "removal men" (Pine 1975: 62–63).

they found “cases” of young children emotionally disturbing. One young woman described other “cases” that had upset her.

There were a couple young women, both our own age, in a matter of two weeks . . . it kind of hits you when you go home . . . You can’t help thinking about it.

Yet these students reportedly did “get used to it,” “keep it down,” and deal with emotionally distressing “cases.” Like me, their classmates who withdrew or who were expelled from the program apparently could not.

What emotionally and sometimes physically overwhelmed the unsuccessful mortuary science students (and me) seemed to fascinate the students who continued their studies. For example, one successful student’s remarks about his experience with “removals” from hospital morgues contrast sharply with the reported reactions of two of his former classmates to the filmed images of an autopsy:

The morgue itself is always in the basement, deep dark dungeon. I really . . . find it interesting . . . I look at it, . . . doing autopsies and all, not just [as] a place to stick bodies in a cooler. If you go into the examination room, where they do the autopsies and things like that, I just find it interesting.

If we may judge by their numerous and often detailed conversations about their “cases,” the students who continued to study mortuary science at Community College when I was there “just found” embalming interesting. This fascination apparently overshadowed any initial discomfort, occasional queasiness, and unsettling reactions to certain kinds of “cases.”

I was not allowed to attend the embalming lab and to see whether these students were as calm and composed as they claimed when working with the dead. Sometimes, however, I lingered in the mortuary science classroom after the embalming lecture while students went into the bathrooms off the lounge to prepare for the lab. They returned to the classroom in their embalming “whites” and goggles to wait for the laboratory instructor. When I waited with them, I did not detect any signs of apprehension or

anxiety. Rather, to my eye and ear, they seemed either eager to start their laboratory work or relaxed, engaging in casual conversation and playful banter.

Were the successful mortuary science students at Community College simply more emotionally suited to work around death and with the dead than their failed classmates, me, and perhaps most of the lay public? The students themselves gave conflicting answers to this question. During a casual conversation with two male students, for example, I asked if they considered themselves “special.” One said no: “What we do is far less depressing than what nurses and doctors do. We only get the body after the death and do not have to watch all the suffering.” The other student disagreed quickly and emphatically: “We’re at least unique in some way because not just anybody can do what we do.” In a conversation with two female students, one remarked, “It’s not like ‘can you stomach it.’ Like people say, ‘You have to have a stomach for it.’ It’s not like that.” Before she could explain what it is “like,” the other woman responded: “Yeah, but I think it’s something that you have to have always thought about. For you it was.”

Although the successful mortuary science students may not have “always” thought about working around death and with the dead, this woman had a point. As suggested by their biographical explanations of how they came to study mortuary science, they had thought about such work long before they came to Community College and far more extensively than the rest of us.

Biographical Undertakings

One morning over coffee in the student center at Community College, I became intrigued with the biographical paths that lead to mortuary science students’ career choice. One of the five mortuary science students at the table asked whether I had ever thought of a career in funeral direction. I answered that I never had done so and added, “It’s not the kind of thing guidance counselors suggest.” The students laughed, and one told a humorous story about his high school guidance counselor’s reaction to his career aspirations. It seemed clear that

neither guidance and career counselors, former teachers, nor perhaps the cultural images of their desired occupation (Cahill 1995) encouraged these students' career choice. What, then, brought them to study mortuary science at Community College?

Often the answer was family background. Sixteen of the 24 students were sons or daughters of funeral directors; this proportion is about the national average for mortuary science students, according to the director of the program at Community College. Most of these students had long expected to follow in their parents' occupational footsteps. As one of them explained,

Mom and Dad were always talking shop, and when I got older, I had to help out. It seemed like a good business, comfortable income, and important. I guess I never really thought about doing anything else.

Others followed more reluctantly. One student, the son of a funeral director, spent two years at a state university and three years as a distributor for a national snack food company before deciding to study mortuary science:

I couldn't decide on a major in college, and I wasn't happy with my job. I'd always been around funeral directing because of my dad, and I just decided I'd be happier doing this. He never pushed me, but now he's excited about working together.

Another student, the youngest of the family and the only child of a funeral director to pursue mortuary science studies, reported that she "consciously avoided" her father's work until two years before enrolling in Community College.

My father would come home from work, and very rarely mentioned it. I can't remember him talking about it. The funeral home was next door, and I'd go over there to talk with him and my mom would be over there helping him, but I never really thought about it. Then my father got really busy and needed someone to help, to come answer the phones. And I liked working with people and the families.

However they reached their decision to pursue a career in funeral direction, all of these

students had "always been around" such work.

Several other students also had close personal ties to funeral directors and direction. One student had dated the daughter of a funeral director throughout high school and hoped to work at her father's funeral home after completing his mortuary science studies. As mentioned earlier, two students were married to daughters of funeral directors, for whom they currently worked. One had been an emergency medical technician when he married; the other had been a landscape architect. Both continued to work at those occupations some years after marriage but gradually became interested and involved in their father-in-laws' work. As the former landscape architect explained,

My wife's uncle who had a part in the business would go to Florida. And he'd be gone for a month, and I'd normally be laid off for eight to ten weeks in the wintertime. So I would come over and work funerals and calling hours and things like that. I was kinda weaned into it gradually.

Also as mentioned previously, another student was married to a funeral director. She reported having a highly successful but stressful career in advertising before she took a trip to Big Sur, where she experienced a "New Age" conversion. She returned to New York City, resigned her position, changed her name, and then visited a friend who lived in rural New England. There she was introduced to a man whom she described as "the most peaceful and wisest man I had ever met." He was an embalmer at the local funeral home. They married, and two years later she enrolled in the mortuary science program at Community College so as to realize her dream of owning and operating a funeral home with her husband.

Although these four students had not always been around the work of funeral direction, they were quite familiar with it before enrolling in the mortuary science program at Community College. The remaining four students were less familiar with funeral directors and their offspring, but they knew something about funeral direction before enrolling. One woman

explained to me that throughout her childhood "I lived between two funeral homes, and I was always around it. So, we didn't treat it as strange." Two other students had long been friends with sons of funeral directors. One of these young men said that the friendship was crucial to his career choice:

I got involved with it in my hometown. I had a friend whose father owns a funeral home. He's into funeral directing. He got me interested in it. You have to know somebody, somebody with a funeral home, or I wouldn't have gotten involved in it.

The remaining student became involved with funeral directing later in life but claimed that he "always had an interest in it."

And then I got a contact to the inside. I met this friend who is a trade embalmer,¹¹ I think before my senior year of high school. He plays [the organ] at a church. He was playing, and I had to go in to practice, and that's how I met him. And we became very good friends. The whole time I was going to State University, we'd go out on calls, and I'd help him do removals and embalmings and that kind of thing. I mean I was doing it while I was still at State University. I was nicknamed Morbid Mark. I don't really know what it is that draws one into it, but [I know] that one is drawn into it.

The mortuary science students at Community College may have been drawn to funeral direction, but they were also pushed by their experiences. Unlike me and probably most other contemporary North Americans, they were well acquainted with death and its symbolic reminders before enrolling in the mortuary science program at Community College. They had all lived, played, and/or worked in and around funeral homes. As I stated previously, death rarely intrudes upon our everyday thoughts, and even more rarely into our daily lives. And even when death makes one of its rare appearances, specialized institutions for dying and the specialized occupation of funeral direction "minimize the average person's exposure to

death" (Blauner 1966:384). In this respect, the mortuary science students with whom I became acquainted were not average people. They had been regularly exposed to death and work with the dead before deciding to do that work.

Such familiarity with death may not reduce its horror, but it does lessen its strangeness and even, as Aries (1981) implies, may increase its fascination. Unlike us but probably like our ancestors and those who live "in many parts of the world yet today" (Lofland 1985:177-78), the mortuary science students at Community College apparently had come to think of death as routine and, in some respects, intriguing—routine and intriguing enough to justify the choice of their anticipated life's work.

EMOTIONAL CAPITAL AND OCCUPATIONAL SELECTION

These mortuary science students' backgrounds and emotional reactions to the work of funeral direction suggest that they came to Community College with something I lacked and still lack. I doubt that I am alone among contemporary North Americans in this regard. Our unfamiliarity with death and our horrific definitions of death leave most of us ill prepared for work around death and with the dead. If my experience at Community College is any guide, the everyday scenes, talk, and work of mortuary science education would not normalize death and work with the dead as readily for us as they apparently did for the mortuary science students at Community College. They seemed biographically better prepared for such work than most of us probably are.

These students apparently were neither frightened by death nor repulsed by the thought of working with the dead. Any qualms about the work of funeral direction seemed to be dispelled easily through engrossment in that work. Those few students who found the work more gross than engrossing abandoned it quickly. The normal scenes, associations, and talk of mortuary science education at Community College made such students easily recognizable to themselves and to others as ill suited for a career in funeral direction.

¹¹ A trade embalmer is a specialist who embalms by contract for various funeral homes.

The lessons that students of social life might draw from the seemingly peculiar case of mortuary science students are not limited to these students. Their example reminds us of what Berger and Luckmann (1966:140) identify as the "fundamental problem of secondary socialization: It always presupposes a preceding process of primary socialization." Thus it must either build upon prior socialization, transform already socialized individuals, or do some of both. Although students of professionalization commonly focus on how such processes counteract prior socialization and transform individuals, the example of mortuary science students (and me) suggests that they also build on prior socialization.

It is doubtful that the professional socialization of aspiring funeral directors is unique in this regard. For example, several studies convincingly document that medical school transforms students' emotions (e.g., Coombs and Powers 1975; Segal 1988; Smith and Kleinman 1989). Yet the authors of one of those studies also observe that medical students "know the feeling rules of professional life before they arrive at medical school" (Smith and Kleinman 1989:67).

Childhood socialization and formal education teach them to set aside their feelings in public, to master "the facts," and to present themselves in intellectually defensible ways. . . . Medical situations provide vivid challenges, but students come equipped with emotion management skills that they need only to strengthen. (Smith and Kleinman 1989:67)

It would seem, then, that the success of any emotional socialization that occurs at medical school, mortuary science school, and perhaps other professional schools, training sites, and workplaces depends in part on students' and trainees' prior emotional socialization or what might be called, drawing inspiration from Bourdieu ([1979] 1984), their "emotional capital."

Although Bourdieu's name is associated most closely with the expression cultural capital, his arguments about the acquisition and biographical consequences of aesthetic perception, judgments, and tastes are analogous to those made by others about emo-

tions. Among others, Hochschild (1983:153-61) and Gordon (1989) suggest that early training and what Bourdieu ([1979] 1984) calls "conditions of existence" also shape emotional perception, judgments, and emotion management skills. As they observe, there are good reasons to suspect that the extent, timing and sequence of children's exposure to different emotions, to evaluations of particular emotions, and to feeling and expression rules varies by social class, parental occupation, ethnicity, and gender.

Such variable socialization of emotions may result in a social distribution of what I call emotional capital. Over the course of their childhood socialization, individuals acquire (to draw again on Bourdieu) an emotional "habitus" or system of emotional dispositions. That system of dispositions, in Bourdieu's ([1979] 1984:170) words, is "general, transposable," and applied "beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt." That is, it generates emotional perceptions, reactions, expressions, and emotion management strategies across various situations, including those not encountered previously. And as Hochschild (1983) implies, this emotional capital, like Bourdieu's "cultural capital," channels individuals toward different occupations and social positions.

Different occupations clearly require different forms of emotion work and therefore trade on different forms of emotional capital. Thus individuals with different forms of emotional capital tend to select and to be selected for different careers. For example, funeral directors must master any fear of death and revulsion toward contact with the dead. Thus sons and daughters of funeral directors, who are familiar with death and with work with the dead, are more likely than our own sons and daughters to consider, and to be considered for, a career in funeral direction. Similarly, high-steel ironworkers must mask and master their fear of falling off narrow steel beams high above the ground (Haas 1977). Thus working-class boys, who have long been encouraged to mask and master fears are more likely to consider, and to be considered for, such work than middle-class girls, who may not have been encouraged to do so. In contrast,

airline attendants must master anger toward rude and demanding passengers. Thus middle-class girls, who have long been encouraged to place others' concerns before their own feelings, are more likely to consider, and to be considered for, such a job than are working-class boys, who have been encouraged to respond angrily to slights and demeaning comments. Although these examples are largely speculative, they illustrate how previously acquired emotional capital may influence occupational aspirations and selection.

This is not to suggest that the emotional capital which individuals accumulate during their childhood socialization determines the course of their later occupational lives. On the contrary, the above analysis of mortuary science education and Smith and Kleinman's (1989) analysis of medical education document how professional socialization alters students' emotional habitus and thereby shapes the emotional capital they eventually bring to their work. In some cases, it may do so radically. For example, many working-class students at the elite law school studied by Granfield (1992) eventually redefined their long-cultivated sympathetic identification with the socially disadvantaged as a naive, irrational view of social justice. Yet in learning to think dispassionately, like lawyers about social inequities and justice, they faced more emotional struggle and needed more self-conscious effort than did their more affluent classmates, who had never been as passionately sympathetic toward the socially disadvantaged.

As Bourdieu and Passeron ([1970] 1990:43) suggest, the difficulty and likely success of any secondary socialization, perhaps including any secondary socialization of emotions, are "a function of the distance between the habitus it tends to inculcate . . . and the habitus inculcated by" prior socialization. Although some occupational aspirants, like Granfield's (1992) working-class law students, can and do succeed in compensating for occupationally specific deficiencies in emotional capital, the emotional struggle and the effort required to do so probably persuade many to abandon their initial choice of occupations.

Self-elimination from occupational futures also may occur, quite inadvertently, long before individuals embark on some professionally or occupationally specific training. Solot and Arluke (1997:29) report, for example, that educators consider the dissection of fetal pigs in middle school an important rite of passage on the way to careers in science and medicine. Middle school students who choose not to participate in that collective ritual, as did a few of those studied by Solot and Arluke, deprive themselves of the emotional capital it imparts. Refusing to master their "squeamishness" (Solot and Arluke 1997:48), they are subsequently unlikely to enroll in undergraduate college courses in comparative anatomy that require dissection of a cat, or to consider applying for admission to medical school.

Thus, emotional ordeals such as dissecting fetal pigs, watching a film of a autopsy, and dismembering human cadavers are mechanisms of both emotional socialization and occupational exclusion. Yet the self-elimination that they encourage masks their exclusionary effect. These ordeals discourage those with occupationally specific deficiencies in emotional capital from aspiring to, or from continuing to pursue, the corresponding occupations. On the other hand, as Lortie (1968:261) suggests, such emotional ordeals tend to foster a "subculture of confidence" and to generate collective identification among those whose career aspirations survive them. They set the emotional survivors apart from others, especially those whose career aspirations do not survive them. In the proud words of one of the mortuary science students at Community College, "Not just anybody can do what we do." Not just anybody can do the work of the funeral director, of the physician nor probably of the high-steel ironworker or the flight attendant—at least, not unless they acquire the requisite emotional capital.

EMOTIONAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Although aspirants bring and probably must bring certain forms of emotional capital to their occupational socialization, that

very process also transforms their emotional habitus and thereby invests them with occupationally valued emotional capital. This is the emotional capital on which they subsequently draw to purchase authority in matters related to their work. For example, the "detached concern" (Lief and Fox 1963) of the examining physician and the calm sympathy of the consulting funeral director serve as "place claims," in Clark's (1990:305) words, attesting to these professionals' authoritative standing in encounters with patients and with clients. The palpable contrast between their self-command and their patients' anxiety or their clients' grief commands respect and deference in matters related to their work. These are only two possible examples illustrating how emotional capital may be implicated in the interactional reproduction of occupational authority and prestige.

Yet the example of funeral direction suggests that social standing in encounters which are an occupation's work may not translate directly into general social standing. However much respect and deference funeral directors receive from clients, they meet with little respect in popular media, everyday conversations, and receive little from their many social critics. To those of us who are horrified by death and repulsed by the very idea of contact with the dead, funeral directors' pecuniary dependence on and intimacy with death seem strange and vulgar (Cahill 1995:125). Their occupationally valued emotional capital is not converted easily into social capital because of its divergence from what might be called, following Bourdieu and Passeron ([1970] 1990:9), the "dominant cultural arbitrary" of emotionality.

Like the cultural capital of aesthetic judgments, perceptions, and taste, different forms of emotional capital distinguish the refined from the coarse, the socially honorable from the dishonorable. Elias ([1939] 1978) documented how delicacy, or "shame threshold," has long been used in Western societies to distinguish the courtly from the common, the civilized from the backward, and the normal from the incompetent and ill. His *History of Manners* can be viewed as a study of the historical formation of one

aspect of our currently dominant cultural arbitrary of emotionality. Carol and Peter Sterns's (1986) *Anger* and Aries's (1981) *Hour of Our Death* document the historical formation of other aspects.

Today those with power and influence evaluate others in terms of their own standards of delicacy and poise, their careful control and their calm verbalization of anger, their own conversational and cognitive shunning of death, and similar emotional criteria. Theirs is the dominant cultural arbitrary of emotionality, defining the emotional currency of social prestige and standing.

Like funeral directors whose emotional capital has occupational but not general social value, members of other social circles also may find that their valued emotional capital cannot be converted into the emotional currency of general social prestige and standing. Dodd (1987), for example, reports that residents of an African American ghetto, lacking other resources, treat emotional posturing and manipulation as capital, evaluating one another by how well they play this game. Yet this form of emotional capital clearly diverges from the dominant cultural arbitrary of emotionality, against which others will judge them in classrooms, on the job, and elsewhere. Thus, emotional capital may well be implicated in the social reproduction of status distinctions in professional, high, and middle schools, in physicians' and funeral directors' offices, on high steel structures and in airliner cabins, in personnel offices, at cocktail parties, and on the street. The case of mortuary science students underscores this process and indicates a number of potentially informative empirical and analytic directions for studying secondary socialization and the reproduction of social distinctions.

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