

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

UNHURRIED POST-MORTEM.

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ABSTRACT | This study investigates the changing landscape of funeral practices, studying the transition from community-involved rituals to professionalized, streamlined funeral processes. Modern funerals have become more privatized, distancing relatives from active involvement and shifting responsibilities to professionals. This shift has led to a lack of personalized rituals and distancing relatives from death, potentially leaving bereaved individuals with unprocessed grief.

Utilizing a service design approach alongside arts-based research methods uncovered nuanced insights into the funeral landscape. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the bereaved's needs and shed light on the value of involving slowness in funeral services. Arts-based methods, while emphasizing credibility over conventional validity, provided richer, multidimensional insights into the subject matter. Moreover, reflexive research played an essential role, helping researchers to critically reflect on their assumptions and social constructs.

A key finding of this study lies in the increasing diversity of demands in funeral services and processes, reflecting individualistic desires and varied life-views among the Finnish population. The longing for slowness, a deeper connection with nature, and personalized mourning experiences were the most distinctive themes. Slowness in this context refers not to delaying burial but rather to providing relatives with a considered and deliberate mourning process.

The study's findings highlights the significance of incorporating personalized rituals into the mourning process, challenging the prevalent quest for efficiency and our avoidance of mortality. Slowness in funeral rituals offers a means to confront loss, demystify death, and facilitate healthier grieving processes, ultimately enabling individuals to confront mortality with greater understanding and acceptance.

1. Introduction

In Finland, many people are not familiar with what goes into planning a funeral until they are faced with doing it themselves. Talking about funerals is not common until it becomes necessary, often leading to avoidance until the last minute. As a result, most funeral-related tasks are handled by professionals, leaving grieving relatives feeling sidelined during their loved one's farewell. The post-mortem process has, in various respects, become efficient and effective, yet frequently lacks significance for relatives. However, deliberate and unhurried process is essential to ritualize, process and comprehend the loss of a loved one. Otherwise, the relatives may feel that they have been left out: *"It felt like a conveyor belt experience, blunt staff who didn't know how to deal with a grieving next-of-kin"* (Participant in web survey, 2017).

The rituals tied to death play a vital role, helping family members cope with their grief and emotions. But these days, funerals are mostly handled by professionals, taking away the family's traditional role. This shift can make relatives feel distant and less involved in the grieving process. Plus, there is still a lot of secrecy and taboo around death in society, even though art and culture often openly explore themes of mortality.

Exploring the issue and taking a developmental approach for the benefit of the family member's experience is important to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to face and deal with the loss. By putting the experience of the relative at the centre and exploring the feelings related to the burial, it is also possible through self-reflection to identify needs and areas for development that cannot be achieved through other methods. Thus, in this study we draw on both service design and arts-based method approaches.

The research questions are:

1. What insights do arts-based research and human-centered design bring to the burial experience? and
2. How can service design contribute to better experiences of loss for the relatives?

Depending on the context, funerals can be understood either as enveloping the entire journey from the moment of death to the burial, or more narrowly as a memorial service. Throughout this article, the term "funeral" refers the entirety of the process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Finnish Funeral Culture

Finnish funeral culture has become more professionalized over the last 100 years and the involvement of relatives has decreased (Pajari 2014, 64–65; Pentikäinen 1990, 197). Funeral-related services and providers, such as florists, funeral homes, and the church, play a crucial role in facilitating rituals associated with death. Numerous service providers and professionals are indirectly engaged in the process making burial also an economically important factor in Finland.

Rituals aid relatives in confronting their loss and managing their emotions, making them essential for coping with grief. Funerals serve as a means for the community to come together and reorganize following a loss. Often, the rituals surrounding death are influenced by religious practices. (Hakola, Kivistö, & Mäkinen, 2014, pp. 16–17; Pentikäinen, 1990, p. 93). However, the rituals themselves are in the process of changing. For a bereaved, the relevance of rituals to their lifestyle is significant. In contemporary times, internet technology and social media communities provide avenues for individuals experiencing grief to engage in ritualistic mourning and satisfy their need for companionship. (Haverinen, 2014, p. 206).

Art and popular culture frequently draw inspiration from death. However, in our society, aspects such as corpses, mourning, and certain elements of the funeral process are often kept hidden. Unlike birth, which is often openly discussed, death tends to occur behind closed doors metaphorically. Studying this sensitive topic makes death more visible, shedding light on this phenomenon and fostering opportunities for change.

Kimmo Räisänen, a photographer who has captured images of the terminally ill and their families, expressed that “I understand, that it feels horrible that I have taken the photo in this critical hour. However, I think that such pictures must be taken. Death must be made powerless” [authors’ translation] (Peltola, 2017). According to Kallinen, Pirskanen, and Rautio (2015, p. 195), research serves as a platform for strengthen the voices of individuals grappling with sensitive topics, providing them with an opportunity to express themselves. By attentively considering these perspectives, it becomes feasible to gain insights on how to develop the funeral services and processes to serve relatives better.

As previously discussed, death often remains a silent and concealed subject within our society, save for its expression in art and cultural mediums like music. Consequently, when individuals are faced with the death of a loved one and require assistance with funeral arrangements, they may find themselves at a loss. In such intimate moments of grief, the significance of rituals becomes heightened as individuals seek guidance from others on appropriate conduct (Poijula, 2002, pp. 92–93). Frequently, the desires of the deceased are ambiguous, necessitating negotiations among relatives regarding the most fitting way to honor their wishes. Molander (2009, p. 40) highlights how death taboos are evident, particularly in the treatment of bodies within hospital settings, where deceased individuals are discreetly transported through back entrances to avoid the gaze of visitors. Nonetheless, there are emerging signs that discussions surrounding death may be gradually shedding their taboo status. Notably, heightened discourse concerning end-of-life care and the legal dimensions of death has drawn increased attention to this significant topic (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2018).

2.2 Service Design as a Human-Centered Approach

The experience of relatives with funeral services and processes can be improved through human-centered methods such as service design. A human-centered approach can be embedded into a design process by examining and considering the viewpoint of the user. Using multiple touchpoints throughout user experiences to create enjoyable and valuable service journeys (Zomerdijs & Voss, 2010; Halvorsrud et al., 2016; Maechler et al., 2016; Miettinen, 2016), service design is a human-centered, multidisciplinary, and transformative design methodology (Sangiorgi et al., 2019; Prestes Joly et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2011). Especially when developing complex services like funerals, it must be understood that the relative is dealing with dozens of different service providers and touchpoints when organizing the affairs of the deceased.

By incorporating people into mapping processes of service user journeys, service design proactively drives value co-creation for continual improvement, an essential component of service design (Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018), for providing services that satisfy functional needs and emotionally connect with users to ensure their satisfaction and the fulfilment of the purpose of the service.

2.3 Arts-Based Research

The arts-based method used was photography, creative notetaking and storytelling. The photos and notes were analyzed by drawing on narrative approaches to visual analysis (Bal, 2001; 2006). In arts-based research (ABR), artistic methods are systematically used as part of the research. Artistic methods can be used in the data collection phase, the operational phase, including analysis, and in the presentation of research results (Barone & Eisner, 2011). The use of artistic methods can achieve the values that designing services commonly require: empathy and change. Empathy makes it easier for us to understand each other’s needs and thus enables change. Through art, it is possible to obtain collected material that would not be possible using other methods. Using arts processes in research enables different ways for research

participants and researchers to connect. In addition, the material may be more vivid and nuanced than if the material were collected by other means (Barone & Eisner, 2011, pp. 20–21).

ABR methods focus on credibility rather than validity (Barone & Eisner, 2011, p. 22). Research can potentially gain deeper meanings when utilising other than the so-called clean research methods that supposedly achieve the highest possible validity. However, the use of arts-based methods does not preclude other methods, but the best result is obtained by utilising various ABR methods in the phases of data collection, analysis, interpretation and dissemination of the research (Leavy, 2014, p. 20; 2017). Thus, ABR offers ways for knowing differently as it enables tapping into ‘what would otherwise be inaccessible ... or out of reach’ (Leavy, 2014, p. 21).

Reflexive research (Weber, 2003, p. v) includes the step of taking an intentional break in our activities as researchers for the purpose of reflection, drawing on our ability to reflect on and enhance our understanding by seeing ‘the interrelationships among the deep assumptions that underlie our work’. Weber (p. vi) calls on researchers as social beings to ‘come to grips with the ways we construct our understanding’. Critical reflection (Fook, 2011, p. 56) can serve as a valuable method in the various stages of reflexive research. The first stage, Fook (2011) suggests, seeks to unearth our fundamental assumptions about social structures and power relationships, to name a few, which enables exploration and enquiry through the recognition of values and beliefs. The second stage draws on new awareness to frame and ‘devise new (and better) approaches to practise’ that are more suited to our social environments and practices (p. 56).

3. Methods

The research was conducted mostly with qualitative methods: interviews, online survey, photography/visual analysis and creative notetaking as arts-based method, and co-design workshops (Table 1). The studies were conducted between the years 2017 and 2019.

Table 1. DATA COLLECTION METHODS.

Interviews with relatives	n= 13	13 people from all over Finland, aged 34 to 70 years who had organized a funeral sometime in the past
Other informants	n=2	2 persons visiting the cemetery and giving their comments on their visit
Interviews with professionals	n=8	an entrepreneur, a florist, an end-of-life caregiver, a pastor, a senior advisor, an employee of a funeral home, crematorium workers (2)
Co-design with relatives	n=7	1 workshop online, 2 workshops in person
Online survey	n=91	quantitative data with 304 qualitative answers
Observation and self-reflection	n=1	The first author’s self-reflection and photos when visiting the crematorium
Creative notetaking	n=5	Creative notetaking with the Mustarinda residency residents
Total of data informants	n=127	

The themed interviews were guided by questions, but the focus was placed on the important cues of the participants by encouraging them to continue their stories about their experiences and feelings at the time of dealing with the funeral process. Interviews were carried out with 13 relatives who had organized a funeral sometime in the past. They were from all over Finland, aged 34 to 70 years. In addition 2 informants gave their comments about their visit to the cemetery. It was also vital to understand the service provider's point of view. To accomplish this, an entrepreneur, a florist, an end-of-life caregiver, a pastor, a senior advisor, an employee of a funeral agency and crematorium workers, who also were chapel workers, were interviewed. The objective was to determine what factors affect the experience of those who are arranging funerals from their professional perspective. During the interviews, we discussed the funeral industry and changes in it in general.

The aim of the workshops was to gather ideas from relatives on how to improve burial customs and services. Participants had either organized funerals themselves or had attended a funeral. During the workshops, ideas were collected around four different themes and participants were also given the opportunity to comment on and elaborate on ideas previously collected by other participants. The first workshop was held online and others were held in person. There were in total 7 participants in the workshops.

The web survey's goal was to increase understanding of the funeral industry, generally, and the customer's experiences related to funeral service providers, specifically. There were 92 respondents to the web survey. In every phase, respondents were given the opportunity to respond with an open format reply in addition to a numeric option. This resulted in 304 open replies.

The first author was a resident at artist and researcher residency Mustarinda House in 2019 and collected data during her visit. The thoughts of other residents about funeral rituals and what kinds of rituals they would want to organize for others or would like for themselves were collected by the researcher, supplementing her previous research data. Information was collected from the wall where artists and scholars were encouraged to write and draw pictures of their thoughts. A total of five residents took part in the study. Arts-based methods such as sketching on the walls (Figure 1), instead of only note-taking, were used to collect data, thus supporting different avenues of expression for the participants. Additionally, this approach enabled the participants to process their thoughts differently and enabled us to understand and see differently the assumptions and social structures that underlay the topic of the study.

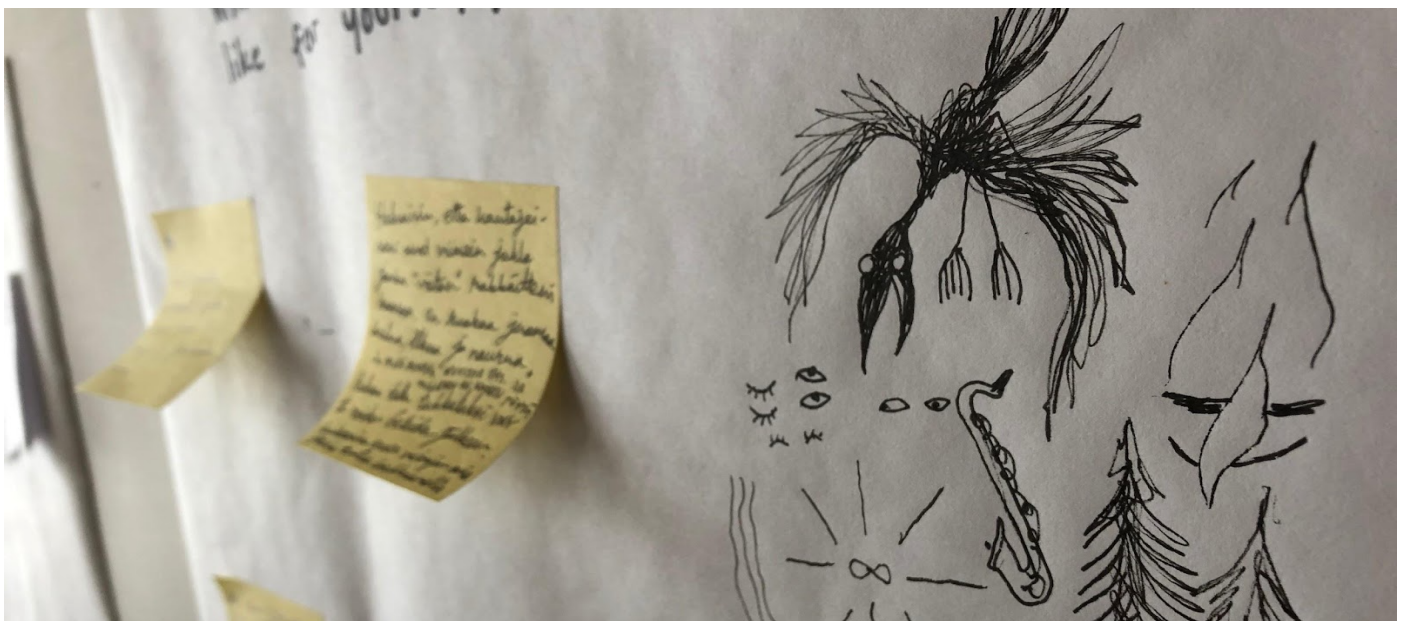


Figure 1. Drawing at Mustarinda House data collection wall.

The analytical approach selected for this study, which was enabled through the reflexive research approaches, was informed by the writings of Bal (2001, 2006) on visual culture and the analysis of visual images as narratives. Bal's approach is based on the logic that visual works contain 'traces' that present clues of how 'the work becomes narrativized' (Bal, 2001, p. 63). These traces are the signs and visual texts in visual images that, once read and interpreted, have the ability to narrate and transfer stories. Such narrativization, once combined with reflexivity, is underpinned by the concept of intertextuality, which 'implies that the adopted sign necessarily comes imbued with meaning' (Bal, 2001, p. 69). Thus, the interpretations coming from the images in this study were 'intertextual' as they transferred meanings across different contexts.

4. Results

4.1 Results of the Data Collecting with Participants

According to the funeral officer we interviewed, fewer people are dealing with death and traditions related to it; for example, fewer are now attending funerals. Obviously, inexperience increases stress and anxiety when the first funeral is to be arranged. In addition to the actual work, funeral officers can potentially play a role in untangling the mysteries and complications that are associated with death. In the interviews with relatives, many stressed the need for slower service experiences and clear instructions as well as a transparent and well communicated process. Funerals are often organized without prior experience, which is why the family members who assume the role of organizers do not always know how to proceed, and they may, and probably do, feel overwhelmed. Funeral officers have recognized this need, and the relatives' role in organizing funerals is usually relatively small. Thus, individualistic choices or one's own rituals are not commonly included. Cultural and religious customs as well as laws also limit self-determined rituals. Relatives often have no information about the deceased's wishes, and this increases the stress. They have a real need for clear, simple and scheduled directions. Practical arrangements such as paperwork should go smoothly for relatives, but dealing with the actual loss often also requires first-hand participation in the burial process. This situation was clearly described by a participant:

"It would be great if the next of kin had more real-time information about things. As it is, death is hidden behind the funeral home; the idea is that they take care of everything. I think not being able to participate is also stressful for the next of kin." (Participant in web survey, 2017)

In the study, some practiced their own rituals, some in a slightly undisciplined way. For example, one interviewee put keys in a coffin:

"He lay there quite nicely, the coffin was open and I put the keys of the home in Carelia where he grew up. Even though you're not allowed to put metal inside the coffin, I said 'the hell with it' and did anyway. So it was like he could get home now. He had kept them all his life." (Interviewee, 2018)

Employees of the crematorium also said that they try to fulfil the wishes of relatives as often as possible, not all of which are necessarily in accordance with the instructions. Today, customers desire individualistic choices for funeral artefacts, ceremonies and rituals. Church customs and guidelines, or the views of an individual employee of the church, sometimes limit the options for the rituals of relatives. One of the web survey respondents wrote that they wanted to put a lumberjack's helmet on the coffin at the ceremony, but the pastor had forbidden it.

Some of the participants had also developed their own ways to mourn the loss after the funeral. For example, sisters have a picnic in the cemetery annually and even pour sparkling wine on the grave to the 'delight' of the deceased (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Woman pours sparkling wine on the grave (Picture: Maija-Liisa Kuronen).

Based on the responses from the web survey, it was evident that family members responsible for organizing funerals encountered varying levels of professionalism throughout the service process. Many respondents expressed feelings of stress due to encountering ignorance and unprofessional conduct during the entire journey of organizing the service. For instance, limited resources in terms of space and time in hospitals led to difficulties for relatives and organizers. However, the professionalism displayed by individuals in such situations could significantly impact the experience. An illustrative example of this was an employee who attempted to transform a linen room into a space for relatives to bid farewell to their loved one when no other suitable area was available. Funeral workers emphasized their sensitivity to service experiences and monitored their own behavior to avoid appearing busy. For example, one interviewee mentioned that they never check the time in front of the customer.

The study participants, especially the participants in workshops, expressed a desire for more tangible actions to aid them in coping with their loss, such as shoveling sand onto the coffin, accompanying the ashes, and placing the urn. In many cases the answers reflected the respondents' strong relationship with nature instead of the church. They also explored avenues of self-expression and co-creation, such as utilizing natural stone as a memorial from a meaningful location, planting trees, and crafting coffins. One interviewee even expressed a wish to bake buns and store them in the freezer to be served at their funeral. The data collected through the creative notetaking method also highlighted people's desire for active participation and the importance of nature values. However, the interviewed pastor expressed skepticism towards newer rituals like tree planting, questioning their significance in the absence of established tradition or historical context. They pondered the role of the funeral speaker in such rituals. Nevertheless, they indicated that if such new rituals were not expected to be led by the church, she would not object to relatives partaking in their own farewell ceremonies, emphasizing the importance of allowing individuals to bid farewell in their own way. Interviewed professionals acknowledged the potential for developing new rituals without forsaking established traditions.

4.2 Results of the Self-Reflection and Image Analysis

In this section, the first author of this paper shares reflections from her experience at the crematorium, employing the first-person perspective ('I'). She applied the two steps suggested by Fook (2011) to identify and define the meanings that she saw in the pictures, while also reflecting on, processing and channelling the experiences and thoughts that the participants of the study shared with her.

When I arrived at the crematorium, I was surprised at how harsh, almost cold and extremely simplistic the interior was and the presence of so much concrete. The upper floor was very beautiful, but in an austere way. First, I felt the place was somehow – not sacred – but sensitive, and I was fearing that any misstep, even in the placement of my jacket, could be deemed inappropriate. During the visit, I realized that the crematorium was quite an everyday place. There was no mysticism or spirituality evident, and the cold room was full of human shells, not people. I would not feel comfortable staying alone in the cold room, but I am not afraid of the coffins anymore. I even saw a burning skeleton and felt that the experience made death less awful. The skeleton was no longer complete but a few burning bones. Imaginations of a burning skeleton are much more distressing than witnessing the reality of a burning skeleton in a crematorium.

Burning a body in a crematorium is a very mundane and practical event. Figure 3 shows a coffin ready to be burned in an oven. The coffin is lifted onto the rolling cart. Behind the furnace is a workspace in which the crematory workers supervise the burning of the corpses. The most important thing for workers is to ensure their own safety near the hot ovens and to keep to the schedule given to them. Some relatives ask if they can monitor the burning of the body. The crematorium worker told me that it reduces the mystery of death as the client is introduced to the process without the mysticism, and continued: “And they won’t keep searching for it (the body) anywhere, when they’ve seen it with their own eyes that it’s gone, reduced to dust. It has helped a lot of people”.



Figure 3. Coffin ready to be burnt.

The body disappears into a black hole after one’s life. It even appears like a reverse birth. The atmosphere in the crematorium is unemotional and calm. Steel and tiles give an appearance of efficiency and clinicality. Together with the cart, they form an efficient, clean conveyor belt that efficiently disposes of bodies, the discarded shells of human beings: the viewer may get the impression that it is possible to sweep the dead out of our sight and thus perpetuate the illusion that we have control over our own lives. The coffin is very simple, it is made of unprocessed wood and has cross-shaped screws. The coffin is chosen by relatives and is the only natural object in the picture.



Figure 4. Bones are collected and crushed after cremation.

Figure 4 shows the bones taken out of the oven and three stone balls with which the bones are crushed into ashes. One could easily see something brutal in the picture, but I think crushing the bones is an artisanal stage, even if it is done by machine. At this point, the conveyor belt of the burning of the body seems to slow down, and the crematorium worker picks out foreign objects that are amongst the bones, such as artificial knees and hips made of titanium, porcelain and glass.



Figure 5. A cart in front of a steel desk.

Figure 5 shows a cart that is used to transfer coffins. The cart is empty and is positioned in front of the steel desk that is brightly lit by fluorescent lamps, almost like a spotlight, highlighting the emptiness of the cart. In the middle of the photograph is a black door. This was the first space that I visited when I came to the crematorium. Its coldness felt oppressive at first. Quickly, however, I became accustomed to the facilities, and when I was told that the steel desk was originally meant to be a flower shop I realised my own preconceptions about the premises. Time seems to stand still in the picture. The body no longer exists, but the cart and steel accessories remind us that the body has been eliminated systematically and effectively. Time has stalled, but has the loss been dealt with at the level of mind and body or just swept away? The efficiency of the burial process was also questioned by one of the participants in the web survey (2017):

“Arranging things went quickly and professionally, but in the middle of grieving, I would have needed a slow service. So I would have had time to think things through.”



Figure 6. Room for the farewell to the deceased.

In Figure 6, two metal supports mounted on the wall are depicted, serving as the resting place for the coffin. Additionally, a candlestick holding a lit candle is positioned on the floor, located towards the right side of the image. The room is dim and the walls are made of concrete. The lighting creates patterns on the walls and emphasises its emptiness. There is no coffin, no people and no symbolism related to culture or religion. The word “absence” describes this picture best. It is free from everything; all that remains is a hollow emptiness. However, the areas of light and shadow created by the light bring vibrancy and rhythm to the image.

The images above easily evoke unpleasant emotions, even aversion, in the viewer. This kind of emotion arises from our cultural heritage where anything related to death is both foreign and avoided. We learn in our childhood to fear the things related to death, even cemeteries. Based on these culturally implanted reactions to death, we interpret any images related to it as potentially distressing and intrusive. However, a visit to the crematorium, at the very least, helped me to demystify my thoughts about things related to the deceased. The atmosphere in the crematorium was very different from the image the pictures convey. The employees were nice, and they had highly developed interpersonal skills; after all, they encounter grieving people every day. We drank coffee, and they generously, even proudly, shared information about the important work they were doing.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Death is often unexpected, and relatives need rituals to deal with grief. Many rely on rituals offered by the church because there is nothing else available. However, for processing the loss, it is essential to deal with it through rituals that are personally relevant. The findings from the study indicate that customers will need more opportunities for individualistic choices when organizing funerals and coping with loss.

The first research question asked was, what insights do arts-based research and human-centered design bring to the burial experience. Arts-based research and human-centered design can be used to identify needs related to burial that support both the smooth running of processes and the emotional experiences of the bereaved. While there is a general desire for services to be efficient, these approaches can be used to identify different needs in relation to burial. Relatives need time and slowness to absorb and understand both the loss they have experienced and the existential, alien, taboo and possibly religious aspects of death. This understanding was gathered in the study, in particular through interviews with relatives and self-reflection and image analysis of the cremation visit. Arts-based research and human-centered design approaches bring out unspoken experiences like preconceptions, the evolution of the bereaved's experience during the process or, for example, the impact of social norms on the relative's experience.

The second research question asked, How can service design contribute to better experiences of loss for the relatives. Service design can improve the carer's experience by putting the bereaved's experience and needs as a starting point, rather than organisational policies and processes. In addition, service design involves understanding the various stages and emotions that relatives go through during the grieving process and customer journey during the entire period. This improves the situation of relatives during a difficult time in their lives. Service design can also be used to identify future needs that service providers can respond to, thus ensuring the future relevance of their services.

According to the current study, relatives need unhurried service when it comes to dealing with a new and unfamiliar matter for them in a situation where they are consumed with grief, not thinking or acting as they normally would. This does not mean procrastination or delaying the burial, but experiencing it without rushing or having time constraints. However, many respondents hoped that the deceased would be buried quickly after their demise because for many the actual mourning began only after the burial. Bereaved needs clear advice, unhurried service, ready-made alternatives and transparency in the burial process.

Involving a relative in various stages of burial, such as preparing the body, make the process more mindful for the bereaved, and at the same time makes it more humane. If relatives actually take some control of the process of burying their relatives, they can also take the time and actions they need to deal with their loss. The examples in the study showed that, when relatives actively participate in the rituals of death, for example, by being present at the burning of the body, they feel the rituals are more personally meaningful. When one takes the time to fully encounter a loss, for example, by arranging one's own rituals, making something by oneself or even monitoring the burning of the body, it helps to eliminate the mystification associated with death and thus facilitates dealing with the loss. However, it should be noted that each funeral and family experience is unique and the key is to enable everyone to have an experience that suits their needs.

6. Conclusion

The arts-based research used the methods of photography, creative note-taking, and storytelling, enabling slow processes of documentation in reflection by the participants and the researcher. Slowness challenges both our society's quest for maximum efficiency and our delusion that we are immortal. We easily understand our mortality as an abstraction that can be used as an inspiration for art and culture. However, when we have to actually face the death of a loved one, we turn the body over to professionals to take care of and remove it from our sight. Slowness matters when it is time to understand and process the great loss that has taken place.

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