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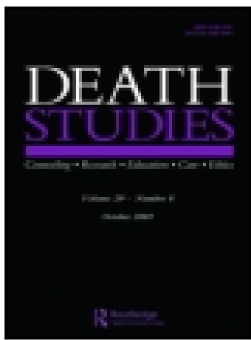

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Constructing the Dead: Retrospective Sensemaking in Eulogies

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Abstract

Eulogies serve a sensemaking function of identity construction—both for the deceased and for the survivors. This work examines the communicative construction of identity in eulogies and shows how eulogia discourse affirms and reconstructs our relational identity through communication. We extend scholarship on eulogies by using relational communication theories to investigate how

eulogic discourse functions as identity construction, considering eulogies of ordinary people, and exploring the gendered nature of eulogies. We discuss how eulogies are specific ritualized forms of communication in which the bereaved focus on self-identity as they articulate their experience of grief.

Keywords: eulogy, gender, identity construction, sensemaking

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Eulogies represent relational performances that—through a communicative process of framing and sensemaking—discursively reconstruct our social identities in the face of the death of a loved one. While framing helps people organize experiences and action, sensemaking occurs when people actively assign meaning to experiences. When relationships are lost or changed, the bereaved ultimately reframe their relationships between the deceased and their surviving loved ones. Eulogies are one form of what Aristotle called a ceremonial or epideictic genre, or what Cicero called a 'consolation' speech, and are characterized by being planned in advance, for the purpose of a performance of praise for its subject, consolation for the audience and speaker, identification with the audience (which is characterized by having a relationship with the deceased), and a statement on the character of the deceased (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990; Kent, 1991; Samek & Anderson, 2011). Eulogies represent a specific frame of meaning, and as a frame, eulogies serve many communicative, cultural, and religious purposes. Eulogies help to frame a life with anecdotes, songs, poetry and other genre. A plethora of research exists that rhetorically and psychologically examines these functions.

In this manuscript, we extend the previous work on eulogies in three ways: We insert a relational communication perspective into a body of work that is predominantly based in psychological theory and that predominantly examines *intra*personal motivations for eulogies and their ceremonial nature. When referencing sensemaking, we are using the communication

construct that explains how we make sense of our relational identity in the context of the death of our loved one, rather than making sense of a loved one's death itself. We also add to the conversation because, unlike previous research, which focuses primarily on eulogies of famous people, we examine eulogies of ordinary people. Finally, as gender identity is constructed through performance of cultural norms (Butler, 1993), we explore the possibility of a gendered nature of eulogia messages.

A relational communication perspective aids in understanding how eulogies are acts of framing and sensemaking within relational systems. We specifically use three interrelated relational communication lenses through which to examine eulogies: framing and sensemaking which looks at the ways we use communication to construct and re-construct meaning; systems theory which looks at communication in relational systems; and identity theory which looks at the way communication constructs our social and personal identity. We briefly introduce these three constructs here and their relationship to our examination of eulogies. We discuss these theoretical perspectives in more detail in the next section.

These three communication perspectives are considered essential in understanding how meaning and identity formation are negotiated relationally. Framing and sensemaking, from a communication perspective, refer to the way our social identity is derived from the sense we make of our relationships with others, and our personal identity is derived from our view of ourselves in light of our social identity (Gergen, 1971; Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1963). Since our identity is both personal and relational at the same time, it is both personally and relationally constructed as well. Communication scholars understand identity to be constructed through language and in social interaction, both everyday ordinary interactions, and formal, more ritualized interactions (Goffman, 1963). Sensemaking occasions occur when our prior framing and sensemaking no

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longer fits the situation. The death of a loved one creates a sensemaking occasion in which unstable frames require us to redefine our reality and adapt to our new life. A communication perspective of systems theory suggests that our personal, relational, and cultural worlds overlap and converge to construct our relational identity (Archer, 1995). In a system, all actions require a reaction, and a change or loss requires an adaptation. When a relationship is lost or changed, relational uncertainty and ambiguity results (Weick, 1995), and our relational power and identity can be lost as well. In fact, death causes both personal and social instability (Seale, 1998). Identity theory explains the development of meanings we attach to roles based on the reciprocal relationship between the self and society. Our identity is based on our social roles, our performance of those social roles, and the "meanings and expectations associated with that role and performance" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research on eulogies has examined eulogies as ceremonial discourse and as bereavement or grief-related discourse, primarily from a therapeutic lens. Before moving on to discuss a different lens through which to understand eulogia discourse, we briefly review prior scholarship to frame the conversation.

Scholarship on Eulogies

Eulogies as Ceremonial Discourse

Epideictic discourse has drawn much scholarly attention. Eulogies are a genre, or specific type, of rhetorical form, and the stylistic devices of eulogia rituals as ceremonial discourse have been examined from antiquity to current day. Genre criticism as an approach to eulogistic rhetoric has historically studied specific eulogies and looked at how, using rhetorical principles and

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examining typical patterns in the eulogy genre, eulogies address their particular audience, environment, and situation. Examples include Berens's (1977) analysis of nationalist discourse in early American eulogies from 1799–1800; Hansen and Dionisopoulos's (2012) consideration of how the media used eulogistic-type rhetoric to cope with the political loss of Proposition 8 in California; Foss's (1983) discussion of eulogistic rhetoric after John Lennon's assassination, using Burke's concepts of hierarchy, guilt, and perfection to understand how the eulogies gave advice to Lennon's fans; Brouwer's (2004) examination of congressional observation of decorum in their eulogies for U.S. House Representative Stewart B. McKinney; and Schrader's (2011) look at former President William J. Clinton's use of religious language in his eulogy for the Oklahoma City bombing victims.

Eulogies as Bereavement Discourse

Many scholars—including rhetoricians, sociologists, and psychologists—focus on the functions eulogies serve, most looking at eulogistic discourse in the role of grief consolation and bereavement (see, for example, Kunkel & Dennis, 2003). As bereavement discourse, one primary function of eulogies is to heap praise on the deceased (Kent, 1991), and at the most basic level, eulogies simply console the audience and offer social support to the bereaved (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Kent, 1991; Kunkel & Dennis, 2003). However, many other functions of eulogies have been identified, and Samek and Anderson (2011) note that eulogies function to both comfort and pull together survivors. Rhetorical scholars examining eulogistic rhetoric report that eulogies of famous people have been used to build community (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982; Jensen, Burkholder, & Hammerback, 2003) move survivors to action (Foss, 1983; Jamieson & Campbell, 1982; Jensen et al., 2003), give advice (Foss, 1983); and frame the legacy of the deceased (Berens, 1977). Eulogies function to acknowledge the death (Jamieson & Campbell,

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1982) and help the survivors make sense of their loss (Kunkel & Dennis, 2003). Eulogies help the survivors refocus the experience in a positive direction (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Kunkel & Dennis, 2003) and construct new meanings for themselves (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004; Kunkel & Dennis, 2003). Eulogies acknowledge the change in the relationship between the survivors and the deceased (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982). Since the death of a loved one increases mortality salience and raises fears of death among survivors, eulogies also help the survivors face their own demise (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982). Finally, for Christian eulogies, eulogies function to praise God (Kent, 1991).

Scholarship on Bereavement Discourse

As Dennis and Kunkel (2004; see also Dennis, Ridder, & Kunkel, 2006) and many others observe, eulogies serve many grief consolation and bereavement functions. Of course, eulogies are not the only source of bereavement communication and this section will briefly look at many types of bereavement discourse. One key bereavement strategy is the maintenance of bonds with the deceased (Klass, 2006; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Silverman & Klass, 1996)—including supernatural or spiritual bonds (Klass & Goss, 1999). Another function of bereavement discourse is to assist survivors in their grief and help them deal with their emotions (Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994). One way bereavement discourse accomplishes this is with positive reappraisal (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004) of the death and life of the deceased. Bereavement discourse helps the survivor reconstruct his/her narrative and functional sense of self (Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002) and specifically helps survivors construct a coherent narrative in the face of the chaos of death (Neimeyer et al., 2014). Bereavement discourse helps the survivors express and construct their relational identity to the deceased (Kunkel & Dennis,

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2003; Neimeyer et al., 2014) and thus serves as farewell communication and public articulation of one's experience of grief and loss (Doka, 1987; Harvey, 1996).

As we assert in the introduction, sensemaking is one way grief-related discourse constructs meaning of the loss. Kunkel, Dennis, and Garner (2014) distinguish between seeking comprehension, significance, assimilation, and accommodation of a loss as ways to manage grief through communication, and other scholars advance the importance of meaning-making related to making sense of tragedy and grief (see, for example, Neimeyer et al., 2002; Park, 2013). However, there is a difference between making sense of a loved one's death itself, and making sense of one's self in light of the death of a loved one, and we note that when we refer to sensemaking in this manuscript, we are discussing how eulogists make sense of their relational identities in the context of the death of their loved ones. To quote Seale (1998), "reorientation of the psyche . . . is not to be equated with repairing damage to social order" (p. 66), and in fact, Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver (2000) suggest that finding meaning in loss is neither as prevalent as people suppose, nor necessary for healing. Conversely, focusing on how a loved one's death affects the survivor's identity, and realignment of relational identity, does help people deal with loss (Kunkel et al., 2014; Neimeyer, 1998). In the present manuscript, we focus on how eulogies use sensemaking to serve the bereavement function of reconstructing one's relational identity in the face of a loved one's death.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Framing and Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a continuous ongoing process, but we often retrospectively reframe our lives. One way we do this is through narrative memory (Carr, 1986; Cooley, 1964; Freeman, 1998;

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Weick, 1995). Remembering the past is a process of symbolically representing something that is temporally distant, yet experienced in the present (Kerby, 1991). Memory is central to our present experience of personal identity, even as it is interpretive, representative, imagined, and narrated (Kerby, 1991). Sensemaking also has a self-presentation component. In respect to our life stories, we are both spectators and agents. We represent ourselves through the stories we tell about ourselves, just as the stories others tell about us help construct our identity (Goffman, 1986). Since our stories form within our family and peer interactions, our identities are both shaped by and shape our social interactions.

In this manuscript, we are using a relational communication definition of sensemaking which refers to the retrospective communicative process through which we construct and understand the meaning of our past actions, and by which we construct our identities based on this meaning (Weick, 1995). This is a social process by which people generate and frame interpretations of events. Authoring and interpretation are interwoven. Sensemaking is less about discovery than it is about invention as it is a relational process in which we act, react, interpret, and reflect, on our shared experience, as we are creating meaning out of our experience (Weick, 1995). Framing occurs more in the present tense, and refers to the meaning attached to a contemporary circumstance (Goffman, 1986; Luckmann, 1978). Framing and sensemaking are at the same time both individual and social, and these related relational communication concepts help explain communal, cultural, and relational communication. According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, because as we make sense of our experiences we are making sense of our environments and our selves within those environments. We attach meanings to actions almost as soon as those actions take place, certainly in most cases close enough to the action that the action and the sensemaking appear to be simultaneous activities. Although

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sensemaking is continuous, we often reframe our lives by reflecting on the past and negotiating new meanings retrospectively. We can know what we are doing only after we have done it. These meanings and their negotiations are mediated through talk, discourse, and conversation.

While Goffman's (1986) sense of framing extends to society as a whole, Luckmann's (1978) sense of framing takes a more personal stance; one that is concerned with our personal life worlds. We live within social-life worlds and private-life worlds and construct our social reality by virtue of the communities in which we take part, including our families. We are born into a frame, and thus we are both agent and recipient of our frames (Archer, 1995: Bateson, 1972; Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1986).

In summary, sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, retrospective, part of our relationships and environment, a social process, and is ongoing. Sensemaking motivates action, but it is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Sensemaking is the symbolic interpretation of a narrative, reflecting previous efforts at sensemaking and creating new patterns of sensemaking for the future. Most importantly, sensemaking is performed discursively through interpersonal and cultural communication.

Systems Theory

The systems theory of communication, based on biological General Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989), is a theory of interactional patterns and processes. This theory defines a system as a group of people who are bound together in relationship by their communication behaviors, existing within an environment that affects and is affected by the people in the system. Each part of a system only exists in relationship to the other parts; they are what they are because of their systemic context. Thus, each part is essential to the system's functioning

and if one relationship changes, the entire system will be affected. Relationships are understood in the context of the system created by them, within their social, cultural, and interactional environment (Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Meaning resides not exclusively in individuals, but in their interactions, through symbolic communication (Bateson, 1951; Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956; Blumer, 1969; Bowen, 1966; Laing et al., 1966; Mead, 1934). In a system, joint action constructs relationships, and therefore meaning. Relationships in a system are negotiated and constructed through communication.

Identity Construction

The concept of social constructionism posits that meaning is interactionally constructed and our identity—who we are in relation to our world and our relationships—is formed and reformed through a continual process of interpersonal and cultural communication (Berger & Luckman, 1967). The formation of a person's self-identity is dependent upon an individual's experience and how they interact with the world (Gergen, 1999). Interactions are key to identity construction, as people make meaning based on the way others react to them and interact with them, and identity is based on both our relationships with our significant others and how we think other people view us (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Mead, 1934). A person's identity shifts and revises in response to changes in a one's experiences or relationships, and identities are fluid as they are negotiated, interpreted, and responded to (Bartesaghi & Castor, 2009; Carmack & Galanes, 2013; Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Guiot, 1977; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Ochs, 1993; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). In addition, a person's sense of self is entwined with the identity of their significant others (Bakhtin, 1984). Social constructionism also highlights the important role of communication and discourse (relational and cultural) in construction of our identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999).

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Many facets of identity construction have been researched, including marital commitment, gender, student and teacher identity, sexual identity, ethnicity and race, religion, nationality, occupation, moral and civic identities, and resilience in problem youth. However, identity formation through eulogia discourse has been unexplored.

Gendered Construction of Identity

Feminist scholars (see, for example, Butler, 1990; Reger, 2001; Wood, 2009) claim that our gendered identity is socially constructed (constituted) through common cultural themes that shape gender performances for men and women and which are traditional, stereotypical, and one dimensional: whereas females are more commonly valued for being beautiful, sensitive, and caring, males, on the other hand, are valued for being more successful, aggressive, sexual, and self-reliant. Correspondingly, 'self-in-relation theory' suggests that women are relationally viewed, and within roles in which they are empathetic and responsible for other's emotions, needs, self-worth, and growth (Surrey, 1991). The degrees of gender role identity (femininity or masculinity) are formed through self-meanings and social interaction. Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction and is influenced by gendered constructions of self, including counter-identities of self versus other (Stets & Burke, 2003).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

As Kent (1991, 1997) noted, and as is still the case today, few analyses of eulogies are of eulogies for non-famous people, few have considered eulogies written or delivered for female deceased, and none have considered the possibility of a different framework for matriarchal eulogies either delivered by or for women. Unlike the plethora of scholarship from psychology and rhetoric on eulogies' bereavement or ceremonial functions, and the myriad of rhetorical

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analyses of eulogies of public figures, this analysis centers our discussion of eulogy discourse in Communication Studies scholarship, most specifically in the social constructionist framework of sensemaking and identity construction. Building on prior research on construction of identity and sensemaking at end of life through family and personal narratives (Davis, 2008), on research that suggests a reconstruction of identity is a key component of healing (Kunkel et al., 2014), and on research which looks at the bereavement function of eulogies of famous and notable celebrities (see, for example, Dennis and Kunkel, 2004; Dennis et al., 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2014), we suggest that eulogies of ‘ordinary people’ also serve a unique relational identity and sensemaking function. In this research we sought to look at how they do that. This manuscript adds to the research on eulogies by focusing on eulogies of non-famous people and by including eulogies written by and for women. We also extend the work of Dennis and Kunkel (2004) to focus specifically on identity construction and sensemaking in the process of positive appraisal and meaning construction for the loved ones of the deceased, and the work of Kunkel et al. (2014) to hone in on identity construction in what they call the search for significance in their typology of meaning reconstruction in grief. However, by taking a relational communication perspective to this study of eulogia discourse, we move the scholarship on eulogies beyond the commonly taken perspective of social psychological analyses of eulogies as bereavement discourse that has characterized much of the past work in this area.

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METHODS

Sample

We conducted a qualitative textual analysis of eulogies written and presented by non-clergy for friends and relatives. Using a volunteer and convenience sample, we sent out requests for

eulogies via social media, e-mail, and in-class announcements. The 17 eulogies we received are rather homogenous and represent a limited amount of diversity: all Caucasian, the deceased range in age from infant to elderly, and include males and females. Notably, however, with two exceptions (father's eulogy for his infant son, grandson's eulogy for grandfather), all eulogies volunteered were either written for women, by women, or both (two granddaughters' eulogies for their grandmothers, two daughters' eulogies for their mothers, a female student's eulogy for her female teacher, two female friends' eulogies for female friends, a sister's eulogy for her sister, a husband's eulogy for his wife, a son's eulogy for his mother, four daughters' eulogies about their fathers, and one granddaughter's eulogy for her grandfather).

Those submitted were exclusively ones that had been planned, written eulogies, rather than ones extemporaneously delivered. All eulogies examined were delivered at a formal funeral; two were read by alternative loved ones other than the person (daughter; father) who wrote it; all others were read at the funeral by the writer. The deceased died from various medical causes (primarily cancer and heart failure) and from an automobile accident and a suicide. One eulogy was written as a letter to the deceased; three were written as poems. Many of the eulogists forwarded their eulogies with apologies for the condition of the eulogy—typos, misspellings, grammatical errors—and acknowledged their rushed and stressed mental states when they wrote them. In our analysis, we attempt to reproduce the oral nature of the eulogy delivery by correcting only typographical and spelling errors (which do not reflect delivery), otherwise reproducing the eulogies as delivered.

Coding and Analysis

Using an inductive process of coding and analysis, the three researchers independently analyzed the eulogies using interpretive thematic analysis (Tracy, 2013). Given our research

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question of understanding how eulogists use sensemaking for identity construction, issues of sensemaking and identity were sensitizing concepts. We categorized the data following a multi-step iterative process: 1) we each individually conducted open coding as we read through the data letting themes and categories (first level descriptive codes) emerge; 2) using a constant comparative method we individually went through our initial themes and categories and looked for clusters of meaning (second level analytic codes); 3) we met as a group and reviewed our themes and categories and further grouped our codes to identify patterns and connect the data to our sensitizing concept; 4) using a process of axial coding, we further grouped and regrouped our categories into ones that made the most conceptual and analytical sense; 5) through multiple meetings, we created and discussed preliminary findings and together negotiated a framework for the analysis by continuing to attend to emerging topics, comparing and contrasting each category and cluster, and adjusting our analysis as we identified linkages and themes (Charmaz, 2006; Davis, Powell, & Lachlan, 2012; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Tracy, 2013).

Findings

Eulogies serve a relational sensemaking function in many discursive ways, all related to construction of a relational identity: through loss discourse (expression of the sense of relational loss by survivors); relational discourse (by explicitly referring to the relationship between the deceased and their loved ones, or recalling events that contribute to family or community identity); virtues discourse (referring to positive characteristics—primarily relational virtues—held by the deceased); legacy discourse (referring to the ways their lives were changed by the deceased, or to values or lessons learned from the deceased); transcendence discourse (construction of a ‘good death’ by sanctifying the deceased, referring to how the deceased is better off, accepted death, or will be seen again; addressing a mystery or dilemma surrounding the death); and social discourse

(expressions of acknowledgement and gratitude or requesting social support). In this section, we discuss each of these discourse themes and provide exemplars from the eulogies examined.

Loss Discourse

Kunkel and Dennis (2003) report that eulogizers deal with their grief by acknowledging it, and we concur. Frequently found near the end of many eulogies, but—we suggest—perhaps the most salient of all types of eulogy discourse, loss discourse acknowledges the loss and, most importantly, constructs the resulting need for new relational identity for the survivors. Loss discourse looks to the (diminished) future to say, simply, ’we will miss you.’

> Our hearts break
>
> As we miss her warmth,
>
> Her kindly presence. [Poem read by Granddaughter about Grandmother]

Loss discourse is especially poignant when the eulogies acknowledge losses that are themselves imagined, projected or incomplete. For example, the eulogy written for a father’s infant son spoke of imagined memories:

> Dear [SON], I am a Tom Waits fan. For whatever reason, his music fits well with me and moves me. There is no doubt we would have spent lots of time listening to his songs together. . . Given your passing, [SON], I’d like to focus on one short verse that has a new meaning for me. It goes like this. . . . ‘The things you can’t remember tell the things you can’t forget that history puts a saint in every dream.’ [Father about Infant Son]

Relational Discourse

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We identified several classes of relational discourse: identifying our relationship (role) to the deceased; making claims about how the deceased felt about the eulogist and/or other loved ones; stating how the eulogist or loved ones have been changed as a result of their relationship to the deceased; and recollecting activities jointly performed with the deceased. We classify all these as relational discourse because they make statements or claims about the relationship between the deceased and eulogist and family members from the point of view of the eulogist.

Eulogies construct our relational selves by identifying who we are in relationship to the deceased, reinforcing our relational identity, and restating our relational importance: I am his daughter, her father, her student, her husband, her favorite nephew. Kunkel and Dennis (2003) suggest this serves to establish credibility of the speaker, but we propose that relational discourse goes beyond that to focus on the relationship as it was constructed in the past, and to reinforce relational identity of the survivors.

> We are all here today to honor the memory of [DECEASED] who has touched all our lives as a mother, grandmother, neighbor, friend, and dear wife. My name is [EULOGIST], a lifelong student of [DECEASED]. [Student of Deceased]

As another class of relational discourse, many eulogists focus on how the deceased felt about them or their family, or what they meant to the deceased, reinforcing familial, relational, and emotional bonds between them. This is an interesting form of discourse as, on the surface, it seems to be praising the listeners rather than the deceased. We suggest it serves to reinforce relational identity.

> She was so proud of her family, and loved each and every one of us unconditionally. We were her life. [Granddaughter about Grandmother]

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Eulogists use a third class of relational discourse when they speak of how they or others are better people, more loved, as a result of their relationship to their loved one. This differs from virtues or legacy discourse categories because it is stated from the point of view of the eulogist or other loved ones in terms of how they have been enriched by their relationship with the deceased.

> It is hard for me to express what a special and important role Gram played in each of our lives… She was the epitome of love and shared all of it with us. . . . Each of us is rich, so enriched by Gram's love. [Granddaughter about Grandmother]

> Mom would often say, 'Life is what you make it and you only go this way once so make the best of it.' Well, Mom, you most certainly made a difference in the life of those around you and you most certainly made the best of life for you and your family. [Daughter about Mother]

Especially poignant is how the eulogy for an infant who was only a few days old when he died refers to how he changed their lives:

> For everything you have done and for how you have changed our lives forever, we, again, thank you. [Father about Infant Son]

For a fourth class of relational discourse, many of the eulogists talk about activities they had done with the deceased, frequently memorializing everyday, mundane events. These recollections, although of seemingly trivial events, also serve to construct family identity, as activities and behaviors serve as nonverbal communication.

> Mystery books, playing cards, drinking coffee, *Murder She Wrote*, the smell of apple pie in the oven, homemade chili sauce, unfiltered Camel cigarettes, swimming in the lake with that white flowered swim cap, and the candy dish on the table at the house my father and

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mother grew up in… [DECEASED] is my grandmother and I am lucky to share her with [OTHERS] and the seven of us share her with all of you. [Granddaughter about Grandmother]

He gave me a 20-gauge shotgun for my 18th birthday and taught me to shoot clay pigeons at the land he owned by the river… He thought it important that a female know certain things that were traditionally in the 'male' domain, so he taught me to change the oil in my car, install spark plugs, set gaps, change tires, and reline the brakes. [Daughter about Father]

I know he loved us all, but he rarely said it. . . . I always looked forward to Sundays in the fall because I knew after a Cowboys game, I could always get him to talk to me on the phone for at least 15 minutes. . . . I will always think of him whenever I watch the Cowboys. [Grandson about Grandfather]

Virtues Discourse

One prominent characteristic of the eulogy genre is virtues discourse—the listing of positive qualities of the person who has died. Many virtues—personality characteristics, skills, positive traits—are mentioned: determination, consideration, physical beauty, strength, humor, skills or talents, resilience, and caring. Virtues discourse—the most traditional of funeral oratory discourse mentioned in the literature—is the ultimate retrospective sensemaking for the deceased, constructing his or her identity one last time. Virtues discourse differs from relational discourse in that virtues discourse specifically focuses on the deceased. Virtues discourse, we suggest, contributes to the construction of relational identity because the deceased served as a role model

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for loved ones when he/she was alive and the practice of sanctification of the dead raises the likelihood that survivors will reify the positive characteristics of their loved ones after they die.

We point out the gendered discourse in which women are remembered for their beauty, kindness, selfless nature, and men are acknowledged for their hard work and patriarchy (reframed, however, by the daughter below relationally).

> When you think about [DECEASED], what do you remember? I remember her contagious smile, her laughter, and her beautiful face. Everyone remembers her for her beautiful, sunny smile. I remember that strong will that made her into the beautiful, graceful dancer and the great softball player that she was. . . I also remember that [DECEASED] was a selfless, kind-hearted soul and was always willing to lend a hand even during her toughest of times. [Female Friend of Deceased]

> Above all, I remember my dad as a man that always made sure that his family was taken care of even if it meant that he had to sacrifice something important to him. [Daughter about Father]

Legacy Discourse

Legacy discourse focuses on the relationship as it is taken into the (changed) future, as many speakers state the idea that 'I am who I am from your example, from the way you lived your life.' Kunkel and Dennis (2003) refer to this as 'positive reappraisal,' a form of social support or comforting rhetoric, but we suggest that legacy discourse serves a function beyond that of comforting—it reconstructs family identity into the (changed) future. Using a mixture of both relational and legacy discourse, eulogies pass on relational values taken from the past and carried into the future. Legacy discourse talks about familial values and family identity; most especially

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how the life of the deceased defines family identity. We note that legacy discourse differs from the other categories in that it includes a focus on the future based on characteristics in the past life of the deceased.

Note also the self-in-relation language which is used in many of the eulogies for female deceased, exemplified in the following:

> The most important lesson the seven of us have learned from [GRANDMOTHER] . . . [is in] family and friends. To her they were one and the same… To our grandmother, everyone is family. [Granddaughter about Grandmother]

> As I am about to begin my marriage, I will use my parents' love and devotion to one another as a model for my future marriage and family life. [Daughter about Mother]

Legacy discourse keeps part of our loved one alive as we move forward without them, yet holds that part of them within us. In essence, the deceased live on through us as we identify our future behavior as a legacy of theirs.

> I would like to share with you some of the lessons that I learned from [DECEASED] as her lifelong student. In second grade, [DECEASED] taught me that having a disability doesn't mean that I am 'dumb' or 'stupid.'… No matter how many times I would get down about how difficult school was, I was never allowed to say dumb or stupid—and I still avoid those words today. [Student of Deceased]

> I realize that [SISTER] was more than a sister; she was also a role model and someone I could learn from. [Sister about Sister]

Transcendence Discourse

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Eulogists transcend the death of their loved one through several rhetorical strategies. Kunkel and Dennis (2003) describe a process called 'positive reappraisal' but we suggest these approaches extend beyond Kunkel and Dennis's typology. What we call transcendence discourse lets the mourners overcome, or deny, death itself, as they attempt to construct an identity of immortality.

One tactic we identified is a sanctification strategy. One of the social rules of the genre of eulogies is to never speak ill of the deceased. Eulogists often speak of the deceased as "saints," as if they had no faults when alive.

> You are the saint that history put in our family's dreams. [Father about Infant Son]

> How does one begin to summarize the life of such an incredibly beautiful soul? . . . she was … born with the patience of a saint. [Daughter about Mother]

Potentially negative characteristics are reframed as positives:

> Irish and stubborn, she would not give in to anything that she did not want to do, and oddly, no one seemed to mind, for her beautiful smile and vibrant personality proved to overshadow her stubborn, secret tough-as-nails personality. [Daughter about Mother]

> He wasn't the man who hung the moon; he was the man who designed and installed the lighting/heating and air conditioning system for it. [Daughter about Father]

Another transcendence strategy is to suggest that the deceased is "in a better place" now. Often mentioned as a response to the pain and suffering related to the dying process, this statement is both a faith proclamation and a declaration of defeat of suffering. This assertion is often

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accompanied by a relational construction—the contention that the deceased is now with friends and family members who have previously died.

> Well, [GRANDFATHER], it's been a long time, but we're sending you our grandmother, mother, aunt, sister, and friend, your bride. Take care of her, just as she did for all of us. It's her turn to relax and the Lord knows she deserves it. [Granddaughter about Grandmother]

> I asked God to take this remarkable man and lead him to that place where there will always be perfect flying conditions, where planes won't fly into the sun or get lost in tree tops or shatter when they hit the ground. I believe my prayers were answered on the evening of [DATE OF DEATH]. [Daughter about Father]

As a transcendence strategy that is frequently mentioned in relation to pain and suffering, eulogists assure the audience that their deceased loved ones were stoic in the face of death, were ready to die, and welcomed or accepted death. These 'good death' performances seemed to be statements intended to comfort the mourners, who presumably would be consoled to know that their loved ones accepted death and had died peacefully. In addition we suggest writing and delivering eulogies are performing acts of 'good death' by the eulogists.

> He didn't want me to think of his death as a big thing. He always said that we begin dying from the moment we are born… He wanted to fight this last battle and he fought to live until there was no strength left in him to fight. I watched him leave little by little until his body began to say 'enough.' As I stood by his bed several days before his death, I held his hand and thanked him for all the times we shared, and all he taught me. I told him how proud I was of him and I was glad that I turned out to be just like him and proud to be his

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daughter. He squeezed my hand and smiled and I will carry that memory with me for the rest of my life. [Daughter about Father]

The morning he died, I know he said, 'God please take me home.' And knowing he is there happy with God makes it a little easier. [Grandson about Grandfather]

Perhaps as a statement of faith, as an attempt to temper grief, or construct hope in the face of loss, eulogists often express the belief that they will again see their loved one in an afterlife.

Goodbye for now. [Father about Infant Son]

Let faith allow me to see your face again. Until then, you are still here. Rising with the sun. Setting upon the sea. [Daughter about Father]

Many eulogists also evoke an image of immortality through nature or a memory. Note in this next quote that the speaker places the burden on the listeners to maintain that immortality.

I would remind you, every time you see a rose, especially on a sunny day, remember that beautiful smile that lit up the room like the sun lights up the sky, and say a prayer and remember our beautiful [DECEASED]. [Female friend for female friend]

He will always be here with us and in us through the memories that we have and by the values that he instilled in all of us by the life that he led. [Daughter about Father]

A final strategy to rhetorically transcend death through sensemaking is an attempt to answer difficult questions about the death. When a death is sudden, self-destructive, or especially painful (as in the case of suicide), the eulogy addresses the confusion and attempts to make sense of the death itself. In the following quotation, a eulogy for a person who committed suicide

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addresses societal beliefs about suicide head on, and voices the pain of the loved ones. This eulogist is intentional about assuring loved ones that they could not have prevented the suicide:

> Maybe like me you are asking yourself, "what could I have done or said or not done or said? Whatever the answer, my prayer is that you find in your heart to know you did everything you could. And [FRIENDS AND FAMILY], you know that strong, determined will of hers, and there's nothing more that you could have done. [Female friend about female friend]

That same eulogy for the suicide victim faces the issue of suicide head-on but reframes it to a more positive meaning, preserving the deceased's relational identity in the process:

> She left us in a very painful way that none of us can understand and never will understand. But, we must believe that she knew that her babies were in good hands. Hands that for some reason she was convinced weren't to be hers. But, she knew that [HUSBAND] would make sure that [FRIENDS AND RELATIVES] would do for [CHILDREN] what she never felt she could do. [Female friend about female friend]

Social Discourse

Finally, eulogies reinforce our social identity as they serve social functions of acknowledging appreciation and gratitude to those who assisted the deceased or the family in end-of-life needs and to those who attend the funeral or memorial service, and requesting future social support for the survivors. Interestingly, when we die, our social debt to those who cared for us at end-of-life seems to move onto our next of kin, who inherit our social obligation to express gratitude to our caregivers. Perhaps this acknowledgement allows the survivors to move forward free to accept more comfort from their community of caregivers.

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Our family has been overwhelmed at the outpouring of prayers, love, and support throughout this difficult journey. It has helped tremendously to be surrounded by so many who, like us, absolutely adored our beautiful [MOTHER]. [Daughter about Mother]

Some eulogists included gratitude to the deceased.

Thank you Mom and Dad for all the times when you greeted my visits and calls with a smile, and a sparkle in your eyes and in the sound of your voice. [Daughter about Mother]

Acknowledgment of the loss also involves requests for future social support for the surviving loved ones. Some of the eulogists asked those listening to care for the friends and family members remaining.

Remember to be there for [FAMILY], especially in the coming difficult weeks. Drop them a note, make a phone call, bring a simple meal, stop by and say hello. [Female friend about female friend]

Gendered Discourse

We claim that the eulogies by and about women reflect and sustain stereotypical representations of gender to some extent. Sometimes the eulogies describe the woman's virtues or her character, often in terms of how that character benefitted others or her beauty or physical appearance. Women are often described primarily in relation to others, with less mention of women's accomplishments unless they are relational ones. However, eulogies for men also focus on relational virtues and construct their own post-bereavement relationally identity, although they do have some gendered nuances which lend some support to 'self-in-relation' theory.

DISCUSSION

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Eulogies convey an identity message about both the deceased and the survivors. Eulogies serve a sensemaking function in many discursive ways, all related to construction of a social or relational identity. We all die in the middle of a story, and eulogies attempt to encapsulate these unfinished narratives. Eulogies go further, however, than simply summarizing lives into end stories. Eulogies are written retrospectively but set the stage for a re-imagined future. Eulogies serve a sensemaking function, but relationally—they help us make sense of a loved one's death, and of us and our relationship, in the face of a loved one's death—through many different types of discourse. We argue that in many cases this sensemaking function is a sanitized version of the life story, potentially bolstering the eulogists' positive reconstruction of their relational identity.

Eulogies are specific ritualized forms of communication in which the bereaved focus on self-identity as they articulate their experience of grief. Eulogies then serve a bereavement function, as they affirm and reconstruct our relational identity. Loss discourse acknowledges the loss and thus acknowledges the need for a new relational identity for the survivors. Relational discourse reminds us that death is both personal and communal, and they help us figure out who we were in relation to our loved one, and—most importantly—who we are now that our loved one has died. Through legacy discourse, using the life of the deceased as a model, eulogies suggest to those remaining how they should live their lives and thus provide identity construction for the survivors as they serve as a guidebook for living in the future. Virtues discourse helps us remember (memorialize) the deceased, giving a foundation to the legacies transferred to survivors, reminding us of relational virtues of the deceased, and reinforcing our identity relationally with the deceased. Transcendence discourse helps to construct order out of the chaos of death, giving sense to the unexplainable—suffering, dying, being out of control at the end-of-life. Transcendence discourse reconstructs the identity of the deceased in the language of immortality—sanctifying the dead;

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speaking them to a better place with previously deceased loved ones, to be seen again; to be understood someday. Finally, social discourse acknowledges and expresses gratitude for kindnesses extended in support of the deceased or family during the end-of-life process. This, we suggest, sets the stage for the loved ones to move forward as they let go of the past and construct a new social identity.

Throughout, we have noted similarities and differences between our coding scheme and the extant literature. This manuscript extends the existing literature on eulogies by bringing in a relational communication perspective to a topic that has previously primarily focused on psychological, *intra*personal, and therapeutic interpretations of eulogia. Using the lens from communication perspectives on framing and sensemaking, systems theory, and identity construction, we bring an important perspective to understanding how eulogies use communication to repair the social order torn by the death of a loved one. This is the first manuscript to describe how eulogies reconstruct identity for the survivors in relation to their deceased loved one. We also clearly show how eulogies serve as a specific type of rhetorical bereavement discourse and represent an early attempt for loved ones to cope with their relational loss. The systems theory concept of morphogenesis suggests that components of a system adapt to change and loss within the system (Archer, 1995). We suggest that eulogies represent a morphogenesis strategy in which people within a family, communal, or relational system reconstruct their identity in the experience of loss of a loved one. Because eulogies are publically enacted, they serve as a performative counter-discourse to regain our personal and social identity in the demise or alteration of this relational identity.

We also discussed the possibility of construction of gender identity in eulogies, and the eulogies we examined are gendered, but less so than might be expected. Virtually all eulogies we

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analyzed construct a social and communal identity with and for the deceased and the survivors. While some of the discourse have traditionally gendered tendencies (women valued for appearance and relational emotions, men valued for accomplishments and relational activities), such gendered construction of identity is less than expected. All deceased are acknowledged for their relational identity and all eulogists comfort themselves and other survivors with a reconstructed relational identity.

CONCLUSION

This project is unique in several regards. First, it is one of the first projects to explore the relational communicative aspect of eulogy discourse, rather than the psychological motivation behind eulogies as a form of grief discourse or the rhetorical dimensions of eulogies as public performances. In this manuscript, we uniquely extend the more familiar rhetorical or social psychological analyses of eulogies and bereavement that have characterized most past work on grief and end of life. Our study examines the communicative construction of identity in eulogies in ways that has not been seen or fleshed out in past scholarship. In addition, the eulogies examined in this manuscript are for non-famous, “normal” people. We note that the deceased or loved ones may not be public figures but their performances of eulogies are no less public or significant.

Death creates a relational liminality in which the surviving loved one is in a state of social liminality—between social roles, relationships, and contexts. Eulogies help survivors to move through this liminal state into a newly constructed identity. Eulogies serve a bridging function from life to after-life, by tying up a person’s life in a neat story of retrospective sensemaking (see Frank’s, 1995, discussion of “restitution narratives”), and reminding the loved ones that chapter of the story has closed. They also represent our public attempts to both memorialize the deceased and

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construct meaning out of their life and out of their death, both for them and for us. Eulogies give word to that which may be thought of as wordless—the ultimate ending, loss of self, loss of voice, loss of identity. Remembering the newly deceased requires transcendence of the corporeal. While eulogies help ground our memories in the past and present and move us into a new future, eulogists struggle with bridging that gap between the transcendent and the secular. Becker (1973) suggests one of our main projects in life is to deal with the knowledge of our own death, and Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), based on the ideas of Becker, maintains that humans are motivated by the desire to overcome our fear of death by constructing meaning and significance in our lives in various ways. We advocate that constructing an identity that transcends the death of a loved one gives us hope that we, too, will transcend death, we will attain immortality, symbolically at least.

The bereaved is, among other things, a performer in a cultural drama that asserts basic ides about the nature of life and death. These eulogies are identity performances that tell us who we are and how we are supposed to live our lives. They are guidebooks for our lives constructed from the lives of our deceased loved ones. Thus, eulogies do not just make sense of the lives of the deceased; they make sense of our lives as well, in the face of—in relation to—the lives of the deceased.

Although many denominations and religious traditions today restrict delivery of eulogies in funerals and memorial services and there are trends away from formal funeral services, we suggest that eulogies serve an important function in bereavement. We urge bereavement counselors, funeral home directors, mortuary workers, clergy, etc. to understand the myriad of purposes eulogies play in bereavement and the importance of retrospective sensemaking for the surviving loved ones. Feelings and communication of grief are complex and culturally situated. It is critical for bereavement counselors to consider approaches that blend narrative identity

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construction with ritualistic processes such as eulogizing to assist survivors in managing their grief.

In conclusion, this manuscript demonstrates what communication theory can contribute to our understanding of eulogy discourse. It takes a social constructionist stance and shows how a communicative approach to studying eulogies enables us to more thoroughly comprehend the phenomenon.

Limitations and Recommendations

We note several limitations to the eulogies we analyzed: first, all were composed ahead of time, written down, and delivered from a written script. We suggest that might have biased the eulogies submitted toward those more positive, praiseworthy, or more thoughtful. In addition, the role of racial and cultural preferences in delivery of eulogies should be considered. It is very possible that the request for a written manuscript in recruiting efforts might have created a bias toward Caucasian eulogists, for example. Future research should include other cultural constructions of eulogistic oratory. We also note that the eulogies were self-selected; eulogists might not have sent us their eulogies if their delivery of them had not gone well. Most of the eulogies we collected were delivered as part of religiously-oriented ceremonies, although today many funerals and memorial services are no longer held in places of worship. Future research should seek to understand the role of religious practices and beliefs in eulogies.

The gendered nature of eulogies is an intriguing consideration, one our sample was insufficient to thoroughly investigate. We propose future research conduct a thematic or content analysis with a larger, more representative and diverse sample of male and female eulogies.

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