

EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY¹

By CALLUM E. COOPER

ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of ancient civilisation humans have assigned themselves to the preparation of deceased individuals for funerary purposes, including but not limited to, bodily disposal, and related religious ceremonies. In modern day, we recognise this process under terms and job titles such as ‘funeral homes’, ‘funeral directors’ and ‘undertakers’. Such roles carry with them a variety of responsibilities. For example, duty coroners collecting cadavers, morticians, funeral home staff (e.g., receptionists, hearse drivers and pall bearers), and of course, the head funeral director. It has been previously proposed in the pioneering PhD research of Joanne McMahon (1987), that those working in the profession, around dead bodies, may be more prone than most people to psi type experiences, which are non-typical in the literature, given such persons rarely ever knew the deceased. This paper summarises McMahon’s work and relevant key literature, arguing for further professional investigation to be carried out into the exceptional experiences and psychology of those in the funeral profession. Such research is essential as it may help to provide new insights into such experiences, and also because such specific literature, at this stage of awareness and time, is severely limited.

INTRODUCTION

Although the majority of After-Death Communications (ADCs) are reported by the bereaved who knew the deceased (e.g. Cooper et al., 2015; Elsaesser et al., 2021; Gurney & Myers, 1889; Rees, 2010), it has been reported that those working in a profession where they deal with cadavers have reported psi themed phenomena (Francart, 2021; Krippner, 2006; McMahon, 1987). That is, a situation in which we have various individuals who most often have no personal attachment to the deceased people they are dealing with, and yet, a variety of psi themed experiences are reported. Thus, making them non-typical reports of ADCs, but still intertwined. The phenomena could range from a ‘sense of presence’ experience, smells and voices, all the way through to, apparitions, electrical disturbances and movements of doors and objects, etc. Hence, this article focuses specifically on this variety of exceptional experiences, what may also be termed psi-type experiences, that have been reported within the funeral industry, although scarcely researched to date in any formal capacity.

Some may consider the ‘corpse’ or ‘cadaver’, at this stage, nothing more than an empty shell, the representation of what once carried that individual around through life to live and to experience. Structured processes of disposing of the deceased – i.e., the ‘funeral’ – have been practiced for thousands of years in various cultures. Such practices can be seen in classical antiquity, especially within Greece, Rome and Egypt, through to religious traditions which extend to today, including Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh, and Islamic (cf. Kastenbaum, 1989; Parsons, 2018). Interestingly, records have also shown reports of exceptional experiences from those involved in the preparation of the body to ‘lay it to rest’ and around such burial sites and tombs (e.g. Ballentine, 2018; Cooper, 2011; Felton, 1999).

Nowadays, there is an increasingly popular humanist approach to funerals, which can often be family led and devoid of religious interventions (Engelke, 2015; Willson, 1989). Typically, these processes involve a preparation of the body, sometimes by family, but more often in Western culture, by funeral directors, their co-workers and coroners. Depending on religion and culture, there are quick disposals with funerals taking place within a day or so, through to a couple of weeks before any funeral ceremony takes place. The deceased may be prepared,

¹ I am grateful to the SPR’s Survival Research Committee for financial support of this topic area and research project, and more recently, the SRC’s support of Natalia Lavin as a research assistant in this project.

with various embalming fluids used to temporarily preserve the body from further decomposition, the body may be washed, hair washed and styled, re-clothed and makeup applied. Often the body is placed on display for the family to see and pay their last respects within a chapel of rest, with some cultures allowing display of the body in the coffin or casket at the funeral ceremony. Whatever the tradition and process – and there are many – given that funerals involve working around the subject of death and various cadavers, it would be fair to assume such professionals are more likely than any other to find themselves in circumstances where things happen that may appear exceptional – such as sounds, movements, and visions. Therefore, what evidence is there for funeral directors and their apprentices having psi themed experiences?

Experiences directly related to those in care of the dying and around cadavers were noted early on in such popular works, for example, as Barrett (1926), Snell (1959), and Osis and Haraldson (1977). Indeed, there are other such works of early researchers and in present times which would also add to these case collections, from the work of psychical researcher and astronomer, Camille Flammarion (1921a; 1921b; 1922), to neuropsychiatrist and neurophysiologist, Peter Fenwick (Fenwick & Fenwick, 2008). Despite the work that has been conducted to date on exceptional experiences concerning the study of death, consideration for such experiences within the context of the funeral industry are severely lacking in the known literature. Indeed, throughout my own research, I knew of only one formal study regarding psi phenomena reported by funeral home staff and coroners – and that is still the only study I am aware of.

From exploring much of the old and new literature of psychical research and parapsychology, which has focused on spontaneous case reports of ADCs, hauntings and survival, there are some mentions of experiences attributed to ‘the funeral setting’. However, these are by no means formal studies, but represent the reported experiences of funerary professionals or other such persons within funeral homes and related settings (i.e. morgues and crematoriums, through to church services and wakes), and these will be discussed in a later section. However, the initial aim of this article is to examine and discuss the 1987 doctoral thesis carried out by Joanne McMahon at Saybrook Institute (now Saybrook University), under the supervision and guidance of Stanley Krippner. As part of this research, McMahon also became a student of the San Francisco Mortuary School, which became an important place for her to further understand the profession, but also a prime place in which to signpost her own research and collect willing participants.

McMahon’s rationale for the project was based on several observations deemed worthy of investigation after examination of the existing literature on ADCs and thanatological works (cf. Coly & McMahon, 1993; Rogo, 1974: for overlaps between parapsychology and thanatology). Funeral directors, apprentices and morticians were chosen to be questioned on any spontaneous psi experiences they believe they may have had in the industry because of the following points (McMahon, 1987, p.26):

1. They are in direct contact with the bereaved and the deceased shortly after the time of death.
2. Funeral directors are less susceptible to many superstitious attitudes associated with death because mortuaries, caskets, corpses and cemeteries are an everyday part of their working environment.
3. The emotional impact of death on a family is not shared by the funeral director.
4. As professionals in the field, funeral directors have the advantage of dealing with a large number of families per year.

The study involved 50 participants, which consisted of 35 funeral directors and 15 apprentices (9 females (18%) and 41 males (82%), aged between 18-82 years, mean age of 38 years). The level of experience was as varied as the age range, from 5 months experience to 55 years (mean of 15 years). Of the sample, 29 were living in, or had previously lived in, a mortuary – with an average length of residency being 3 years. Most came from Roman Catholic and Protestant faith, with only 7 listed as ‘other’ or ‘no faith’ but at the time of the study, approximately half were still practicing the faiths they had come from or been raised in. Within this group, 42 (84%) believed in some form of afterlife or ‘something out there’ and 44 (88%) were accepting of people having exceptional (i.e., anomalous/paranormal) experiences (levels of that belief strength were near equally mixed (very strong (16 / 32%), strong (18 / 36%), not strong (16 / 32%)).

One of the most detailed accounts McMahon had reported to her, came from a 29-year-old male funeral director. He invariably worked from 5:00pm through till 7:30am, and up until 9:00pm in the evening his main job was to deal with clients and visitors coming into the funeral home. From 9:00pm through till morning he could sleep unless he had a call from the authorities that a cadaver was to be brought in, at which time he’d prepare things and make a call for the pickup to take place. Before going to the night office at 9:00pm, he’d walk through the entire building to do some final checks, he states as follows:

“[I’d] make sure the building, you, know, the doors were all locked up and people were actually out of the building. The place that this happened at was a very large place; we did about 1,400 a year [body collections]. One night my last stop before I locked up the main doors into the building was to check the public restrooms and turn out all lights to the visitation rooms and such. Did that and everything was going along just good. I went back to the dormitory where the night people slept at and was doing homework. The next day we had a test and had to use a number 2 pencil. So I walked up to the office to get a number 2 pencil for the test the next day and as I came up the hallway (pause) Been to Disneyland? The haunted mansion? That one scene where they’ve got the candelabra that appears to be floating around at the end of the hallway. That is identical to what the hallway looked like in the mortuary that I worked in. We had like 12 visitation rooms down this hallway and down at the end was a candelabra. I was coming up the hallway, the lights were all out and such and as I came up to the front of the lobby I heard water running in the public bathroom that was at 9 o’clock I know for a fact the building was completely empty, there was nobody in there and the water was off. So I thought, well, it’s either somebody’s broken in or (pause) I didn’t know what was going on so I walked back to the dormitory and picked up a Louisville Slugger, a 38 Louisville Slugger [baseball bat]. I kept that readily available because the first night that I worked in the mortuary at night, on the night shift, we got broken into at about 3 o’clock in the morning. So as I came up the hallway, bat in hand and everything because I didn’t know what to expect, I opened the door to the public bathroom. The lights were on and I know they were off because I turned them off. And it was really wild because the water basin, the water wasn’t turned on a little bit where the water was just kinda dripping out, that sucker was open full bore. It was cold water.”

He went on to mention how sure he was – repeatedly – that no one was in the building. And that the water had been on for some time due to condensation, and also that it ‘had’ been checked as anyone doing the night shift had to be going through the building with a clipboard and checklist to make sure various things had been checked and done before locking up. It had unsettled him, but he had no doubts about the checks he had made. He left the bathroom, and continued as follows from his interview transcript:

“I was kinda looking down the hallway and came to a screeching halt because I saw somebody standing at the end of the hallway where the candelabra was. I stopped for a second and I kinda raised my head so that I could look right through my glasses themselves. I swear there was a person standing there. It was an old man. He was standing there in like

a baggy set of trousers. He had a red plaid shirt on, like a lumberjack shirt, and he had his hat in his left hand. He was just standing there, very peaceful looking. We locked eyes. I couldn't tell you how long we sat there and looked at each other. It seemed like forever but it really startled me and I just stood there staring at this guy and he was staring at me. I could see right through him. All of a sudden it was just like a picture being turned off a television. It just kinda faded away" (McMahon, 1987, pp. 59-63).

Following the experience he returned to the night office and locked the door. He didn't tell anyone about it for some time, until he finally confided in the receptionist. She then informed him that the apparition he'd visualised matched the description of someone called Clyde McQuinney. He was one of the founders of that particular mortuary and cemetery. The experient was also not the first person to have encountered Mr McQuinney. The apparition had also been seen and reported by the florist for the funeral home, in his premises, with spontaneous movements of objects also reported within the shop.

The participants in this study also responded to 'generalisations' of the funeral profession. For example, when asked if the mortuary felt different when a suicide or homicide victim was brought in, slightly more than half (27 / 54%) believed that it *did* feel different in instances of violent death (see Haraldsson, 2009 – on apparitions and violent deaths). Many attributed this to the emotions of the family, and the tense atmosphere that it caused, intensifying the natural grief process. A funeral director of 7 years, commented to MacMahon (1987, p. 51) on this particular point stating "There's just a different atmosphere. Different things seem to happen as far as the air, even the noise. It's a little noisier but the words are more coherent".

Of the 50 funeral directors and apprentices approached for interview and completing surveys, 80% (40) reported having experiences which could be categorised as psi related. Experiencing a 'sense of presence' was the most common of the phenomena – much like in the findings of ADC studies (e.g. Cooper et al., 2015; Elsaesser et al., 2021; Rees, 1971; Steffen & Coyle, 2012) – with 64% (32) relating to this or a feeling of being watched. Most experiences occurred when the person was alone, and usually within the preparation room when the funeral director or apprentice was embalming, washing hair, shaving, adding makeup to the cadaver, or preparing the casket. The chances of someone having a collective case experience (multiple witnesses to the event (see Tyrrell, 1953, pp.69-73) was considered small since this process of preparation was usually done alone. The strength of presence in these instances could vary, sometimes it would be so small it was considered an insignificant feeling. For others, the experience could be very significant. For example, as reported by a male funeral director of 15 years' experience:

"I felt like someone was standing directly behind me but not actually touching me. Did you ever have the feeling like if you're in the room and someone comes in and all of a sudden you know someone's there? Well, that was the situation. It was the only time, in all the years I've been in the funeral business. I was in a funeral home in upstate New York working for 4 years. It was a three story; the bottom level was the selection room and embalming room. It was in 1977 in August. The only reason I know about that was because I was embalming an elderly lady and we had a little radio in this prep room and it was on and it was right after Elvis died. Remember, they talked about it for days? I was doing my work and listening. All of a sudden, I got the strangest feeling that somebody was standing behind me. In fact, it was so strong I turned around and looked. I shrugged it off, you know. I continued to work and oh, one minute, two minutes later, I don't know what time, I felt it again. I was sorta spooked, so as to speak. I stopped; I took a break; I went outside, smoked a cigarette. I forgot what I did but I took a break for 10 minutes or so and then I went inside and finished my work. Well, in the 11 years I've been licensed and the 15 years or so I've been in the business that has never happened before then or after" (McMahon, 1987, pp. 53-54).

Various auditory (19/ 38%) and visual (13/ 26%) experiences were reported. These ranged from footsteps, voices, knocking and unidentifiable sounds, and with visual movements, shadows and corner of the eye phenomena, through to distinct apparitions reported. One funeral director of 30 years' experience had periodically seen the apparition of an elderly Asian man in the mortuary. There was no specific time or location within the mortuary for his appearance, it was always purely spontaneous and the location would change.

McMahon (1987) concluded that with the intent of this study being to see whether funeral directors and apprentices report potential spontaneous psi experiences within their profession, she reported her findings to be "quite provocative". It could be taken from this comment that the data is certainly rich in content and worthy of further investigation given the uniqueness of the experiences and the situation, which had never been formally explored in this manner before. In questioning whether these are actually instances of psi, McMahon discussed whether most of the people she interviewed were naturally prone to psi. And, are high incidence of psi-type experiences typical of such professionals? The literature showed death to be a common situation whereby psi-type experience could be involved – thus, a natural hypothesis would be that anyone working with the dead may report a high incidence of psi type phenomena. All of these speculations, she noted, need to be examined further.

In reference to the work of Martin (1945), a mortician and funeral director who explored the psychology of the funeral service, McMahon (1987) noted in Martin's writing that the discussions of beliefs and superstitions are respected within funeral industry workers but not necessarily personally held. Indeed, the funeral director through to coroner, may have a natural interest to understand the human perspective on all of these beliefs held towards life and death, given their professional position in the middle of this life transition. But much like physicians and doctors, they must be professional and maintain some emotional and personal distance from the clients they serve. Given this, McMahon felt that it is unlikely people working within the funeral industry would fabricate their accounts of anomalous phenomena:

"Funeral directors are very serious and cautious about their jobs. Superstitions are considered frivolous and comic but have no place in the sincere side of the business. This is evidenced by a statement from a funeral director on the psychology of the funeral service. "There are today organizations attracting sizeable groups of people that pretend to demonstrate the existence of 'spirits from the other world.' Man is still highly superstitious" (Martin, 1977, p.16). This illustrates the somewhat trivial attitude toward the subject matter. Because of this and because I have reason to believe that this is the typical attitude, it is unlikely that funeral directors would fabricate their stories" (McMahon, 1987, p.43).

This does not mean that the mindset of all who work in the profession comes from a place of anti-superstition or perhaps even cynical attitudes towards anomalous phenomena. McMahon's (1987) study was just the first tentative approach to explore this domain, with a sample of 50 within San Francisco alone, and now over 30 years ago. Indeed, surveys *have not* been conducted in this manner on the paranormal belief, afterlife belief, superstitious belief and religiosity of those who work in the funeral industry. There are such validated scales for these topics, and more, which could be applied to assess the general feelings of a given sample of people who work in the profession. There are certainly some funeral directors who are the exception to Martin's (1945) observations, and McMahon found many of her participants where open to and accepting of exceptional experiences through to an afterlife, and held faith, while practicing it had declined over time. Cooksley (2010), as just one example, published her accounts of psi experiences throughout her life, and holds more than 30 years of experience in the funeral industry and is certified by the National Association of Funeral Directors. She states:

“At some time in our life we are likely to hear of some kind of phenomenon, an experience that we cannot explain. In fact anything remarkable. You may hear about a ghost, unexplained happenings, people who have seen or felt things before they happened” (Cooksley, 2010, p.6).

This alone demonstrates that even though McMahon’s (1987) initial assumptions that those working in the funeral profession maybe more sincere about their experiences, their sincerity will not always come from a place where the professional stance is to not hold or simply reject such claims. Perhaps, even from the time of Martin’s (1945) initial statements on this, to McMahon’s (1987) study, perceptions and openness towards death and related exceptional experiences were increasing in public – and in professional – acceptance. Some would argue that this is thanks to the research by Rees (1971), or indeed, the popular work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969; 1991). Today, a wide range of literature and empirical studies have been generated regarding how we interact with and report exceptional experiences, and how they impact on our psychological health (Steffen et al., 2018). We are all human after all, some in the funeral profession maybe sympathetic sceptics through to outright believers, for various reasons.

Conducting a further literature search of exceptional experiences in the funeral industry has produced next to nothing. It is clear that the data is there, but surprisingly has gone unstudied and seldom documented, as demonstrated in what I found in an initial wider search summarised in the next section. I was, however, fortunate during 2021 to be conducting interviews as a co-host on the BBC Radio show *Science Detectives*. The show’s premise is to interview people involved in various sciences and professions that the public has questions about. The funeral industry came up as one profession, and Donna Francart was interviewed about her time in the industry as a deputy coroner in the United States. She had also recently published her diary accounts of the profession, in which exceptional experiences are periodically presented (Francart, 2021). Her experiences ranged from the finding of white feathers near bodies in the funeral home, with seemingly no apparent source, to clocks chiming random numbers at non-hourly times, seemingly in response to when speaking to, and comforting, the recently deceased. Synchronicities relating to numbers and times were noted. Spontaneous messages of mediums regarding ‘thanks’ from the cadavers she’d cared for at work. Personal experiences in the family home of the apparition of a young boy also seen by her parents, where bare footprints of a child (definite small human foot formations with 10 toes) were also found on the kitchen worktop and photographed. With final discussion on the repeated smell of cigarette smoke as if someone were following her around. If more autobiographies and published diaries of those in the funeral industry were systemically examined, it is likely that other similar accounts would be mentioned and serves to add to the case being made in this paper.

SERVICES, WAKES AND GRAVEYARDS

In this section experiences associated with the funeral industry will be briefly discussed. This is to demonstrate, from what literature has been sourced, that such exceptional experiences are not just limited to funeral directors and their apprentices but have been reported by others in circumstances which surround the funeral profession and the symbolism of ‘laying one to rest’ (i.e. bodily disposal). People have reported experiences during funeral services, while at wakes (the social gathering which typically follows the official service and disposal of the body), through to graveyards and symbolic experiences involving coffins and caskets which suggest potential psi processes at work. These reports further build a case for exceptional experiences surrounding the funeral process, but then bring back the element of potential grief and personal loss being partly responsible for how and why the experience was generated,

unlike in the case of funeral directors and their apprentices. Even so, below are some further examples identified as part of the funeral process, or related symbolism.

This first case concerns an apparitional experience at Mansfield Crematorium during a funeral ceremony. Jane Peters – a writer on ghosts and hauntings of the Ashfield district of Nottinghamshire, UK, in the 1990s – had collected various day-to-day accounts of exceptional experiences. ‘Joe – The Kirkby Ghost’ just so happened to be reported within the context of the funeral setting – which is quite unique (Peters, 1996). To summarise the account, living in the local mining community Mr G, a coal miner, lost a close friend of his of some 30 years plus, a fellow coal miner called Joe. They were part of a group of mining friends who met regularly. Joe was the practical joker of the group and had distinctive blue eyes. His death was caused by a progressive lung condition. All of his friends, including Mr G, visited him while in hospital. And on the day of the funeral they all attended at the packed crematorium, due to Joe having a large number of family and many friends. Peters (1996, pp. 47-49) states as follows from having interviewed Mr G:

“Towards the end of the service, when all heads were bowed as the vicar said prayers, Mr G happened to look up. His gaze seemed drawn to the covered coffin which stood at the front, to the left of the congregation. To his astonishment he saw, standing next to the coffin, the figure of his deceased friend Joe. Mr G blinked, thinking he was seeing things because of his tear filled eyes but no, Joe was still there as real as everyone else in the room! Mr G’s heart missed a beat and he felt the blood drain from his face. Joe looked just as he always did when he was alive. His eyes were twinkling merrily and he had a grin on his face as if he were enjoying a huge joke. It seemed as if he were looking straight at Mr G. Then with a flamboyant wave of his right hand, he suddenly disappeared. Mr G glanced around at the bowed heads around him to see if anyone else had noticed the strange phenomenon but it was obvious that no one had”.

There is some documentation of people reporting exceptional experiences during the wake. For example, two weeks following the passing of her husband, Jane Smith was attending to guests at the wake and reported the following experience:

“My brother-in-law and his girlfriend sat down at the table with their drinks and they put the girlfriend’s drink right on the inside of the table, and the drink proceeded to be pushed off [as if by unseen hands] the table and fell on the floor, and the actual glass landed up, it didn’t fall it landed actually on the actual base... the drink spilt but the glass didn’t smash” (Cooper, 2018a, p. 208).

Jane had had experiences of this nature not only as a nurse working in end of life care, but regarding her own husband, she reported experiences immediately following his death which began with electrical disturbances – particularly with her mobile phone (see Cooper, 2012) – and then sense of presence experiences. She had told no one about her experiences. Although she did not personally witness the glass moving at the wake, she was called over immediately. The brother-in-law was highly sceptical of such experiences and subsequently became more open-minded. Not only did he and his girlfriend witness the glass move out and then fall, so too, did seven other witnesses.

Other experiences identified from within the literature have included people having sense of presence phenomena and the witnessing of apparitions, when unknowingly in the presence of concealed coffins which had held cadavers at some point. This is noted in the case of *The Renishaw Coffin* within the work of Charles Lindley, Viscount Halifax (Lindley, 1939). To the seemingly inexplicable movement of coffins and caskets in Barbados (Cohen, 1984) and within the sealed and guarded burial tomb in the town of Ahrensburg, on the Latvian island of Oesel (Ouitanon, 1950). And, visions of ‘apparitional coffins’ deterring people from paths to their own certain death (Stemmer, 1955), or seen to symbolise serious illness within family or for oneself (C. M., 1961). Cases have been noted of corpses *allegedly* pointing out their murders

(Dyall, 1954), and dreams of funeral processions shortly before the deceased within the waking state has actually met their demise (Owen, 1860). And indeed, countless stories of haunted graveyards and burial sites from ancient to more recent times (cf. Ballentine, 2018; Cooper, 2011). Although all such accounts are open to speculation, many were subjected to thorough investigation at the time to find conventional explanations, and yet, some still appear to slip that net and are worthy of further investigation.

CONCLUSION

There are many conventional explanations we could turn to for why people report such experiences. Certainly for psychology, various perceptual mistakes added to beliefs, expectancy and anticipation, could account for the experience (e.g. Klemperer, 1992) and indeed, environmental factors could also play a significant part (e.g. O’Keeffe & Parson, 2010; Parsons & Cooper, 2015). However, if these can be ruled out, or at least accounts where conventional explanations posing the likely outcome are placed to one side (see Cooper, 2018a,b, for discussions of this process), exceptional experiences of the funeral industry could present favourable instances supportive of psi, or indeed, survival.

There is no sweeping ‘one size fits all’ explanation for a given case suggestive of survival. Debates have persisted for decades as to how far extra-sensory perception and psychokinetic phenomena – once all other explanations have been explored – could produce the illusion of survival for personality beyond death, or whether survival evidence can stand its ground independently (cf. Hart, 1959; Storm & Thalbourne, 2006). Harnessing ‘Occam’s Razor’ as a methodological approach to spontaneous cases, and a consistent filtering approach, could help sift out the more persuasive cases (Cooper, 2018b). From there a collection of the strongest cases could be assessed (see e.g., Cooper, 2020; Stokes, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c).

To turn our attention to the case of Mr McQuinney’s apparition, the experient’s report presents some interesting features which, *prima facie*, do not present many conventional explanations which would account for the experience. Indeed, there are extra elements which begin to lean the evidence in the direction of survival. The experient was not familiar with past experiences in the funeral home. Nor was he familiar with the founders of the business. Yet he reported clear details of the apparition, which were later confirmed – by another member of staff – to be one of the founders of the funeral home. The same apparition had been reported by the florist. We could assume the experient had seen a photograph somewhere of this person when alive, and unconsciously taken it in (i.e., cryptomnesia). But it does beg the question of why in those particular events such a memory would be reproduced as an unfamiliar apparition of specific detail, through to a hat being held in one hand. In addition to the self-assurance that the restroom light and tap of running water were not turned on at the time final night checks were made.

The exceptional experiences of the funeral industry tell us very little about ‘what survives’. However, they certainly present unique features comparable to certain ADC cases – thus, offering *potential support* for survival. These are instances where additional elements of unknown information received (i.e., the description of Mr McQuinney) and multiple witnesses, begin to make conventional explanations harder to apply. In conclusion, I would say that this is where the ‘exceptional experiences of the funeral industry’ could offer further support to the case of survival for psychical research. The experiences suggestive of psi or survival within the funeral industry are no different to that of any other ADC in their characteristics. What makes them unique and offers cases of ‘stronger merit’ is that the experients are, generally, emotionally detached and work within a profession that deals with death.

This area of research, at present, has received little scientific attention besides the pioneering work of McMahan (1987), as made clear within this paper. As such, there is much more to be explored and assessed. Given how many established funeral businesses there are, and the

volume of people working within this industry, there is a wealth of data from such experiences yet to be collected and explored, which could provide vital information to psychological researchers and parapsychologists investigating the question of survival. In turn, such gathering of data in the industry would help to further map the psychology of the funeral industry for any social scientist taking on this task (cf. Klicker, 2007; Martin, 1945), while of course, the wider topic of thanatology is well served in textbooks (e.g. Kastenbaum, 2000, 2018; Parkes et al., 2018; Penfold-Mounce, 2018). The specific focus on the funeral industry is indeed lacking, but increasing numbers of textbooks, and contributed chapters, are showcasing the importance of investigating exceptional experience surrounding the matter of death (e.g. Betty, 2008; Byerly, 2021; Earle et al., 2010; Klass & Steffen, 2018).

Once again, McMahon (1987) demonstrated how truly spontaneous these experiences can be in the funeral industry, even when emotional attachment to the deceased cannot be turned to as a conventional explanation for the occurrence. Personal beliefs, expectancy and anticipation alone, might account for many reports of exceptional experiences. But this does not fully account for instances of movements of objects, multiple witnesses, or the witnessing of Mr McQuinney's apparition. This industry, and those who work within it, demand further investigation and phenomenological mapping of such experiences.

CALLUM E. COOPER

Centre for Psychology and Sociological Sciences

University of Northampton

callum.cooper2@northampton.ac.uk

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4747-0363>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Since drafting this paper, originally as a book chapter in 2021, Prof. Chris Roe and I have taken on a doctoral candidate looking into these specific experiences. If you have had any experiences related to the funeral industry, or would simply like to get in touch regarding this paper, please also consider emailing Natalia Lavin: natalia.lavin@northampton.ac.uk

We would especially appreciate our attention being drawn to any articles, chapters or books, not mentioned within this paper, regarding exceptional experiences and the funeral industry.

REFERENCES

- Ballentine, K. (2016). *Ghosts and graveyards in the news 1844-1922*. CreateSpace/Amazon.
- Barrett, W. (1926/2011). *Deathbed visions*. White Crow Books.
- Betty, L.S. (2008). Why an investigation of paranormal experiences should be an essential component of a course on death. In C. M. Moreman (Ed.) *Teaching death and dying* (pp.261-276). Oxford University Press.
- Byerly, T.R. (Ed.) (2021). *Death, immortality and eternal life*. Routledge.
- C., M. (1955). Warnings come in floating coffins. *Fate*, 14 (4), 71-73.
- Cohen, D. (1984). *Encyclopedia of ghosts*. Fraser Stewart.
- Coly, L., & McMahon, J. D. S. (Eds.). (1993). *Parapsychology and thanatology: Proceedings of an international conference*. Parapsychology Foundation.

- Cooksley, J. C. (2010). *Believe it or not! A lifetime of paranormal experiences*. AuthorHouse.
- Cooper, C. E. (2011). The Ka of ancient Egypt. *Paranthropology*, 2 (3), 43-45.
- Cooper, C.E. (2012). *Telephone calls from the dead* [2nd printing, 2024]. Tricorn Books.
- Cooper, C. E. (2018a). Considering anomalous events during bereavement as evidence for survival. In D. Klass, & E.M. Steffen (Eds.) *Continuing Bonds: New Directions for Research and Practice* (pp. 201-213). Routledge.
- Cooper, C. E. (2018b). *A Parapsychological Inquiry into Purportedly Anomalous Telecommunication Phenomena with Considerations of their Contribution to the Survival Hypothesis Debate*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK.
- Cooper, C. E. (2020). Favouring the grey crows [Letter to editor]. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 20, 95-98.
- Cooper, C. E., Roe, C. A., & Mitchell, G. (2015). Anomalous experiences and the bereavement process. In T. Cattoi, & C. Moreman (Eds.), *Death, Dying and Mysticism: The Ecstasy of the End* (pp. 117-131). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dyall, V. (1954). The corpse that winked. *Fate*, 7 (6), 46-53.
- Earle, S., Bartholomew, C., & Komaromy, C. (Eds.) (2010). *Making sense of death, dying and bereavement: An anthology*. Sage / Open University.
- Elsaesser, E., Roe, C. A., Cooper, C. E., & Lorimer, D. (2021). The phenomenology and impact of hallucinations concerning the deceased. *BJPsych Open*, 7(5), e148.
- Engelke, M. (2015). Humanist ceremonies: The case of non-religious funerals in England. In A. Copson & A.C. Grayling (Eds.) *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of humanism* (pp. 216-233). John Wiley & Sons.
- Felton, D. (1999). *Haunted Greece and Rome: Ghost stories from classical antiquity*. University of Texas Press.
- Gurney, E., & Myers, F. W. (1889). On apparitions occurring soon after death. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 5, 403-485.
- Haraldsson, E. (2009). Alleged encounters with the dead: The importance of violent death in 337 new cases. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 73, 91-118.
- Hart, H. (1959). *The enigma of survival: The case for and against an afterlife*. Rider & Co.
- Kastenbaum, R. (1989). Funerals. In R. Kastenbaum & B Kastenbaum (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Death* (pp. 120-126). Oryx Press.
- Kastenbaum, R. (2000). *The psychology of death* (3rd ed.). Springer.
- Kastenbaum, R. (2018). *Death, society and human experience*. Routledge.
- Klass, D., & Steffen, E.M. (Eds.) (2018). *Continuing bonds in bereavement: New directions for research and practice*. Routledge.
- Klempner, F. (1992). Ghosts, visions, and voices: Sometimes simply perceptual mistakes. *British Medical Journal*, 305, 1518-1519.
- Klicker, R. (2007). *Funeral service psychology and counseling*. Thanos Institute.
- Krippner, S. (2006). Getting through the grief: After-death communication experiences and their effects on experiencers. In L. Storm & M. A. Thalbourne (Eds.) *The survival of human consciousness: Essays on the possibility of life after death* (pp. 174-193). McFarland & Co.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. Macmillan.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1991). *On life after death*. Celestial Arts.

- Fenwick, P., & Fenwick, E. (2008). *The art of dying*. Continuum.
- Flammarion, C. (1922a). *Death and its mystery: Before death*. T. Fisher Unwin.
- Flammarion, C. (1922b). *Death and its mystery: At the moment of death*. T. Fisher Unwin.
- Flammarion, C. (1923). *Death and its mystery: After death*. T. Fisher Unwin.
- Francart, D. (2021). *I've seen dead people: Diary of a deputy coroner*. Jongleur Books.
- Lindley, C. (1939). *Lord Halifax's ghost book* [abridged edition]. Geoffrey Bles.
- Martin, E. A. (1945/1977). *Psychology of funeral service*. Sentinel.
- McMahon, J. D. S. (1987). *Reported Spontaneous Psi Experiences in the Funeral Industry*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Saybrook Institute, San Francisco, California, USA.
- O'Keeffe, C., & Parsons, S. T. (2010). Haunting experiences: An integrative approach. In M. D. Smith (Ed.) *Anomalous experiences: Essays from parapsychological and psychological perspectives* (pp. 108-119). McFarland.
- Osis, K., & Haraldsson, E. (1977/2012). *At the hour of death*. White Crow Books.
- Ouitanon, F. J. (1950). The Ahrensburg mystery. *Fate*, 4 (4), 33-36.
- Owen, R. D. (1860). *Footfalls on the boundary of another world*. J. B. Lippincott & Co.
- Parkes, C.M., Laungani, P. & Young, B. (2018). *Death and bereavement across cultures* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Parsons, B. (2018). *The evolution of the British funeral industry in the 20th century*. Emerald.
- Parsons, S. T., & Cooper, C. E. (Eds.). (2015). *Paracoustics: Sound and the paranormal*. White Crow Books.
- Penfold-Mounce, R. (2018). *Death, the dead and popular culture*. Emerald.
- Peters, J. (1996). *Haunted Ashfield*. North Trent Publishing.
- Rees, W. D. (1971). The hallucinations of widowhood. *British Medical Journal*, 4, 37-41.
- Rees, [W.] D. (2010). *Pointers to eternity*. Y Lolfa.
- Rogo, D. S. (1974). Parapsychology – It's contributions to the study of death'. *Omega, Journal of Death and Dying*, 5, 99-113.
- Steffen, E., & Coyle, A. (2015). Sense of presence experiences in bereavement and their relationship to mental health: A critical examination of a continuing controversy. In C. D. Murray (Ed.) *Mental health and anomalous experience* (pp. 33-56). Nova.
- Steffen, E., Wilde, D., & Cooper, C. E. (2018). Affirming the positive in anomalous experiences: A challenge to dominant accounts of reality, life and death. In N. J. L. Brown, T. Lomas, & F. J. Eiroá (Eds.) *International handbook of critical positive psychology: A synthesis for social change* (pp. 227-244). Routledge.
- Stemmer, C. C. (1955). Saved by a coffin. *Fate*, 8 (6), 73-75.
- Stokes, D. M. (2017a). White crows rising: Using spontaneous cases to establish psi. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 17, 47-60.
- Stokes, D. M. (2017b). A murder of white crows: Additional cases of unequivocal spontaneous psi. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 17, 171-186.
- Stokes, D. M. (2017c). Correspondence. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 17, 228.
- Storm, L., & Thalbourne, M. A. (Eds.). (2006). *The survival of human consciousness: Essays on the possibility of life after death*. McFarland.
- Snell, J. (1959). *The ministry of angels: Here and beyond*. The Citadel Press.

Tyrell, G.N.M. (1953). *Apparitions*. Gerald Duckworth & Co.

Willson, J. W. (1989). *Funerals without God*. British Humanist Association.