



Domes and the Dead

An Example of Extreme Fatalism among Mortuary Workers in Bangladesh

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Domes in Dhaka are a group exposed to extremely unpleasant, stressful and psychologically damaging working conditions and cultural marginalisation. In observing them and speaking with them, two questions are obvious: why do they do it and how do they cope? The answer to the first question seems to be that they accept their position, more through extreme fatalism than any sense of reward or worth. The answer to the second seems to lie partly in their relationship with the dead bodies, to which they attribute powers and motives, and partly in resorting to alcohol, linked to an apparent immunity from the normal restrictions placed on alcohol consumption in Bangladesh.

In modern society, many people live a lifetime and never see a dead body. Perhaps because we prefer to deny death,¹ we no longer expect to deal with the deceased, and thus the mortuary is a separate place, detached from common experience. There is likely to be a cultural dimension to the experience of those who habitually deal with dead bodies, but many studies have focused on the developed world, mainly within a secular context.²

In the West at least, those who do choose mortuary or funeral work as a career may find it rewarding.³ Nevertheless, those working with death can be seen as “less than human,”⁴

1 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: New York Free Press, 1973).

2 James E. McCarroll et al., “Handling Bodies After Violent Death: Strategies for Coping,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 63 (1993): 209–14; Spencer E. Cahill, “Emotional Capital and Professional Socialization: The Case of Mortuary Science Students (and Me),” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62 (1999): 101–16; Pam Garden, “Rising From the Dead: Delimiting Stigma in the Australian Funeral Industry,” *Health Sociology Review* 10 (2001): 79–87; Linda M. Goldenhar et al., “Psychosocial Work Stress in Female Funeral Service Practitioners,” *Equal Opportunities International* 20 (2001): 17–38; Mindy E. Bergman and Katherine M. Chalkley, “‘Ex’ Marks a Spot: The Stickiness of Dirty Work and Other Removed Stigmas,” *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 12 (2007): 251–265.

3 Cahill, “Emotional Capital and Professional Socialization: The Case of Mortuary Science Students (and Me).”

4 Garden, “Rising From the Dead: Delimiting Stigma in the Australian Funeral Industry.”

or on the edge of society.⁵ They may suffer from work-related emotional and psychological disturbance,⁶ and may adopt emotional beliefs relating to the relationship between themselves and the deceased in order to cope.⁷

Few studies have been done with mortuary workers in developing countries. The purpose of this phenomenological interpretive study was to gather and consider the views of mortuary workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where the stresses of working with death are likely to be compounded with the pressures of poverty. Mortuary workers in the sub-continent tend to be drawn from poor or disadvantaged communities. These groups may be known as *dalits* (literally: downtrodden, crushed) or by other names such as *Asprysa*, *Achut*, *Chandala*, *Harijan*, Scheduled Caste, or Untouchable.⁸ It is recognised that individuals in these groups are subject to significant pressures, whatever their profession, which may result in psychological problems. For example, individuals from scheduled castes are more likely to be regular alcohol users.⁹

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Teesside University. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the management of the mortuaries involved. Participation was voluntary with informed consent. The research methodology was designed to avoid deception and physical or emotional harm to the participants. Confidentiality, data security, and safety for respondents were assured. As respondents were generally illiterate, this was done verbally in the local language. Respondents' original names have been changed.

Selection of study group and data collection

An interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological research approach¹⁰ was adopted in order to provide an understanding of mortuary workers' beliefs and perceptions. The term "hermeneutics", of Greek origin,¹¹ which is philosophical in nature, can be used as the theory and

5 Bergman and Chalkley, "'Ex' Marks a Spot: The Stickiness of Dirty Work and Other Removed Stigmas."

6 Petra Brysiewicz, "The Lived Experience of Working in a Mortuary," *Accident and Emergency Nursing* 15 (2007): 88–93.

7 McCarroll et al., "Handling Bodies After Violent Death: Strategies for Coping."

8 Cosimo Zene, "Myth, Identity and Belonging: The Rishi of Bengal/Bangladesh," *Religion* 37 (2007): 257–281.

9 K..J. Neufeld et al., "Regular Use of Alcohol and Tobacco in India and its Association with Age, Gender, and Poverty," *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 77 (2005): 283–91.

10 Max Van Manen, "Phenomenology of Practice," *Phenomenology and Practice* 1 (2007): 11–30 and *Researching Lived Experience. Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Ontario: Althouse Press, 1990); Brysiewicz, "The Lived Experience of Working in a Mortuary;" Maura Dowling, "From Husserl to van Manen. A Review of Different Phenomenological Approaches," *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 44 (2007): 131–42.

11 'Hermeneuo' translated as 'interpret', from Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

practice of interpretation and understanding.¹² Within this framework, ethnographic data was collected using dialogue and third person listener techniques.¹³ Prior to data collection, the researcher made a number of extended visits to the mortuaries to become a familiar face to staff and to establish a good rapport with the respondents. This allowed the researcher to be an unobtrusive listener.¹⁴ Where possible, interviews were formally prearranged, but informal opportunities were also taken, at times and place where the participant's interest could be obtained and retained. Data analysis was conducted by using six activities for conducting hermeneutic phenomenological research as described by Allen and Jensen (1990) and Brysiewicz (2007).¹⁵

There are two official mortuaries in Dhaka. After initial observation, three distinct groups of workers were identified;

1. Forensic physicians and support staff;
2. Police employees responsible for the external physical examination of bodies;
3. Mortuary assistants involved in opening the body for examination by physicians and suturing the body prior to handing it over to the relatives.

This third group, defined by the local term “dome”, was observed to exhibit a significant group identity, sharing a distinctive manner, bearing and expression. A significant distinction was the language they used, which was not formal Bengali, but rather Bhojpuri, a combination of local dialect, Telegu, Bengali and Hindi. The group can be considered to consist of: (a) official domes, recruited and paid by the hospital; and (b) unofficial domes, generally relatives of the official domes, receiving payment from relatives of the deceased in return for help in dealing with the body. Hospital records revealed that the population of official domes was seven. Initial reconnaissance revealed that the population of unofficial domes was 14, giving a total population of 21. Inclusion criteria included any individual over 18 years of age who has been working in the mortuary at least for the last 6 months. From this, 17 participants were interviewed (7 official and 10 unofficial), 16 from 17 were male. The remaining unofficial domes (all male) were unavailable during the survey period; there was no obvious reason to consider that their non-inclusion led to significant bias.

Research was conducted in Bengali. Primary records were kept in Bengali and subsequently translated into English. Translations were intended to impart the style of Bhojpuri speech and to capture how the original would sound in English, so expressions that would be considered errors in Bengali have been translated directly without correction (indicated by *sic*). The translation was undertaken by one author (MP) and independently confirmed by two others (MS and KME). Further confirmation of fidelity of translation for quotes chosen

12 J.O. Urmson and Jonathan Rée, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Western Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

13 Masum A. Patwary, *Risk Assessment and Management Associated with Medical Waste Disposal in Bangladesh*, (PhD diss., Teesside University, 2010), 84–5.

14 Kathleen DeWalt, Billie R. DeWalt and C.B. Wayland, “Participation Observation”, in *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, ed. H.R. Bernard, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 259–299; A.K. Shenton, “Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research Projects,” *Education for Information* 22 (2004): 63–75.

15 Marion N. Allen and Louise Jensen, “Hermeneutical Inquiry, Meaning and Scope;” Brysiewicz, “The Lived Experience of Working in a Mortuary,” *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 12 (1990): 240–53.

for publication was undertaken by an independent verifier (see acknowledgments). Analyses were done in both languages.

Results: Coping

In order to cope with their livelihood activity, people adapt pragmatically to the present situation and emotionally by adopting several beliefs.

Shunil's story reveals the stress felt by domes during their early experiences working with the dead:

A few days after I started here, I was engaged to move a dead body from one place to another, when we moved the corpse it sounded like the dead body was snoring and trying to say something. Everyone in the mortuary was very scared.

Shawpan said he thought of bodies every moment, even in sleep. He spoke of, "dreams about cutting bodies . . . dead bodies walking in front of me." However, with time, some grow used to it:

The first day I walked into that morgue I had no idea how I would react. The smell made me a little dizzy, but the feeling passed . . . Now I am used to and feel comfort to work with deceased rather than live people [sic]."

Some experienced *domes* even claimed to prefer to work with the dead:

Dead bodies are more cool and polite. They never annoyed on us, never said us anything. If we do any mistake they never came to us with bossing mood [sic].

Shankar was one of the few who mentioned that he found comfort in the responses of relatives: "People like us [because we] have done such work."

Many *domes* were observed to resort to alcohol abuse. Ujjol indicated that, without alcohol, he and his colleagues couldn't do this job (which he described as "inhuman") properly. He also commented, however, that even though alcohol is strictly restricted by the government, he felt safe from those restrictions,

My friend and I are needed and wanted to drink this. It gave us peace of mind and body. [Because] I am a dome nobody will disturb or punish me to have this drink [sic].

Western studies have found an inverse relationship between problematic alcohol use and both level of education¹⁶ and socio-economic status.¹⁷ No Western study has reported a particular association between excessive alcohol use and mortuary work. In the sub-continent, an association between alcohol abuse and lower caste has been reported, associated with fewer prohibitions against alcohol use compared with individuals from higher castes.¹⁸ It is

16 Rosa M. Crum et al., "Level of Education and Alcohol Abuse and Dependence in Adulthood: a Further Inquiry," *American Journal of Public Health* 83 (1993): 830–7.

17 Mariël Droomers et al., "Educational Differences in Excessive Alcohol Consumption: the Role of Psychosocial and Material Stressors," *Preventative Medicine* 29 (1999): 1–10; Shaila Khan et al., "A Structural Equation Model of the Effect of Poverty and Unemployment on Alcohol Abuse," *Addictive Behaviors* 27 (2002): 405–23.

18 Indra Munshi Saldanha, "On Drinking and "Drunkenness": History of Liquor in Colonial India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23 (1995): 23–31; Himanshu

not surprising, therefore, that *domes* resort to alcohol, even in the face of official restrictions. The alternative hypotheses, that those who already use alcohol take up work as *domes* because of the relative lack of restriction, or because they are already desensitised, is not supported by these data.

Fatalism

There is a link between fatalism and poverty.¹⁹ Of Feagin's three rationalisations of the causes of poverty,²⁰ the poor themselves are perhaps most likely to attribute poverty to fate.²¹ Within a caste system, lower castes may rationalise their position through religious fatalism.²² In this study, most of the *domes* (fifteen from seventeen) identified themselves as Hindus from the lower, *dalit*, caste. There appeared to be many extreme examples of this among the *domes*. They often joined the profession from a family background and the majority of respondents were drawn from only six families. They seem to join the profession, and continue with it, due to a sense of fatalism. Alok's story is typical: "[T]his is my fate that I have to be involved in the family traditional occupation. Therefore I choose this profession as my father and grandfather [*sic*]." Hariya was also introduced to the job by his father,

There are many like myself...it is taboo to even think to way out from this cycle,... we have no way to leave out of the cycle of exploitation, if we try to [find a] way out from this cycle our fate will betray with us definitely [*sic*].

Bishu shared their fatalism, even though he had entered the profession from outside. He described how he had attended many interviews without luck, until the interview for mortuary assistant. He explained his success in this interview, whispering, "This is my fate, that I have to work in the mortuary."

The fear that *domes* felt about leaving the profession was possibly best illustrated by Tushar, who told a harrowing story about a former workmate:

One of our colleagues who died in a road accident and his wife who hanged herself and his only son was murdered. Once upon a time he worked with us. One day he said he will leave this job and will do other job to change his living status as this job was most lower class work. But his fate returns his full family by different ways back to the same mortuaries where he worked. They were so good people and their deaths so avoidable. These are the cases that hit me the hardest and we all were realised that we have no way to move out this life cycle.

K. Chaturvedi and Jagadish Mahanta, "Sociocultural Diversity and Substance Use Pattern in Arunachal Pradesh, India," *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 74 (2004): 97–104.

19 Debraj Ray, "Aspirations, Poverty and Economic Change," in *Understanding Poverty*, ed. A. Banerjee, R Benabou and D. Mookherjee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

20 Joe R. Feagin, *Subordinating the Poor: Welfare and American Beliefs* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1975).

21 Christopher T. Whelan, "Marginalization, Deprivation, and Fatalism in the Republic of Ireland: Class and Underclass Perspectives," *European Sociological Review* 12 (1996): 33–51; Göktug Morçöl, "Lay Explanations for Poverty in Turkey and Their Determinants," *Journal of Social Psychology* 137 (2005): 283–91.

22 Amrit R. Tuladhar, "Naming Anti-Developmental Attitudes," *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 21 (1994): 191–212.

If we try to way out of this occupation we have to come back again this mortuary by being dead body [sic].

All of the respondents attributed emotions, powers (*doibo shokti*) and motives to the deceased. Shajib believed that they determined his luck

I can understand my next future is good or not. When deceased looks at me with smile then I know that my problem will be solved within soon. I found this prove many times in my life [sic].

A conversation between Shajib and Alomoy was followed by the third-person listener approach:

Shajib: Would you like to go to start for your village tonight?

Alomoy: No, because I didn't get the clearance from the last previous body (deceased). She was looked at me with so angriness. Now I am thinking it will not good to start this time.

Shajib: I see . . . better wait. When the next one come you just go and try to get your permission.

Shajib believed that respect is required for the spirits of the dead (*oshoriri shokti*),

Sometimes it seems that [dead bodies] are always walking around me and observe my daily job . . . whether I do my work with respect to the deceased or not. I found myself many times that if I do my work with respect, the dead body comes in my dreams and show some sign for my good luck, but if do any wrong the dead body comes with some bad sign. Then I know that some bad is waiting for me [sic].

Shamol reflected on the history of those that have died and linked this to his own life: “[W]hen I am standing next to a stiff deceased, and I peer down into the lifeless face, I can't help but wonder . . . am I ready for my own ending by death [sic]?” But, on hearing this, Dipen countered, “It's part of life, there's no need to worry about it — when your time comes, it comes.”

Conclusion

It seems that here caste, culture and poverty have combined to create an extreme example of fatalism, which goes beyond rationalising disadvantage to the disadvantaged; it actively deters escape. Like others in their profession around the world,²³ the group suffer the compounded stresses of social ostracism and a uniquely unpleasant job. This can lead to dehumanisation.²⁴ Superimposed on this are the privations and exclusions associated with their position as *dalits*, so they find few rewards among the living and seek rewards in their relationships with the dead or through alcohol abuse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

23 Goldenhar et al., “Psychosocial Work Stress in Female Funeral Service Practitioners.”

24 Brysiewicz, “The Lived Experience of Working in a Mortuary.”

Authors acknowledge financial support from Charles Wallace Trust UK and Charles Wallace Trust Bangladesh, Mountbatten Memorial Grants, The Hammond Trust British Council, UK, The Leche Trust, UK, The Churches Commission Trust for data collection and research. We also thank to Md. Mizanur Rahman as an independent verifier for qualitative data translation from Bengali to English.

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