


Critical-feminist studies of funerals

A way to grasp the rite's complexity

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This article aims to show how critical-feminist studies can improve research on funerals by contributing to a more complex understanding of ritualization and how it can be explored. The article discusses central issues within critical-feminist theory in relation to previous studies of funerals in Sweden and presents theoretical approaches that may improve the field of funeral studies.

Intersectionality, queer phenomenology and ritual practice theory are introduced as examples of approaches that might help the researcher deal with questions of representation in research, rejection of othering and application of non-essentialism – central issues in critical-feminist theory. Critical-feminist studies may, for example, uncover intersections of power relations in the ritual field, reveal experiences of inclusion/exclusion and contribute to a relational and dynamic understanding of ritual practice. Thereby, they provide complex knowledge of funerals, essential for understanding their functions for individuals and societies in times of ritual change.

Introduction

During the twenty-first century, there has been a significant change in the ritualization of death in Western societies (e.g. Venbrux *et al.* 2013; Mathijssen 2017; Davies 2017). In Sweden, funerals performed in the Church of Sweden, which until recently dominated the ritual scene in the country, are decreasing in number. Instead, pri-

marily civil funerals, conducted outside religious organizations, have become more common. There is also a rise in burials without funeral ceremonies, so-called ‘direct cremation’ (Helgesson Kjellin *et al.* 2021), and funerals within minority religious communities. Not only the form of the funeral but also the ritual practices in funerals are changing (Høeg 2019, 2020; Helgesson Kjellin *et al.* 2021; Jarnkvist 2019). The increased differentiation actualizes the need for research that may uncover the complexity of the ritual landscape nowadays. This article aims to show how critical-feminist studies can improve funeral research by contributing to a deeper and more complex understanding of ritualization and how it can be explored. The article discusses central issues within critical-feminist theory in relation to previous studies of funerals in Sweden. It presents a few examples of how critical-feminist theories can improve the field of funeral studies. Even though the article focuses on research in Sweden, I argue that critical-feminist methodologies are valuable and needed in all funeral studies, regardless of geographical location.

'Drawing on ritual practice theory, I regard funerals, and other rituals,¹ as dynamic and without essential meanings. Instead, the ritual actors, that is, the participants construct the meanings in relation to the social contexts, of which the actors are a part (Bell 1997). My understanding of critical-feminist studies is that they challenge ingrained notions of, in this case, funerals and problematize the rite by, for example, applying a power-critical perspective in studies of them. Power-critical perspectives contribute to understanding how funerals often reinforce and challenge norms and values, and affect societal power relations. The theories provide a critique of ways of studying funerals in mainstream research and present approaches for making more complex and nuanced studies. In this text, I discuss questions central to critical-feminist studies as my point of departure. These are: What is studied and what is not? Who is represented and who not in the studies? How does difference designate the 'Other'? From which theoretical perspective are studies done? What understanding of funerals does the theoretical perspective lead to? Moreover, how can critical perspectives be useful in funeral studies?

There are a few examples of previous studies of funerals in Sweden using critical perspectives, such as the intersectional perspective (Jarnkvist in progress), queer theory (Svensson 2007), and ritual practice theory (Jarnkvist 2011, 2019, 2020). However, I see a need for more such research. I argue that critical-feminist perspectives and approaches may advance the

1 Ritual and rite are similar concepts and often used alternately. Both concepts are used in the article, referring to funerals and other life-cycle ceremonies.

theoretical underpinnings, perspectives, methodologies and measures used in the field. This, in turn, may lead to a more inclusive and open understanding of the different ritual needs of people in today's heterogeneous society. As this article will show, critical-feminist studies can, for example, uncover socio-economic and cultural inequality within the ritual field. These areas have been touched upon but seldom examined in previous studies. Knowledge of ritual inequality is necessary for societies with the ambition of treating all people equally, which might be especially important in grief.

The article is divided into two parts and structured as follows. In the first part, I present and discuss previous research on funerals concerning some fundamental issues for feminist scholars. The second part gives examples of how these issues may be met with in funeral research using intersectional perspectives, queer phenomenology and ritual-practice theory. I also provide examples of how these perspectives and approaches can be used in funeral studies. Finally, I discuss my findings.

Fundamental issues in critical-feminist studies

In this section, I present three critical issues for feminist scholars in their positioning in relation to mainstream research, namely: 1. representation in research, 2. rejection of othering, and 3. the perspective of non-essentialism. I discuss these issues in relation to previous research on funerals in Sweden and argue the need to consider them when researching funerals.

Representation in research

The issue of representation in research is fundamental to feminist theory and deals with questions such as: What is studied and what is not? Who is represented and who

not in the studies? The issue of representation relates to epistemology, which refers to what we know and how we know it. Epistemology is a philosophical standpoint that guides researchers and their scholarly activity. In opposition to mainstream research in Western countries, which often takes the majority perspective as a point of departure (Benton and Craib 2011: 4), feminist scholars emphasize the importance of taking non-dominant groups as their standpoint to understand society (e.g. Harding 2004; Crenshaw 1991) and to rely on everyday life experiences as a source of knowledge (e.g. Smith 1987).

Previous research on funerals in Sweden has for a long time focused on rites performed within the majority church, the Church of Sweden (see e.g. Pettersson 2000;

Bäckström *et al.* 2004; Bromander 2005, 2011; Gustafsson 2003; Wiig-Sandberg 2006; Helgesson Kjellin *et al.* 2021). In a way, this is not surprising. For decades, the Church of Sweden dominated the ritual scene in Sweden and has also financed much research on rituals. Moreover, these rituals have had a high profile in popular culture and are, therefore, more visible in society. However, the ritual landscape has been changing for a long time, and more and more people choose to perform their life-cycle rites outside the Church of Sweden. Civil funerals, for example, have increased in Sweden over the last decade, from about 4 per cent in 2000 to about 15 per cent in 2021 (Funeral home alliance in Sweden 2022). However, the interest in doing studies on rituals in Sweden has decreased,

David Castor, 2013 (CCO 1.0, Wikimedia Commons)



Coffin in the funeral chapel of Hässleholm, Sweden.

and studies of funeral ceremonies outside the Church of Sweden are very few. There are a few exceptions, such as studies on Muslim funerals (e.g. Sorgenfrei 2021) and civil funerals (Jarnkvist 2019, 2020). Except for these studies, the civil funeral has only been touched upon in other contexts, such as research on undertakers/funeral directors (e.g. Davidsson Bremborg 2002).

The focus on funeral ceremonies of the majority church makes them normative in research. Other forms are somehow forgotten and placed in the shadow, even though they are becoming more and more relevant to people in Swedish society. When one perspective dominates research, in this case the perspective of the Church of Sweden, other perspectives may be regarded as 'the other'. In the next part of the article, I will discuss the problem of 'othering'.

Rejection of othering

In line with the issue of representation, many feminist scholars are occupied with the problem of othering, criticizing mainstream research for presenting women and groups of minorities in society as the 'other'. To reject othering is therefore fundamental for many feminist scholars (see e.g. Brah 1996; Harding 2004; Smith 1989). Othering is the process by which dominant groups, characterized by group size or group power (i.e. social status), define subordinate groups in a reductionist way, assigning problematic and mediocre characteristics to them (Yang 2010). The issue of othering relates to questions such as, How does difference designate the 'other'? Who defines difference? What are the presumed norms from which a group is marked as different? How are various groups represented in different discourses of difference? (Brah 1996: 114).

Implicit othering in academia occurs

throughout the research process. As Jordan Reuter and Colleen Murray (2022) notice, othering is seldom the ambition of researchers. However, it is a consequence of the empirical epistemology that is fundamental in many publications. According to the authors, othering is most common through decontextualization, when specific information is extracted from its context for analysis. Othering also occurs when researchers describe some participants as 'other' or abnormal and deviant from the normative group of participants, which is used as the reference for comparison in research questions and statistical analyses (*ibid.*). The issue of othering is thus related to methods used in research. It is about the standpoint from which the study is done and how the researcher refers to the context (Smith 1987; Harding 2004).

A brief examination of previous sociological studies of funerals in Sweden reveals that many influential studies have been quantitative, investigating how members of the Church of Sweden understand rites based on some predetermined criteria (cf. Pettersson 2000; Gustafsson 2003; Bäckström *et al.* 2004; Bromander 2005, 2011). With a few exceptions (cf. Jarnkvist 2019, 2020; Svensson 2007; Wiig Sandberg 2006), there has been little interest in qualitative studies, especially from the perspective of the relatives of the deceased or on ritualization outside the majority church. Having rites performed in the dominating religious community as the starting point, funerals conducted outside the Church of Sweden have often been regarded as 'the other', and sometimes wrongful assumptions about these funerals have been made.

In previous research, civil ceremonies, for example, are often described as non-religious or secular (Warburg 2015: 141; Helgesson Kjellin *et al.* 2021: 24). People who choose a civil ceremony may also

be described as secular or non-religious, and assumptions have been made about what these people might believe, or most commonly, not believe in. Recent funeral studies focusing on church funerals have, for example, used the *Nationalencyklopedin's* (National Encyclopaedia) definition of civil ceremonies as being 'without an ecclesiastical or religious character', 'non-religious', and to 'be perceived to stand in opposition to ecclesiastical or religious' (Helgesson Kjellin *et al.* 2021: 24).

Critical research on civil funerals (e.g. Jarnkvist 2019, 2020) reveals a more complex understanding of the construction of religion and non-religion in civil ceremonies. The studies show that civil funerals can express relation to, as well as the distance from, organized religion and religious institutions and that this is to simplify it, to take for granted that civil ceremonies are non-religious. During the last century, a number of researchers have problematized the categorizing of people as either religious or not religious (e.g. af Burén 2015; Lee 2015a, 2015b; Rosen 2009; Willander 2014; Reuter and Murray 2022). They have made methodological reflections in terms of studying religion in modern society (Willander 2014), criticized the one-dimensional perspective of religion (Rosen 2009), and asked for an understanding of 'religiosity' and 'secularity' (non-religion) that consider expressions of complexity, contradiction and (in)congruity (af Burén 2015; Lee 2015a, 2015b; Smith 2011; Reuter and Murray 2022).

Applying non-essentialism

The final central issue I want to discuss in this first part of the article is the issue of essentialism. Critical-feminist scholars criticize mainstream research for having a static, essentialist understanding of objects or research and argue for a need to apply

dynamic, non-essentialist perspectives.

A static understanding of rites is often rooted in essentialist thinking, where rites are expected to carry an inherent meaning, which is liberated in ritualization (Humphrey and Laidlaw 2006). Ritual studies have long had an essentialist understanding of rites, focusing on the 'original' ideas, values and symbolism. It has been claimed that specific values are made visible through the rites. Such an understanding is, I would say, evident in several influential Swedish sociological surveys (e.g. Pettersson 2000; Bromander 2005, 2011; Bäckström *et al.* 2004), which, in some cases, has led to theoretical assumptions that I see as problematic.

Let me take the most extensive survey study, *Religiös förändring i norra Europa* (Religious Change in Northern Europe, 2004), as an example, in which Anders Bäckström, Ninna Edgardh Beckman and Per Pettersson investigate how Swedish religiosity manifests itself and what role the Church of Sweden has in a Late Modern society. According to the authors, the rites of the Church of Sweden (mainly baptism, marriage and funerals) are central to today's religiosity. The study shows that individual belief is insignificant to the relationship between the Church of Sweden and its members. Instead, the relation has more to do with nationality and cultural belonging. The scholars state that the desire to be part of a 'tradition', a central but undefined concept in the study, is of great significance for the members of the Church of Sweden. The life-cycle rites uphold the 'tradition' and are said to retain the members' life-long relationship with the institution. Most members consider that the life-cycle rites give intense experiences, and the authors interpret them as signs of a 'new form of religion', which exists 'between individual life issues and collective identity issues'

(p. 72). Religion is defined as an 'arena for meaningful communication between transcendence and immanence'. The rites are examples of such an arena. The authors describe the rite as a '(re)negotiation situation' when values, norms and beliefs are traded and maintained (pp.160–1).

As I see it, the authors present a relatively static and essentialist image of rite and ritualization. The function of life-cycle rituals is described as being to communicate the determined symbols and meanings that, according to the authors, they are built on. Moreover, the authors presuppose that there is a link between religion, belief, practice and institution. What the authors highlight might be real for some people, but I claim that researchers should be cautious with making such generalizations about the meaning of ritualization. Whether ritual actors understand funerals to be 'religious' (whatever that is) or not, as Bäckström and his colleagues argue, is not, as I see it, up to the researcher to decide. Especially not when the empirical data do not define what 'religion' or 'religiosity' might be or ask how the people answering the survey understand the concepts.

As some readers may have noticed, the studies I have criticized have mainly been quantitative. However, my ambition is not to downplay either specific researchers or quantitative methods. I wish to create a constructive discussion on how concepts are used in research and what happens when researchers generalize and make theoretical assumptions built, as I see it, on shaky empirical ground.

So far, this article has discussed previous funeral research in Sweden from the issue of representation, othering and essentialism in research. I have argued for using critical-feminist studies of funerals to grasp the rite's complexity. In the next part of the article, I will present three examples

of how critical-feminist theories can be used in funeral studies.

Using critical-feminist theories in funeral studies

Feminist scholars work on several ways to solve the issues presented above. Below, I submit three theoretical approaches, which I regard as examples of critical-feminist theories – intersectionality, queer phenomenology, and ritual practice theory – and which I argue may help researchers work more critically and reflexively. I give examples of how these approaches might be used in studies on funerals and discuss what such studies might lead to in terms of new understandings of the individual and societal functions of funerals.

Intersectionality

In the first section of this article, I argued for the need for a more complex understanding of ritualization in today's heterogeneous society. Using an intersectional perspective in funeral studies, one can learn how different power relations intersect in ritualization and how ritualization contributes to the production and reproduction of varying power relations. Such knowledge is vital in societies that strive for openness and equal rights.

In previous research, religion and secularity have often been investigated as single categories standing apart from other social categories, leaving intersectional perspectives absent (Jarnkvist 2021; Reuter and Murray 2022). It is the same in studies of the construction, for example, of gender and class in Swedish, as well as international studies on rituals (see e.g. Broekhuizen and Evans 2016; Heise 2012). The use of an intersectional perspective, which emphasizes the impact of social structures on individuals, institutions and society (Christensen and Jensen 2012; Collins and

Bilge 2020), deepens the understanding of the meaning and function of life-cycle rites for individuals and society as well as how different power structures in society affect ritualization and people's ability to make rituals, such as funerals, the way they wish and need.

Kathy Davis (2008) defines intersectionality as 'the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power' (p. 68). Intersectionality has its roots in black feminism from the middle of the twentieth century, and its criticism of white middle-class feminism as not recognizing different power relations (such as race and class) in women's lives (Brah and Phoenix 2004). The analysis of the impact of the intersection of different power relations at the individual, institutional and societal levels has become recognized in feminist research since then. According to intersectional theory, social stratification affects living conditions recreated through people's actions. Intersectionality clarifies how social categories interact in individual lives, social practices and institutional arrangements and where the interactions lead regarding power (Collins and Bilge 2020). One stratification, such as gender, cannot be separated from other stratifications but is made in relation to them and affected by them (Brah and Phoenix 2004).

Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) outlines three forms of intersectionality: structural, political and representational. Structural intersectionality refers to differences in living conditions and legal rights based on how different power relations intersect. Crenshaw has, for example, shown how battered black women have more difficulties than white women in getting

help and support from society. Political intersectionality refers to political consequences and challenges that different groups of people face, depending on how, for example, social class and gender intersect in their life. Representational intersectionality refers to how different groups of people are represented in stereotypical and normative ways in popular culture and other media.

Intersectional perspectives can uncover positions of privilege that are often ignored or taken for granted and reveal how power structures are challenged and renegotiated (Cho *et al.* 2013). Therefore, intersectional analyses are appropriate when studying the complexity of a social phenomenon such as funerals. Intersectionality may, for example, be used as a theoretical framework in studies or for investigating intersectional dynamics in a social phenomenon. It may also be used in studies on a societal level, for example, to understand the effects of legal arrangements on people's lives (cf. *ibid.*).

Intersectional perspectives have been used, for example, in discourse studies of funeral articles in Swedish newspapers during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jarnkvist in progress). The study reveals how different power structures intersect in the articulation of 'funeral' in the articles studied. In future research, intersectionality may be used, for example, in studies on funerals within minority groups to understand their possibilities in society to make funerals the way they wish and need. Intersectionality can also be used in investigations into funeral conditions in different geographical locations, into how the funeral law affects different groups of people, and into how norms and values are repeated, negotiated and rejected in ritualization. By using intersectionality, the researcher may be able to deepen the analysis of the significance and function

of funerals outside the Church of Sweden, to avoid preconceived categorizations and assumptions. Even though most intersectional studies use qualitative methods, there are possibilities for making quantitative intersectional analyses as well. Such studies could, for example, focus on how the use of different forms of funerals, in any religious nomination or civil settings, intersects with variables such as urbanity/rurality, social class and gender.

However, there are other ways of undertaking critical analysis of the social context in which ritualization occurs, which the example of queer phenomenology will show.

Queer phenomenology

Queer theories, which emerged in the 1990s, primarily focus on theorizing and studying sexualities outside the normative heterosexual framework. The theories recognize the binary logic inherent in othering, discussed in the first section of this article. In addition, representativity and non-essentialism are central to the theories, which take social constructivism as their point of departure. Queer theories shed light on non-normative ways of living. Judith Halberstam, for example, argues that queer subcultures produce 'alternative temporalities' by offering their members imagined futures outside hegemonic signs of life experience, such as birth, marriage, reproduction and death (Halberstam 2005: 2). The emerging field of queer death studies (QDS) reconceptualizes death, dying and mourning in norm-critical ways. For example, it criticizes the normative understanding of humans' 'uniqueness' in relation to other beings and the common opinion that some bodies can be left to die. Instead, QDS embraces a 'more-than-human' sense in their ontological, epistemological and ethical-political dimensions (Radomska *et al.* 2020).

The feminist scholar Sara Ahmed has developed queer phenomenology (2006), arguing that all experiences are situated and that social orientations affect what individuals face at any given moment. Queer phenomenology pays attention to orientation, especially sexual orientation, but also orientation in space and towards objects. According to Ahmed, not everything is available for all people. The basic argumentation in queer phenomenology is that 'bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon' (p. 543). Moreover, people tend to repeat actions, making the actions normative in society.

According to Ahmed (2006), it is essential to study what is repeated and how the repetition of actions takes people in specific directions. Applying Ahmed's theory on ritualization, one could say that individuals' choices of life-cycle rites do not just happen; instead, they are part of individuals' life courses that follow a specific sequence. For example, relatives of the deceased who choose to have a funeral within the Church of Sweden have often attended a number of church funerals. The funeral is probably one in a row of other life-cycle rites that the bereaved and others in the family have had in church. The practice of having a majority church funeral is part of a bigger ritual narrative, which has been heard for generations and will echo down many years ahead. The tendency towards particular objects (and actions) and not others – in this case, to choose to have a majority church funeral – produces what Ahmed calls 'straight tendencies', that is, ways to act in the world that presumes normative social conditions (p. 560). As Ahmed expresses it: 'Bodies become straight by tending toward straight objects' (p. 557). Straightening relates to

experiences of inclusion/exclusion. As Ahmed (2012: 163) has argued, inclusion can be understood as a 'technology of governance' and works only if the people searching for inclusion will accept the inclusion conditions and appreciate what they obtain.

Ingeborg Svensson (2007) used queer theory in her study of funerals of gay-identified men in Sweden in the 1980s. Her study makes visible a group of people who are and have often been placed in the shadow of research and society in general. In her study, Svensson found that gay men were doubly stigmatized by the 'wrong' sexuality and AIDS. Against this background of stigmatized homosexuality and its signification as non-life, non-relationship, non-family and non-love, Svensson analysed the funerals of open, self-identified gay men as strategies of re-signification.

Another Nordic example of queer death studies is Varpu Alasuutari's (2020) dissertation on experiences of death and loss among queer and trans people in Finland. The study makes visible the legal and emotional power of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland in the context of death. The interviewees had both inclusive and exclusive experiences of church funerals. As the author argues, studies of experiences of inclusion and exclusion in ritualization may lead to an understanding of why marginalized people sometimes hold on to normative structures, such as the majority church's death rituals, and search for inclusion within them instead of deserting them altogether, which is often prompted among queer scholars (p. 120).

The studies mentioned are examples of how queer theory can be used in investigations of experiences of funerals among minorities, experiences of inclusion/exclu-

sion, and analyses of ritual narratives. Ritual narratives are central to investigations of experiences of being 'out of line' in ritualization. Such studies are essential for making funerals less normative and more open. Queer phenomenology can also be used, for example, in research into bodily experiences of ritualization and how ritual actions and specific ways of ritualizing affect the ritual actors and how they relate to the social surroundings.

Ritual practice theory

Finally, I would like to highlight the ritual-practice theory developed by Catherine Bell (1992, 1997). This is the only one of the three approaches that explicitly focus on ritualization and, thus, is most used in funeral studies. As far as I know, Bell never positioned herself as a critical-feminist scholar, and some would say that it is wrong of me to characterize her as such. However, like many feminist scholars, Bell used a critical perspective on rites and ritualization. Her theory has been related to feminist scholars by others than me (see Hollywood 2002).

Earlier, I discussed the problem of studying rites from an essentialist perspective, in which rituals are understood to have static and exclusive meanings revealed through ritualization. Here, I want to give a short presentation of Bell's ritual-practice theory (Bell 1992, 1997), which offers a reflective way of understanding rituals and ritualization. According to Bell, ritualization is conducted in relation to the social context to which the individuals belong. There is no specific meaning embedded in the ritual itself; instead, the ritual actor constructs the meaning. How the participants interpret the rite depends on the cultural or subcultural context in which the individuals find themselves.

From a practice-theoretical perspective,

the focus is on rites as practice, that is ritualization. Bell defines ritualization as 'a way of acting that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does: moreover, it makes this distinction for specific purposes' (1997: 81). According to Bell, 'traditionalism' is a significant factor in ritualization. Bell defines 'traditionalism' as 'the attempt to make a set of activities appear to be identical to or thoroughly consistent with older cultural precedents' (p. 145). Bell describes the rite as part of a historical process in which old cultural patterns are reproduced. However, she emphasizes that the rite participants may also reinterpret and change these patterns. The rites are thus not only 'traditional' acts but also express changes in society and culture. According to a practice-theoretical perspective, ritualization is therefore tied to and interacts with the worldview of the surrounding community.

Ritual-practice theory is partly inspired by Émile Durkheim's (1965) classical approach of ritual as social practice, intended to bring order to society and separate the sacred from the profane. However, Bell (2006) problematizes understanding ritual as an essential and universal phenomenon with a specific and structural mode of action. Instead, ritual-practice theory emphasizes the complexities and contradictions in ritualization and underlines the importance of studying ritualization in relation to the social context in which it occurs. While functionalist understandings of ritual emphasize ritual as an attempt to forge social solidarity, resolve conflicts within the community or transmit shared beliefs, Bell argues that ritual involves 'the production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding

of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex micro relations of power' (Bell 1992: 221).

According to Bell, ritualization involves the circulation of power among all the players within the ritual field. The subject, or ritual actor, may resist the norms and rituals through which it is constituted (Hollywood 2002: 114). Bell's account of ritualization and its power relationship is influenced by the work of Michell Foucault (1977), especially his idea of the reconceptualization of power, and aligned with the performative theory of Judith Butler (1990, 1993).

Ritual-practice theory has been used in interview studies of ritualization in baptism, name-giving ceremonies, weddings and funerals in Norway and Sweden (Høeg 2009; Jarnkvist 2011, 2019, 2020). The studies have shed light on ritualization as a complex process constructed in interaction with the social context in which it occurs. Studies have revealed, for example, that civil funerals may both relate to and express distance from religion in different ways and that place is essential for how this is done (Jarnkvist 2019, 2021). The theory is also relevant, for example, in studies on ritual change through history and analysing the influence of consumption and popular culture in ritualization. It might also be used for studying power in ritualization.

Discussion

This article aims to show how critical-feminist studies can improve research on funerals by contributing to a deeper and more complex understanding of ritualization and how it can be explored. In the article, I have discussed central issues within critical-feminist theory in relation to previous studies of funerals in Sweden and presented perspectives and theories (intersectionality, queer phenomenology

and ritual-practice theory) that, as I see it, can improve the field of funeral studies.

I have argued that the focus on the majority church's funerals in previous sociological research in Sweden has led to a lack of representation of other forms of ritualization and othering of funerals performed outside the Church of Sweden. Moreover, some of the previous influential studies on funerals in Sweden have had a fairly static understanding of rituals, which sometimes has led to theoretical assumptions about the meaning and function of funerals that, I would argue, lack solid empirical ground.

A critical examination of funerals highlights the times of ritual hybridity we live in, where old and new are mixed, and where people search for new ways of making rites and filling old actions with new meaning. Norms linked to power structures, such as gender, class, religion and sexuality, are created, recreated, negotiated and renegotiated. I have argued here that intersectional analyses, for example of civil funerals, may uncover ritual power structures. The majority church's funeral service, which has often been normative in research as well as in the ritual arena in Sweden, has a dominant position in relation, for example, to civil funerals, which lack ritual manuscripts, such as places, material objects and ritual practices (Jarnkvist 2020). People who choose civil funerals, or are forced to have them because the deceased person was not a member of the Church of Sweden, must create the ritual and arrange and pay for the costs related to it themselves. Intersectional studies may uncover how this situation puts the ritual actors of civil funerals in a subordinate position in the ritual arena because they cannot access what the religious actors offer. Moreover, significant social and economic capital is required, for example, to

be able to carry out a big civil funeral, as premises, musicians and officiant must be paid for by the individual. People who lack such capital have significantly smaller opportunities to carry out such a rite. Suppose the ambition in Sweden is to have equal regulation regarding funerals. In that case, it is essential that research highlight inequality and comes up with suggestions on how to make the ritual arena equal.

I have presented queer phenomenology in this article. I would like, briefly, to discuss the theory using the concept of 'tradition,' which I discussed earlier. With a queer phenomenological understanding of 'tradition,' one would say that the emphasis on 'tradition' as a motivation for having a funeral in the Church of Sweden is an example of 'straight tendencies' in the Swedish context. It is a way of being 'in line with' the norms of ritualizing death in Sweden. To break the 'tradition,' for example by having a civil funeral, is in opposition to the 'tradition' and an example of queer actions or desires, which are 'out of line.' This is at least the situation for people living in rural areas in Sweden, where funeral services of the majority church are still the norm. According to queer phenomenology, the reference to 'tradition' is primarily a social signal of the ritual actor being 'in line,' included in society, following the social norm of ritualizing.

Ahmed (2006) argues that bodies become straight by tending toward straight objects. The bodily aspect of ritualization that queer phenomenology offers is, I would say, a significant contribution to ritual studies as it brings an understanding of the physical experience and impact of ritualization. By doing specific ritual actions in ways similar to the normative practices of ritualizing, the possibly unstraight body becomes straightened, and the subject falls more in line with the

majority of bodies in Sweden. Not only the civil ritual but also the body, the subject who performs the ritual, is straightened. Using a queer phenomenological perspective contributes to a social sense of 'tradition' in ritualization and an understanding of how bodily experiences shape ritualization.

Finally, a short reflection on how ritual-practice theory highlights the relation between rituals, social change and power in rituals. The use of ritual-practice theory in research on civil ceremonies reveals that although the proportion of church rites has decreased, the Church of Sweden's ritualization is still normative for other forms of rituals (see e.g. Jarnkvist 2019). Even though people who choose to have civil ceremonies may distance themselves from the Church of Sweden as an organization and the faith they associate the church with, they often copy large parts of the religious rites into a civil context. There is a kind of tug-of-war going on between what many appear to perceive as 'traditional' collective practices (and therefore highly valued and difficult to question) and a search for new ways of ritualizing. The 'new' is often synonymous with actions that express some form of authenticity, where the individual is placed centre-stage. At the same time, these practices are often copies of what others have done. From Bell's perspective, making civil funerals similar to church funerals is an expression of 'traditionalization' (1997: 145); a way to make the 'new' – and for many people still relatively unknown – form of funeral being experienced as a 'real' funeral, that is, the way that most people know it. This is another aspect than the social aspect discussed with queer phenomenology. Here, it is not the social relations of the ritual actors so much as the understanding of the ritual itself that is focused on.

From the perspective of ritual-practice theory, the ritual transformation that we see in Swedish society right now, when other forms of ritualizing the church rituals enter the ritual scene, is a self-evident development, as ritualization follows changes in society. As the number of members in the Church of Sweden declines, this way of ritualizing major life events becomes less common. Moreover, more and more church members choose civil funerals, probably to be more unrestrained in ritualization (Helgesson Kjellin *et al.* 2021). A ritual-practice theoretical scholar would interpret these sprawling ritual expressions as a sign of the mobility and hybridity that rites constantly entail. Rites are not static nor established and not carried through history in any original form or meaning. On the contrary, they always move; they change as individuals, societies and social relations change. In line with ritual-practice theory, I argue that life-cycle rituals are connected to and interact with the surrounding society from the outset. Rituals are arenas for the expression and negotiation of societal norms and structures. This is important for understanding today's Nordic countries' ritual and religious changes.

To conclude, my main argument here is that critical-feminist perspectives and theories – such as intersectionality, queer phenomenology and ritual-practice theory – may uncover intersections of power relations within the ritual field and, in ritualization, offer knowledge of the bodily experience in ritualization, and contribute to a relational and dynamic understanding of the ritual practice. Critical studies of life-cycle rites, such as funerals, are essential thermometers of social relations and hierarchies of power in societies at any given time. Moreover, critical perspectives and theories help the researcher to open to new theoretical and empirical insights. By

doing so, critical studies contribute to a broader and more complex understanding of ritualization and its meanings in contemporary society. ■

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