



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

The Death Industrial Complex: An Analysis of The American Funeral Industry and Contemporary Death Reform Efforts

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A dissertation submitted to the School of Geography
for the degree of

BA Geography
University of Leeds

June 2023

"[Death] Opens Your heart. It Breaks Your Heart Open. Our Hearts Have Been Closed Because We've Closed Them. We've Defended Ourselves Against Pain."

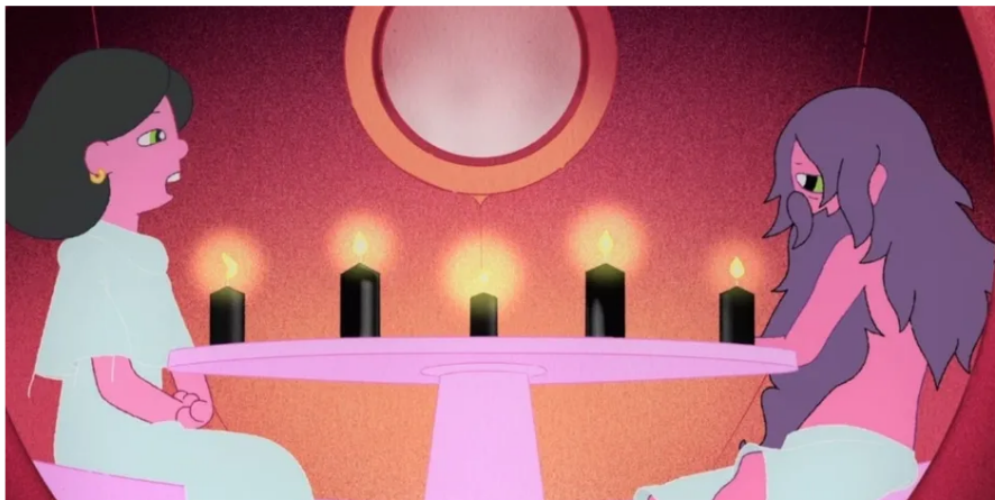


Figure 1 (Hue, 2021).

ABSTRACT

In American society, the topic of death remains a pervasive yet unexplored aspect of human existence. This dissertation explores the various aspects of the American funeral industry, delving deep into the intricate web of the Death Industrial Complex, its impact upon society, and the efforts to challenge its hegemony. Through meticulous examination of death reform initiatives, this study illuminates the transformative potential of reimagining America's relationship with mortality. Drawing on perspectives of death reform advocates, the research navigates the landscape of the Death Industrial Complex, tracing its origins within the capitalist framework and the consequent commodification of death. Monetisation and medicalisation of death practices have led to a profit-driven industry, overshadowing the emotional and spiritual dimensions of death. However, the participants in this study bravely confront this complex, recognising its exploitative nature and advocating change. This study unveils the strengths and limitations of death reform efforts in America. It celebrates the accomplishments achieved thus far, including the gradual legalisation of medical aid in dying, the rise of eco-friendly burial alternatives, the emergence of end-of-life doulas, and the revival of spiritual perspectives on death. These transformative strides have challenged societal norms and paved the way for a more compassionate and holistic approach to death and dying in America. However, this study also recognises its limitations, including the obstacles to death reform: the American political system, the powerful influence of religious institutions, a change-averse funeral industry, and the gradual pace of social reform. Lastly, there is discussion of future possibilities for death reform, based on the insights and perspectives shared by the participants. It delves into the strategies that they perceive as successful and offers recommendations for approaching death reform in the future. By examining their contributions, this study sheds light on potential ways to challenge the Death Industrial Complex and foster meaningful change in the realm of death practices in America.

Word count: 9,995

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the interviewees who generously shared their perspectives on the topic, contributing immensely to the richness of this study.

I am extremely grateful to my academic mentors, Laura-Loyola Hernández, Robert Vanderbeck, David Bell and Pamela Scobie for their invaluable input, without which the production of this study would not have been possible.

To my dear friends, your companionship during those long library days have made this dissertation experience truly memorable.

I am profoundly thankful to my family for their unwavering support. Your love and encouragement have always been my constant motivation.

Paddy, I am deeply appreciative of your constant presence and guidance, which have provided invaluable assistance throughout the completion of this degree.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the scholars whose works have influenced and shaped my research. Their contributions have been instrumental in expanding my understanding of the subject matter.

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1. INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, JUSTIFICATION AND IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation explores how US mortuary culture has evolved into the Death Industrial Complex (DIC); an industry deeply intertwined with capitalism. This industry encompasses exorbitant funeral expenses, medicalised and ecologically unsustainable death practices, and the commodification of death. The DIC, in the context of this dissertation, refers to the monetisation of the funeral industry: a system of denial, routine, expectations, and capital, created by men for monetary reasons. Through qualitative research, this study examines the impact of the DIC upon the US population. The US is a vast and diverse country, home to a multitude of cultures and traditions surrounding death and dying. While it is important to acknowledge the rich and varied mortuary practices across the nation, this dissertation will focus specifically on the typical white American funeral, which has become emblematic of the DIC. This particular funeral involves the services of an undertaker, embalming or cremation, and, as I have previously discussed, is characterised by high costs and a general commodification of the mourning process. While it would be ideal to examine all types of American funerals and their respective cultures, the limitations of this project necessitate a narrower focus. This theme will be explored through the following research questions:

- *What is the Death Industrial Complex and how has it shaped American attitudes towards death and dying?*
- *How do existing death reform strategies challenge the Death Industrial Complex?*
- *What are the gaps with death reform efforts and what more could be done to challenge the Death Industrial Complex?*

Throughout this dissertation, the term ‘death reform’ is used to refer to efforts and actions aimed at transforming the ways in which death is perceived and experienced within US society. Death reform is an ongoing effort to challenge and transform conventional death practices in

various ways, such as promoting eco-friendly burial options, advocating fair pricing in the funeral industry, or initiating discussions about death and dying among the general public. The existence of death reform movements highlights the recognition of the DIC and the need to challenge the status quo. Within the second half of this dissertation, the focus will shift towards death reform movements and occupations responding to the issues raised by the DIC. The term ‘death reform’ is used throughout this study to broadly refer to occupations and movements that oppose the commercialisation of the funeral industry. By engaging with individuals involved in death reform, I will explore the extent to which these movements are effectively challenging the DIC and examine alternative possibilities for reform. Through these discussions, this dissertation contributes to the ongoing dialogue around death and dying, as well as the broader conversations around social justice and systemic change.

1.2 Literature Review

This literature review delves into the DIC as a concept, exploring the interconnectivity of capitalism and death. The aim is to provide a detailed overview of the DIC examining its origins and practical manifestations. This discussion includes a review of literature on the relationship between capitalism and death. The first part explores the monetisation of death and the typical white American funeral. It touches upon sales strategies in the funeral industry and the commercialisation of funerals. This will lead to a brief discussion of the negative environmental impacts of the DIC. This includes a brief overview of how normalised embalming, burial, and cremation practices are environmentally unsustainable. Lastly, this literature review discusses death reform, and how those who recognise the DIC are protesting against it today. By exploring death reform movements and organisations, this literature review provides insights into how the US population is challenging and reforming traditional death practices.

1.2.1 A Brief History of American Mortuary Culture

To understand the emergence of the DIC, it is necessary to explore the history of mortuary culture in the US. The interconnectivity between capitalism and death traces back to the origins of money itself (Han, 2021). Byung-Chal Han explores this idea in their book *Capitalism and the Death Drive*. Firstly, they deliver a brief study of the etymology of money; the introduction of money into society was to provide a medium of exchange for buying sacrificial animals. In this way, accumulated money gives its owner the status of a predator. A predator is simply an

animal that kills and eats other animals, but killing is also an act that prevents one from being killed. At the level of depth psychology, it can be derived that the beginning of money in this context was the beginning of the notion that accumulated capital assets will ward off death. Han further argues that an unconscious fear of death is what spurs capitalism on, and it is this way of thinking that has created the necropolis – ‘an antiseptic space of death, cleansed of human sound and smells’ (Han, 2021). Han is arguing here that a collective fear of death in society has resulted in the desire to emotionally disconnect ourselves from death, leading to the establishment of a funeral industry stripped of emotional involvement. We pay others to take care of our dead, centring the process of death and dying around money. The monetisation of death not only fuels the capitalist machine by generating profits of up to \$20 billion a year, but also serves as a means of suppressing our acknowledgment of death (Marks, 2021). As Tumber maintains in their thesis *Death Becomes Them: Death Doulas, Gender, and Advance Care Planning*, ‘the cultural fear of death, alternatively known as “death denial”, can contribute to poor experiences with medicalized death that can then transform into a costly funeral culture’ (Tumber, 2020).

The DIC began to emerge during the American Civil War, during which embalming practices were normalised, as a means to preserve the bodies of fallen soldiers so they could be transported back home; this held significant importance to numerous families throughout the US, as the widespread acceptance of Protestant values required that families saw their dead loved ones (Kruger, 2008). Train drivers often complained about the smell of rotting bodies on their trains; a group of enterprising young men responded with the offering of their embalming services for a fee. However, after the war ended, these men found themselves without a steady source of income. To keep their business afloat, they turned to convincing the US population one state at a time that embalming was the most effective way to care for the deceased. This led to the widespread acceptance of embalming in the US, and eventually, of the typical American funeral that we see today (Doughty, 2018). According to Kruger (2008), over 90% of burials and 25% of cremations involve the practice of embalming, as per American traditions (Kruger, 2008). The technologizing, monetising and sanitising of death practices is discussed by Sherman in their book *In a Strange Room: Modernism’s Corpses and Mortal Obligation* in terms of how war can transform a nation’s relationship with death (Sherman, 2014). Sherman brings to attention Freud’s contention that war has changed our attitude towards death, and that we have not yet managed to find a new one (Freud, 1915).

1.2.2 The Commodification of Death and Dying

The transformation of the funeral industry has become known as the DIC , denoting the commodification of death and dying. The DIC raises important ethical questions about the treatment of the dead and the role of funeral homes. The DIC, as defined by The Order of the Good Death movement, is the capitalisation on the grief of bereaved individuals in order to increase corporate profits, amounting to \$20 billion in the US (The Order of the Good Death, n.d.). Jessica Mitford (1963) critiques the industry's manipulative sales strategies, high costs, and exploitation of grieving families. Mitford protests against the undertaker's bill, which consists of costs for the casket, 'services', the burial vault, flowers, clothing, clergy and musician's honorarium, and cemetery charges (Mitford, 1963). In 2008, the full cost of a 'traditional full-service funeral' came to around \$8,000 to \$10,000 in the US. The excessive costs associated with private cemeteries can add a significant financial burden to the already emotionally challenging experience of burying a loved one. With plot prices soaring up to \$30,000, a funeral can quickly become one of the largest expenses a person will incur in their lifetime, second only to purchasing a home or a car (Kruger, 2008). This financial strain underscores the monetisation of death and the prioritisation of profits, leaving families grappling with difficult choices under the pressure of social norms and expectations. Mitford discusses the process of selling caskets. The arrangement of the caskets, use of lighting, and background features can affect the psychological state of the family and create a feeling of security and confidence, which increases the chances of them opting for higher-priced caskets. Wilbur M. Krieger (1951) discusses the connection between casket arrangement and sales psychology: a carefully planned sales procedure can result in the consistent selling of caskets that are slightly above the average price bracket (Krieger, 1951). The work of these scholars serves as a critical reminder that death is not just a business opportunity, but a deeply human experience that requires care, respect, and compassion.

1.2.3 Challenging the Death Industrial Complex

In response to the DIC , death reform movements, organisations, and occupations have emerged to challenge and subvert what the homogenised industry centred around capitalism. These movements range from activism and policy reform to academic research. Some prominent death reform movements in the US include: The Alternate Death Movement, (which involved the promotion of 'green burials' and home funerals), The Death Doula Movement (which seeks to transform the way in which the American population engage with death, through providing end-of-life care), and The Death Positive Movement (which aims to

encourage discussion about death and dying), similarly also to The Death Café: a gathering where individuals come together to drink tea, eat cake, and engage in conversations surrounding the topic of death (The Death Café, n.d.). The Death Positive Movement, the largest of those listed here, aims to challenge the pervasive fear of death by advocating greater awareness and understanding of the DIC. Its ultimate goal is to eliminate death phobia from Western society. By doing so, we can develop healthier and sustainable relationships with death that are both emotionally and ethically fulfilling (Tumber, 2020). Tumber's thesis offers a detailed exploration of the topic and provides valuable insights into how death reform is promoting positive change within the US funeral industry. Tumber's analysis sheds light upon the relationship between the DIC and different forms of death reform, such as the work of end-of-life doulas, which may not necessarily lead to policy reforms but rather aim to shift societal attitudes towards death and encourage people to embrace the possibility of a dignified end-of-life experience. By highlighting the various ways in which death reform is contributing to positive change in the death industry, Tumber's thesis provides important context and support for my own research.

1.3 Justification and Importance of Study

There is a growing interest in alternative death practices and a desire to move away from the traditional and commodified approach to death, as shown by death reform movements and organisations. This study is relevant as the US population is recognising the issue that is the DIC and calls for action. Everybody will eventually require mortuary care, yet the lack of affordable options can be a burden on families. We must work towards the provision of more affordable funerary care and educate the US population on other types of mortuary cultures/methods. Societal expectations in the US heavily influence funeral decisions, as the funeral process is a unique experience. Emotional, social, and cultural factors can heavily influence the decision-making of the buyer in a way unparalleled in any other business transaction (Mitford, 1963). This study aims to explore the DIC, drawing together the various ways that the funeral industry continues to exploit the US population. I will explore death reform as a possible solution or step towards challenging and subverting the DIC, considering how the different forms of death reform are creating positive change. Thus, this study aims not only to bring attention to the DIC, but also to explore avenues for change by highlighting potential strategies to promote death reform.

2. METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The methodology employed in this study is a qualitative exploration of the DIC and death reform movements in the United States. This chapter provides an overview of the research design, including the phenomenological approach and worldview incorporated. Data collection methods include semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in death reform. Finally, the ethical considerations taken throughout this study will be addressed.

2.1 Research Design

2.1.1 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research design has been adopted to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals or groups regarding the DIC. Qualitative research recognises the complexity and diversity of human experiences and allows for the exploration of the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Creswell, 2009). This study aims to explore the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences with mortuary culture, and how they feel change can be initiated.

2.1.2 The Advocacy/ Participatory Worldview

This study is shaped partly by the advocacy/ participatory worldview, which requires active participation and promotes understanding between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2009). This worldview is essential as the researcher is to understand the individual participants' perspective of death and dying.

2.1.3 Phenomenology

The qualitative approach used in this study is phenomenology, which aims to interpret the significance of human experiences in the world (Chamberlain, 2009). Phenomenology is suitable as it encourages the in-depth exploration of the participants' underlying assumptions and values, allowing insight into the impact of the DIC on the US population and how death reform can be adopted to combat this.

2.1.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis will be employed to analyse the primary data: This qualitative method involves identifying and examining patterns and themes within the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Thematic analysis will enable the compiling of data into sections, each regarding one of the three research questions that this study aims to explore.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on predetermined criteria, targeting individuals with knowledge and experience relevant to the research topic. This non-probability sampling technique allows for the inclusion of participants who can provide insightful information that helps to answer the research questions (Rai & Thapa, 2015).

2.2.2 Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling was also employed, where participants suggest or introduce others to the researcher. While this is sometimes considered a dangerous research design, with the risk of the overrepresentation of a single group, this project aims to involve those fitting into specific criteria, and is therefore a suitable method (RAND, 2009).

2.2.3 The Participants

Participants in this study come from a range of different religious and cultural backgrounds in the US, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the funeral industry. Some of the participants are actively involved with death reform movements or organisations, others with death doula work, and some with creative arts as a means of promoting death reform.

Table 2.2.4 Participant Information (all names have been changed and these pseudonyms will be used to refer to the participants throughout this study)

Participant	Involvement with death reform	Sampling
Ethan	Creative arts as a means of promoting death reform.	Snowball sampling: contact found through another participant.

Carmen	From Maine Death with Dignity.	First contacted through the Maine Death with Dignity contact form.
Jasmine	Certified End-of-Life Doula.	Contacted via their LinkedIn profile.
Lauren	Funeral Reform Advocate.	Snowball sampling: contact found through another participant.
David	Member of the Death Café movement.	First contacted through the Death Café contact form.
Max	From the Gamliel Institute.	Snowball sampling: contact found through another participant.
Lilly	From the Green Burial Council.	First contacted through the Green Burial Council contact form.

2.2.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

To gather qualitative data, semi-structured interviews have been conducted. Semi-structured interviews (SSIs) are a qualitative data collection method that involves a conversational approach between the interviewer and interviewee; this method utilizes a combination of closed- and open-ended questions, along with follow-up queries (Newcomer, et al. 2015). Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful when the researcher wishes to gain a deep understanding of a topic through the answers provided (RAND, 2009). For the interviews, 20 questions were prepared; the interviewer had some flexibility in the order in which they were asked, and prompts were given to ensure that all the research questions were covered. This approach will elicit comprehensive responses from the participants, as ‘even a small sample with extensive probing can collect most of the salient ideas’ (Weller, et al. 2018). Having pre-prepared questions allowed the researcher to select the relevant questions based on the interviewee’s occupation or background. Zoom provided a suitable space for conducting the interviews, as it offers convenience without requiring any travel, resulting in minimal environmental impact. Moreover, Zoom provides numerous interactive and security features that ensure ease of use (Archibald, et al. 2019). To allow accurate data analysis, the interviews

were recorded and transcribed afterwards. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed of the recording process and provided their consent.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

2.3.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, ethical consideration was of the utmost importance throughout. Obtaining consent for research involves ensuring that participants are fully aware of what is being asked of them, that they are competent to make the decision to participate, and that they do so voluntarily (Mohd & Arifin, 2018). To ensure the comfort and consent of all participants, a clear explanation of the topic was provided prior to the interview, emphasising that they are under no obligation to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

2.3.2 An Objective Approach

In order to maintain an objective approach and to avoid collecting any personal information, open-ended questions about concepts and ideas were employed; if participants chose to discuss their personal experiences, they had the option to share as much or as little as they wished and stop the interview at any time.

2.3.3 Anonymity and Confidentiality

To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, names and specific identifying information were not disclosed in this study, including any personal pronouns. Any profession or involvement with death reform was described in general terms without including details that could reveal their identities.

3. THE DEATH INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

This chapter will delve into the DIC and the various ways it is perpetuated through the monetisation of death practices. By analysing the entrenched systems and structures of this

complex as described by the participants, we can better understand how the DIC impacts American society.

‘Follow the money and you’ll find out who’s behind it’ (Jasmine)

3.1 Profit vs. Public Health

The American Civil War marked a turning point in the history of death practices in the United States. During this time, many doctors were attracted to the occupation of embalming, due to its financial potential (Max), or because it was more ‘lucrative’ (Lauren). As they entered this industry, they brought with them their medical perspective and ‘doctor ethic’ (Lauren), monetising and medicalising American death practices in the process. It was noted that embalming was no longer needed after the war, and this is where legislation became vital for the success of the funeral industry (Lauren). To sustain the demand, embalmers and funeral directors lobbied state legislators to propagate the notion that dead bodies pose a risk to public health, offering embalming as the solution (Max). The proposed laws required only licensed funeral directors to handle the deceased (Harrington, 2007), creating a new industry and imposing a financial burden for many within American society after death. While the legislation was presented as a means to protect public health, its focus was primarily on the requirements for obtaining a funeral director’s license; Max contested that these laws were not at all to protect public health, but to support the birth of what is now a multi-billion dollar industry (Winters, 2017). The participants in this study expressed scepticism regarding the motives behind this legislation, with one describing it as a ‘big industry problem’ that empowers funeral directors and embalmers with rights and control that they ‘don’t deserve’ (Lauren). Another participant stated their ‘cynical view that our systems and our social constructs are designed to eke every penny out of you before you die’, and proceeded to argue that the legislation protects profits over the needs and desires of individuals and deprives Americans of the right to determine their own death practices (Carmen). Marsh (2013) recognised that the regulatory framework that governs the funeral industry is built upon and reinforces particular norms that have social, environmental and economic consequences. These norms often run counter to the actual preferences of an increasing number of Americans who desire more autonomy in their death practices (Marsh, 2013).

The participants in this study repeatedly applauded the funeral directors, embalmers, and policymakers for their ‘opportunistic’ approach to the exploitation of an entire nation (Lauren).

One participant suggested ‘you have to give the people who did that work, and who saw its potential, some credit, because they were really smart’ (Max). The overarching view expressed by participants was that the funeral industry is ‘driven by money’ (David). Another participant observed that the funeral industry is intertwined with America’s ‘hyper-capitalist society’, suggesting that profit motives drive the industry (Ethan). The motivations of those within the industry, such as funeral directors and embalmers, were consistently being challenged, from the motives behind lobbying for legislation to those behind running funeral homes. One participant contested that funeral homes are ‘not in the business of making everybody feel wonderful’ but exist primarily to make money (Jasmine). This shared perception of the funeral industry amongst the participants prompts crucial inquiries about its place in American society and its influence upon end-of-life experiences.

‘There’s a whole sales and marketing team behind that and you’re at your most vulnerable’ (Jasmine)

3.2 Sales Strategies

The participants also expressed their views that the American population is being manipulated by the sales strategies used by funeral directors, further questioning the motives of those involved in the industry. The vulnerability of the buyer is unparalleled in any other transaction (Mitford, 1963). This sentiment was echoed by one participant in this study who discussed how ‘emotionally wrenched’ one feels when somebody is dying and went on to claim that ‘the combination of the amount of financial expense and the emotionally fraught aspects of it it’s pretty treacherous, right?’ (Ethan). Another participant also touched upon this notion as they discussed the process of selling caskets, ‘there’s a whole sales and marketing team behind that and you’re at your most vulnerable’ (Jasmine). The industry’s practices, as argued by Mitford and the participants within this study, take advantage of individuals during a particularly challenging time. The emotional impact of death in the family opens up the opportunity for the funeral industry to exploit American society. This concept is discussed in Banks’s piece on the economics of death, as they argue that in an ideal scenario, funeral directors would prioritise the wellbeing of their clients by providing comfort, sympathy, offering complete information on funeral options, and seeking the lowest cost alternatives. However, as Banks claims, there are many reasons why this is often not the case. The first reason suggested here is the vulnerable state that clients are in when the services need to be purchased; meanwhile funeral directors may have an economic incentive to take advantage of

this vulnerability. Secondly, clients are often pushed to purchase unnecessary luxury goods such as expensive caskets and vaults for ‘maximum preservation of the deceased’. Funeral directors, as Banks continues to argue, also have more information regarding the funeral industry than their clients, and often fail to disclose lower cost alternatives. Finally, Banks contends that funeral directors may have individual biases, such as religious or cultural beliefs, that prevent them from disclosing accurate information (Banks, 1998).

4. THE IMPACT OF THE DEATH INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX ON AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEATH AND DYING

This chapter will explore the profound impact that the DIC has had upon American attitudes towards death and dying. An analysis of the participants’ experiences and views will offer insights into the ways in which the DIC has shaped American society’s perception of death and how it has influenced individuals’ attitudes towards their own mortality.

‘The myth of the infectious body and the myth of the helpless mourner’ (Jasmine)

4.1 Confronting American Society’s Fear of Death

The dominant view expressed by the participants in this study was that American society is ‘death phobic’ (Carmen). The participants were asked how they think the DIC has impacted American attitudes towards death and dying; one participant described American society as ‘death-averse’ (Ethan), and another commented ‘because we are death phobic, we don’t want to deal with it’ (Jasmine). Two of the participants gave very similar responses to the question: one contested that American society is ‘not willing to acknowledge mortality’ (Ethan); another stated ‘we don’t want to acknowledge that we are dying’ (David). The corresponding arguments given by the participants raise queries regarding the causative factors underlying this phenomenon. Kellehear (1984) suggested that death denial is a coping mechanism for a universal fear of death (Kellehear, 1984). However, death denial might also have emerged due to the medicalisation of death that came about in the twentieth century (Aries, 1974). One participant gave a response that supports this notion, ‘it has sort of taken death out of the living room and out of the family, and placed it into hospitals, behind closed doors, and behind closed

curtains, reserving that part of our lives for the so called experts' (Carmen). Han also discusses this concept, as briefly discussed in the literature review; they contest that 'in capitalist societies, the dead and the dying are less and less visible' (Han, 2021). Kastenbaum and Aisenberg (1974) build upon this concept, suggesting that hospitals have created an environment that is both insulated and technologized, which contributes to a situation whereby death is decontextualised (Kastenbaum & Aisenberg, 1974). Could America's lack of engagement with death serve as a plausible explanation for their apparent death phobia? One participant felt strongly about this, as they argued that the concept of embalming, open-caskets and the professionalisation of funeral directors all contributed to the concept of death being scary and unfamiliar (Max). This idea is also supported by Mitford, with the argument that the elaborate and luxurious nature of coffins is suggestion that the finality of death is not widely accepted, as humans often tend to 'beautify' objects to make them more acceptable (Mitford, 1963).

'We're looking at people's relationship with death through that lens, through their lens, not through our own anymore. We're seeing it through a lens that we're helpless, and someone else has got to take care of everything' (Lauren)

4.2 The Impact of Legislative Frameworks

The notion that dead bodies are dangerous has been perpetuated by legislation and has resulted in a societal belief that death should not be engaged with. The funeral industry has successfully convinced the public that dead bodies should not be engaged with, characterising them as a public safety issue, thus allowing the industry to take control of death care and turn a profit. One of the participants referred to this societal belief as 'the myth of the infectious body and the myth of the infectious mourner' (Jasmine). This statement captures perfectly what the funeral industry has achieved in terms of shaping perceptions of death amongst American society; the beliefs imposed upon the general public have contributed to the perception that the general public is helpless when it comes to dealing with death, and that only funeral directors and industry professionals are equipped to handle the situation. It is these deeply ingrained beliefs that have allowed the legislation that protects the funeral industry to remain firmly in place, functioning as a 'well-defined, well-oiled machine' (Jasmine). As a result, much of American society experiences death through the lens of the funeral industry, rather than forming their own perspectives of death. A participant expressed this sentiment, 'We're

looking at people's relationship with death through that lens, through their lens, not through our own anymore. We're seeing it through a lens that we're helpless, and someone else has got to take care of everything' (Lauren).

'We have lost our connection to the natural world, by becoming modernised and so we're removed from the natural cycle of death and rebirth, and I think it's made us very sick' (Carmen)

4.3 The Consequences of Medicalisation

During each discussion, some of the participants identified the medicalisation of death as a part of the DIC, driven by the opportunity to make a profit with the prescription of drugs. According to one participant, American political and medical systems are heavily influenced by conservative and religious ideologies that disapprove of medical aid in dying (MAD) (Carmen). Many of the participants expressed their support for MAD, which they see as an alternative to the medical system's supposed 'attitude to keep someone alive at all costs' (Ethan). Another participant questioned why the medical system does not respect those who are dying and have had enough, advocating that 'every dying person should have exactly what they think they need at their disposal to die in a way that makes meaning for them personally, and their families' (Carmen). The US's medical system's focus on profit was questioned by the participants, with one suggesting that the prescription of drugs is encouraged in US society for this reason; this participant questioned the way that teachers earn much less than psychiatrists do: psychiatrists can prescribe drugs and thus turn profit for the pharmaceutical industry (Jasmine). It has been suggested that the medicalised death has contributed to changes in perspectives of death (Lofland, 1978). Cannadine (1981) also noted that the medicalised death has resulted in many individuals dying 'drugged, lonely and afraid', and characterises this as a dehumanising experience (Cannadine, 1981). The medicalisation of death in the US has led to a cultural environment where negative attitudes towards death prevail, causing many individuals to shy away from discussing the topic altogether (The Economist, 2015). One participant also argued that the medicalised death is less personal, highlighting the way that doctors are trained to 'extend life as much as possible, rather than trying to understand the whole person' (Ethan). Arguably, the extension of life is unnatural; one participant suggested that 'we have lost our connection to the natural world, by becoming modernised and so we're removed from the natural cycle of death and rebirth, and I think it's made us very sick' (Carmen).

‘We’ve lost a lot by trying to put death out of our sight’ (Carmen)

4.4 Outsourcing Death

The viewpoints of the participants suggest that outsourcing death care has resulted in the outsourcing of our relationship with death, leading to a disconnection from the subject and a fear of confronting it. The funeral industry has successfully perpetuated the narrative that death is scary and should not be approached by the general public, thereby assuming control over the dead and profiting from them. Consequently, there has been a loss of visibility of alternative options, including religious and cultural death practices (Max), as funeral directors frequently fail to mention them. As a result, the DIC remains unchallenged by a large proportion of American society, until they are made aware of it. One participant argued ‘we’ve lost a lot by trying to put death out of our sight’ (Carmen). This could refer to the loss of diversity and variation with death practices in America but also to the loss of connection that American society feels towards death culture. The lack of knowledge regarding alternative options has resulted in the normalisation of the typical funeral involving undertaker and embalmer. One participant contested ‘people are not death literate; they don’t know that they have options’ (Ethan). When death became monetised, America lost a piece of their society, and with it cultural and religious traditions (Max). The perception that undertakers are required to deal with the dead has become entrenched in American society, preventing any consideration of alternative options. It is crucial to promote education on the concept, and alternative options, including eco-friendly and financially accessible death practices. This way, a more informed public can work towards policy reform to allow for practices such as home burials, thus taking back control of their own dead.

5. REIMAGINING DEATH: EXPLORING CONTEMPORARY DEATH REFORM EFFORTS, THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

The subsequent chapter will delve into the DIC. Initially, there will be a brief discussion to elucidate the participants’ understanding of death reform, their envisioned aspects of its implementation, and the pivotal factors they deem essential for transformative change. An

exploration of the ongoing endeavours aimed at reforming death practices and reshaping perceptions of death across America will follow, encompassing a comprehensive analysis of their strengths and limitations. Lastly, recommendations for further action will be proposed based on the participants' perspectives, as their collective insights shed light on the subsequent steps to be taken and the additional measures required for effective death reform.

'It's fighting against the current' (Ethan)

5.1 What Death Reform Means to the Participants

When asked to define death reform, the participants provided a variety of responses that converged on a shared collective objective. Unsurprisingly, the participants expressed a sense of opposition akin to 'fighting against the current' (Ethan), the current representing the DIC. One participant contended that achieving death reform necessitates radical measures: 'we have to burn capitalism to the ground and start over with something that has a different focus' (Carmen). This assertion highlights the deep intertwinement of the funeral industry and capitalist structures within American society, underscoring the need for reassessment and a shift in motivations from monetary gain to more meaningful pursuits. Another participant suggested that death reform entails raising awareness among individuals about their complicity in a flawed system, asserting that it revolves around 'getting people to admit that we are participating in a system that is broken' (Lauren). Despite the participants' strong criticism of the DIC, it was clarified that their intention is not to wholly reject the industry, but rather to find ways to transform it in order to align with the needs of American society. As one participant succinctly put it 'it isn't that we need to say no to the industry, it's that we have to find ways to change it to make it meet our own needs' (Lauren). This sentiment was shared by another participant who expressed a similar desire to actively engage with and be part of the industry: 'I'm not looking to knock it down; I'm looking to be a part of it and join it' (Jasmine).

'Storytelling can be a powerful way to change hearts and minds' (Ethan)

5.1.1 The Power of Conversation

One of the prominent themes emerging from the participants' responses is the significance of vocalising the issue as a means to 'reimagine death and dying' (Ethan). Emphasising the need to alter perspectives of death, the participants stressed the potential transformative impact of open discussions on reshaping societal attitudes. According to one participant, 'storytelling can be a powerful way to change hearts and minds' (Ethan), recognising both the need for a shift in perception and the power of collectively engaging in dialogue. Another participant highlighted the imperative of 'breaking down the taboos around talking about dying' (Carmen), this sentiment was echoed by another participant, 'it starts with people like you and me having conversations with people and showing that we can have these conversations about death' (Lilly). Opening up a dialogue surrounding death is considered a crucial aspect of death reform by the participants, with one suggesting that if funeral industry professionals were receptive to these conversations, it could be 'transformative' (Carmen).

'The gap is education' (Jasmine)

5.1.2 The Role of Education

Another recurrent theme to emerge from the participants' responses underscored the importance of education as a strategic instrument for confronting the DIC. Within this context, one participant argued that 'the gap is education' (Jasmine), suggesting that education possesses the potential to bridge the divide between American society and the reclamation of managing our own dead, thereby challenging the DIC. Reflecting this notion, another participant contended that 'it comes down to access and education', indicating a prevailing belief among the participants that widespread knowledge and awareness of the issue can serve as a catalyst for change (Lilly). Moreover, one participant emphasised 'it takes practice, it takes helping people learn' (Carmen), indicating their active involvement in death reform through educational initiatives. This educational endeavour is envisaged as a gradual process, 'educating people one small group at a time' (Max).

'Death reform involves making policy changes' (Carmen)

5.1.3 Policy Reform

Lastly, a significant theme that resonated throughout the participants' responses pertained to the necessity of policy reform. While many participants acknowledged the importance of educating American society about the prevailing issues, an equally significant number of the participants emphasised the critical role of policy reform in effecting substantial societal change. One participant conveyed that death reform means 'being open-minded that there alternative options and making sure those options are accessible', highlighting the imperative of 'getting laws changed in states to allow for some of these new alternatives' (Lilly). Similarly, another participant stressed the need to 'repeal these laws that prevent us from burying our own dead' (Carmen). As discussed in previous chapters, prevailing legislation has perpetuated the deep-rooted influence of the DIC. The participants astutely recognised the need for the repeal of such laws and the reformation of policies to reinstate a more authentic and less commercialised relationship with death in America.

5.2 Contemporary Death Reform Efforts

'There's a recognition that reform is necessary' (Ethan)

Contemporary death reform efforts exhibit diverse approaches and scopes, although all converge towards a common objective: the deinstitutionalisation of death (Bouverette, 2017). The participants' insights revealed their active engagement in various death reform initiatives, spanning from green burial practices to policy changes. Notably, one participant stood out with their active participation in multiple national-level funeral reform initiatives (Lauren). Lauren highlighted their involvement with esteemed organisations such as the National Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA), Conservation Burial Alliance, and the National End-of-Life Doula Alliance (NELDA), and Green Burial Council. The NHFA's mission is centred on providing education to individuals, families, and communities regarding the process of personally tending to their deceased loved ones, thereby emphasising the importance of direct involvement in death care (NHFA, n.d.). The Conservation Burial Alliance is composed of conservation burial sites and dedicated supporters who work together to promote the preservation and sustainable stewardship of land through the practice of natural burial (Conservation Burial Alliance, n.d.). This collaborative effort aims to benefit both individuals and the environment by integrating burial practices that align with conservation burials. The participants' involvement in death

reform illuminated the extensive scope of the movement. Each individual's distinct perspectives and approaches contributed to the multifaceted understanding of death and its reformation. In this subsequent analysis, I will delve into the dimensions of death reform that emerged during the interviews, offering valuable insight into the prevailing efforts within contemporary American society to challenge the DIC.

'What really is changing people's attitudes in the United States is the green burial movement' (Max)

5.2.1 The Interplay of Death Reform and Climate Action

Another notable observation from the participants' responses was the interconnectedness between death reform and climate reform. It became evident that several initiatives aiming to reform death practices encompassed values consistent with climate sustainability. Examples included the promotion of green burials and conservation burials; these efforts reflect a growing recognition of the importance of aligning death practices with principles of ecological sustainability. Green or natural burial involves burying deceased individuals without the use of chemical preservatives. Instead, biodegradable containers, such as ecopods made from materials like cardboard, wood, and wicker, are used for the disposal of bodies (Green Burial Council, n.d.) The participants who work with Green Burial Council provided insights into the organisation's mission and objectives. According to one participant, the council's initial primary purpose was to 'get the word out and certify some of these providers that are offering green burials' (Lilly). This initiative took root in New Hampshire, where Green Burial Council is based, through the rewriting of municipal laws to accommodate green burial practices (Lilly). Today, Green Burial Council not only fulfils its existing responsibilities but also actively challenges the DIC through various additional endeavours. Lilly highlights that significant changes have occurred within the council in recent years, reflecting their commitment to broader objectives. Expanding their scope, Green Burial Council strives to enhance accessibility for marginalised communities, including minority, indigenous, and LGBTQ+ communities. By extending their reach and addressing the needs of all, the council aims to promote inclusivity within the green burial movement. The green burial movement has gained popularity throughout the United States, as attested by one participant who contends that 'what really is changing people's attitudes in the United States is the green burial movement' (Max). This growing awareness and engagement in green burials signify a transformative shift in societal perceptions and a broader acceptance of alternative approaches to burial practices. The

green burial movement challenges what Davies (2005) refers to as the ‘cosmetic-casket-concrete complex’ (Davies, 2005).

‘Everyone can learn how to do this; this is not something that’s for the professionals’ (Max)

5.2.2 Educating for Change

Each participant expressed their involvement with educating American society on death and funeral reform. Notably, one participant provided an account of the endeavours undertaken by the Gamliel Institute to reshape funeral practices specifically for the Jewish community; this dedicated effort aims to revive religious traditions that have been lost during the commercialisation of the funeral industry (Max). The participant explained, ‘The Gamliel Institute is the educational arm of a group called Kavod v’Nichum, which means honour and comfort in Hebrew’ (Max). The Institute offers training programs that encompass both practical and spiritual aspects of caring for the deceased, ‘everyone can learn how to do this; this is not something that’s for the professionals’ (Max). Through their workshops, online education, and annual conferences, The Gamliel Institute aims to empower individuals to take an active role in end-of-life practices.

‘We’re working on legislation to permit human composting’ (Carmen)

5.2.3 Unravelling Legislative Frameworks

Legislative initiatives also emerged as a key aspect of the participants’ death reform efforts, encompassing several areas such as green burials and medical aid in dying (MAD). Issues such as the fight for medical aid in dying are recognised as elements of a global movement commonly referred to as the ‘requested death movement’, centred around advocating the legalisation of MAD (McJerney, 2000). Among the participants, one individual works closely with Maine Death with Dignity, a non-profit organisation committed to providing services, educational resources, and advocacy concerning mortality and end-of-life matters (Maine Death with Dignity, n.d.). Furthermore, the organisation advocates the unravelling of legislation that restricts access to MAD. The participant involved highlighted their engagement in activities like collecting signatures, attending legislative sessions, and garnering public support. These efforts were a success, as demonstrated by the enactment of the Maine Death

with Dignity Act in 2019. This legislative development positioned Maine as the ninth jurisdiction in the United States to establish an aid-in-dying law, thereby defining the medical standards of care governing the practice of medical aid in dying within the state (Maine Death with Dignity, n.d.). In addition to focusing on MAD, Maine Death with Dignity also directs efforts towards other legislative frameworks, as they currently undertake endeavours to establish legislation permitting human composting (Carmen).

‘We want to take back these processes that are deeply meaningful, that should not break the bank, that should not cause funeral poverty’
(Carmen)

5.2.4 The Pursuit of Meaningful Endings

When asked about death reform, several participants elaborated on initiatives that prioritise the conceptualisation of death for individuals, rather than concentrating on funeral reform or the de-medicalisation of death. One participant in particular, who holds certification as an end-of-life doula, offers a distinct contribution to the realm of death reform, primarily centred on the spiritual rather than legal aspects. This participant identified themselves and other end-of-life doulas as ‘part of the new reform that’s coming’ and explained that this involves promoting a ‘good death’ experience (Jasmine). Jasmine actively engages in various death reform groups and associations, such as the National End-of-Life Doula Alliance (NEDA); NEDA is a collaborative network of end-of-life doulas, encompassing trainers, practitioners, and natural death care pioneers, who come together to share knowledge and promote the vital role of end-of-life caregivers in serving individuals, families and communities (NEDA, n.d.) Jasmine emphasised that, while many end-of-life caregivers fulfil the role of a supportive companion to individuals facing death or those close to them, they desired to engage more with the ‘heavy stuff’ (Jasmine). According to Jasmine, this includes actively participating in ‘vigilling’, facilitating the transition process, and assisting in the creation of legacy projects (Jasmine).

‘That’s what funeral reform and death reform are to me, it’s persuasion, it comes down to basic marketing’ (Lauren)

5.2.5 ‘Funeral Reform’

During the interview, one participant introduced the term ‘funeral reform’, distinguishing between funeral and death reform. Lauren, who actively challenges the DIC at a national scale,

characterises death reform as the efforts led by individuals such as Caitlin Doughty, the founder of the Order of the Good Death—an organisation aligned with the Death Positive Movement (The Order of the Good Death, n.d.). Funeral reform, however, focuses on ‘trying to get people to change the way we do the things that we do’, as Lauren contests ‘I think action speaks to people, I think being physically present with a dead body, and knowing what to do with it, is going to be what changes their mindset and their hearts in a way that just talking about death in a Death Café won’t’. After clarifying that ‘we need both approaches’, Lauren argued ‘that’s what funeral reform and death reform are to me, its persuasion, it comes down to basic marketing’.

5.3 The Limitations of Contemporary Death Reform Efforts

‘There are folks that are working in the funeral industry that are very resistant to change’ (Lilly)

5.3.1 Resistance from the Funeral Industry

When questioned about the challenges faced during their involvement with death reform, numerous participants shared their experiences of the funeral industry’s reluctance to embrace change. One participant characterised the funeral industry as an industry that is ‘making big profits and therefore adverse to change’ (Ethan). Another participant emphasised the industry’s lack of interest in death reform initiatives, ‘they think they won’t make as much money if they promote green burial’, attributing it to financial considerations such as reduced profits from the lack of embalming fees (Lilly). Lilly contended that this resistance is what ‘inhibits our ability to get the word out’, therefore restricting the impact of death reform on American society. Carmen echoed this perspective, highlighting that ‘bumping up against organised opposition’, with reference to the funeral industry, ‘is what stands in the way of progress’. It is worth noting, however, that one participant diverged from this viewpoint, acknowledging that the obvious answer would be ‘the funeral industry hates it’, yet continues, ‘the funeral directors I’ve run into have been particularly courteous’ (Lauren). Instead, Lauren highlights that the primary challenge they have faced lies with local cemeteries’ resistance to change. According to Lauren, their lack of understanding and reluctance to embrace new approaches pose the most significant challenges to funeral reform, ‘they really don’t understand change, and they really don’t understand why you’re up in their business’.

'You have the establishment against us' (Jasmine)

5.3.2 Challenging the American System

The participants' responses consistently reflected the perception of systemic barriers within America that hinder the advancement of death reform. One participant conveyed their firm belief that the American political and medical systems act as significant obstacles to the goals pursued by Death with Dignity in their efforts to legalise MAD (Carmen). The participant argued that the current laws in America are 'not progressive enough' and anticipated that this would change in the next 50 to 100 years (Carmen). Carmen attributed this predicament to the 'tenuous political system' in America, which is 'sadly leaning more conservative'. Furthermore, Carmen highlighted the absence of federal government intervention in the various movements seeking to legalise MAD, indicating a lack of interest and motivation to drive policy reform. Consequently, the task of mobilising grassroots efforts to capture legislators' attention has proven 'exhausting', raising doubts about the feasibility of such endeavours, 'is it even feasible to try something?' (Carmen). Overall, Carmen's perspective underscores the challenge posed by a 'monolithic, centuries old, millennial old, patriarchy that quite frankly doesn't roll over very easy'. This highlights the significant hurdle presented by the American political and medical systems for advocates seeking to advance death reform initiatives.

'We are up against the entire Catholic church and the entire body of Evangelicals to try and get any movement on this' (Carmen)

5.3.3 Conflicting Beliefs

The funeral industry is profoundly influenced by religious beliefs, which pose a significant challenge to contemporary death reform efforts. The participants consistently highlighted this issue as a notable concern within the American funeral industry. One participant emphasised the powerful influence of the Catholic Church, '[they] ... have very strong opinions, and they're very powerful, and they influence voting blocks, and therefore influence how everything works' (Ethan). Another participant acknowledged the power of the Church, 'we have this systemic influence of religion in our politics and our medical systems' (Carmen); the participant further emphasised the formidable opposition posed by the Church in relation to the legalisation of MAD, 'we are up against the entire Catholic Church and the entire body of Evangelicals' (Carmen). With regards to death reform, Max argued that 'the religious groups need to be on board', implying that current efforts are constrained until such support is obtained

(Max). The influence of Catholic social norms and expectations surrounding funeral practices was also raised, ‘there’s a lot of Catholic guilt out there about, you know, whose funeral was better’, suggesting that more money is spent on Catholic funerals to avoid social embarrassment (Carmen). This issue resonates with Mitford’s observation that the unique emotional circumstances surrounding funeral arrangements add pressure to provide satisfactory ceremonies for grieving family members (Mitford, 1963). Jasmine further explained that within the funeral industry, ‘it all comes back to that dollar, especially with religion’. This suggests that the funeral industry is greatly influenced by financial considerations. As a result, the active involvement of the general American population in death reform and the recognition of the ties between capitalism and death in America become less probable.

‘Social reform just takes a long time’ (Carmen)

5.3.4 The Long Road to Social Change

Several participants identified the gradual nature of social change as a significant challenge. Despite ongoing efforts to reform death practices in America, there are obstacles to progress: ‘you have to get laws changed and regulate these industries if you want big change’ (Ethan). One participant conveyed the view that ‘human evolution can only occur as fast as the slowest one of us ... social reform just takes a long time’ (Carmen). Carmen’s perspective recognises the diverse composition of American society, with both advocates and opponents of death reform. Therefore, Carmen’s perspective emphasises the need for comprehensive support amongst American society to facilitate reform within the funeral industry.

5.4 Promising Approaches

‘I think there’s lessons to be learned’ (Ethan)

5.4.1 Bridging the Information Gap

The participants highlighted the importance of education and awareness in challenging the DIC and promoting death reform. One participant asserted the need for ‘better information, and more accessible and clear information’ (Ethan). Ethan advocated a ‘decision tree’ of

information, that delineates available options for addressing death and dying to alleviate overwhelm and the pressures imposed by the DIC. Another participant indicated the value of ‘formalised education’ surrounding death and dying (Lauren). Lauren is involved in establishing informative platforms such as the Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA) and Redesigning the End, both of which were recognised by Lauren as the ‘most impactful’ of the programmes they have put together. Another participant highlighted an effective model employed by the People’s Memorial Coop, whereby individuals acquire a membership priced at \$10 (Max). This membership grants access to a mailing list that informs members on available death care services, and a presentation of the advantages and disadvantages (Max). This model presents a framework that could be implemented throughout the United States to enhance public awareness and understanding of the diverse approaches to engaging with death (Max). It was also suggested that education targeted at aspiring funeral and medical professionals could significantly contribute to reshaping America’s relationship with death (Lauren). A participant shared their experience of teaching university students about the historical development of death practices in America (Lauren). Lauren recognises that doctors are ‘trained to cure’, emphasising the need for reform within the medical industry to support the movement towards respecting and legalising MAD, arguing that reform ‘needs to keep progressing’. Another participant expressed a similar perspective, urging American society not to ‘give up the fight ... as soon as we take our eyes off of it, it will easily just go back to business as usual’ (Carmen).

‘We need more intelligent legislators’ (Lauren)

5.4.2 Legislative Inclusion

The need for policy reform and a different legislative approach was repeatedly identified by the participants in their responses. The need for policy reform emerged as a prevalent theme throughout the interviews but featured prominently in discussions about future actions. One participant stated that ‘the policies have to change’ and emphasised policy reform as the ‘big lever’ for progress (Ethan). Ethan highlighted the importance of policy reform in ensuring the well-being of American society, ‘changing laws so that people are protected’. Another participant echoed this perspective, asserting ‘we need policy changes’ and highlighting ‘I think we need a lot more policy reform in the funeral industry’ (Carmen). This indicates that the current pace of policy reform is insufficient to drive efficient change within the funeral

industry. Moreover, multiple participants emphasised the need for a different approach to legislation. Carmen shared their involvement in legislative sessions and remarked that it was collectively decided ‘we can’t have good policy without citizens being involved’, underscoring the essential role of public engagement in shaping legislation to reflect all needs. Another participant echoed this sentiment, expressing the need for ‘more intelligent legislators who understand why the laws that they’re writing are completely, they’re just not serving people’ (Lauren).

‘I would like to see to funeral industry take the lead’ (Carmen)

5.4.3 Collaborating with Funeral Providers

Collaborating with the funeral industry was identified as an aspirational goal by the participants, albeit one that seems unlikely to happen in the near future. The potential for ‘transformative’ change in death reform, if the funeral industry were open to embracing change, was a topic that emerged repeatedly. One participant expressed this notion, characterising the funeral industry as a ‘capitalist, profit-driven industry’ and posited that the industry possesses a responsibility to take a leading role in death reform efforts, ‘I would like to see the funeral industry take the lead’ (Carmen). Another participant suggested that while significant changes might not be immediately feasible, the funeral industry could begin by re-evaluating the types of funerals they offer, either to make them more affordable or more environmentally friendly (Lilly). Lilly proposed the introduction of grant options ‘for families that feel strongly about green burial but can’t afford to do a burial’. Other participants put forward more radical ideas; ‘every funeral home should be a non-profit, every funeral home should have a community board of directors’ (Max). Max’s contention suggests the need for a fundamental shift in the structure and governance of funeral homes, fostering a more community-oriented approach to funeral services.

6. OVERALL FINDINGS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

6.1 Concluding Remarks

This research set out to delve into the intricate dynamics of the American funeral industry, through an in-depth analysis of the DIC and its significant influence on American society. It seeks to shed light on the ongoing death reform efforts that aim to challenge the existing paradigm and pave the way for transformative change. This exploration encompasses an analysis of contemporary death reform efforts, their strengths and weaknesses, and the most viable strategies for future implementation. By conducting an extensive review of the relevant scholarly literature, this study examines the intricate development of the American funeral industry and how it became such a prevalent part of American society. The commercialisation and medicalisation of death have become deeply intertwined with the prevailing capitalist structure in America, resulting in a ‘profit-driven’ industry that generates up to \$20 billion annually (Marks, 2021). This growth is not incidental but rather a consequence of ‘enterprising young men’ capitalising on the demand for embalming services during the era of the American Civil War (Doughty, 2018). Subsequently, legislation, sales tactics, and marketing strategies were enacted, reshaping the American perspective on death and dying. By imposing regulations that portrayed the dead body as dangerous, American society was discouraged from caring for their deceased loved ones, perpetuating the ‘myth of the infectious body and the myth of the helpless mourner’ (Jasmine).

The participants in this study exhibit a profound recognition of the existence of the DIC and its exploitative tendencies, characterised as ‘opportunistic’ in nature (Lauren). Acknowledging the impact of the DIC, Carmen demanded that we ‘take back these processes that are deeply meaningful’. Central to their discourse is the recognition that education plays a crucial role in empowering individuals to navigate and contest the DIC. The participants asserted that informing the population on alternative ways to approach death and dying is an effective way of reshaping America’s relationship with death. They stressed the importance of policy reform as a pivotal pathway towards protecting and promoting death and funeral reform within the Western structure. The significance of legislative engagement and the imperative role of public participation in shaping policies that align with the needs of American society was emphasised. To fully transform the American funeral industry, the participants envision a collaborative

approach involving engagement with funeral industry professionals. Although this aspiration appears challenging and unlikely to materialise in the near future, the participants consistently directed their focus towards it.

The strengths and limitations of death reform were discerned from the participants' responses. Clearly, death reform has achieved a great deal for American society, evident in the incremental legalisation of medical aid in dying, the increasing acceptance of green burials, the emergence of end-of-life doulas, the resurgence of spiritual perspectives on death and dying, as well as more practical initiatives in the realm of funeral reform. Numerous strengths of contemporary death reform efforts were recognised, including its capacity to engender transformative shifts in perspectives simply through meaningful conversations and educational initiatives. The dedicated lobbying and advocacy for the legalisation of medical aid in dying and green burials have resulted in policy reform, while the emergence of various organisations actively challenges the pervasive influence of the Death Industrial Complex in their day-to-day endeavours.

6.2 Research Limitations & Recommendations

One notable limitation of this study is the sample size; it is recognised that qualitative studies typically achieve saturation with a sample size ranging from 9 to 17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). However, due to time constraints, this study only conducted 7 interviews. Hence, one recommendation for future research would be to use a larger sample size to enhance the accuracy of the findings.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this research exclusively focuses on the conventional American funeral, predominantly rooted in white traditions and involving undertakers. Due to constraints in the word count, this study could not explore the range of death practices and traditions across America. Consequently, it is recommended that future researchers delve into a broader range of American death practices, examining their distinctive characters and divergences from the ones discussed within this study.

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9. APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Interview questions

- How would you define the Death Industrial Complex?
- In your opinion, how has the Death Industrial Complex shaped American attitudes towards death and dying?
- How do you see the work of [name of organisation/ occupation] challenging or subverting the Death Industrial Complex?
- How would you define death reform?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your involvement in [name of organisation] and how you became interested in death reform?
- Can you describe any specific projects or initiatives that [name of organisation] has undertaken to promote death reform?
- How effective do you think these initiatives have been in creating meaningful change?
- Do you think that [name of organisation/ occupation] is doing enough to challenge the Death Industrial Complex? Why or why not?
- What other steps do you think could be taken to promote death reform?
- How do you think we can address issues regarding the monetisation of death practices? Do you think death reform movements are enough to tackle this issue? If not, what more do you think could be done here?
- How can we ensure that death care is more accessible and affordable for everyone?
- What role do you think the funeral industry should play in promoting death reform?
- How do you think we can encourage more open and honest conversations about death and dying in our culture?
- Can you describe any specific challenges that you have faced in promoting death reform?
- How have you seen attitudes towards death and dying change during your involvement in death reform?
- How do you think we can make death care more sustainable and environmentally friendly?
- In your opinion, what is the most pressing issue facing death reform movements today?
- How do you see the future of death practices evolving in the coming years?
- Do you think that death reform movements have the potential to challenge and subvert the Death Industrial Complex, or do you believe there is a risk of these movements being adopted by the existing system? For instance, if more funeral providers begin to offer eco-friendly burial options, could this be seen as a sign of progress or simply a way for the industry to capitalise on changing attitudes towards death and the environment?

- Is there anything else you would like to add about your work in death reform or the future of death practices?

Appendix B:

Information Sheet

‘The Death Industrial Complex: An Analysis of the American Funeral Industry and Contemporary Death Reform Efforts’

Research Questions

- *What is the Death Industrial Complex and how has it shaped American attitudes towards death and dying?*
- *How do existing death reform strategies challenge the Death Industrial Complex?*
- *What are the gaps with death reform efforts and what more could be done to challenge the Death Industrial Complex?*

The Death Industrial Complex, in the context of this thesis, is a theory referring to the way in which mortuary culture has become monetised and medicalised; a system of denial, routine, expectations and capital, created by men for monetary reasons. I will look towards death reform movements in this thesis as a solution to some of the challenges that the Death Industrial Complex presents. The second half of my dissertation will focus on this idea of death reform movements as a beginning to the change that is needed to combat this issue.

I am hoping to conduct a series of around 10 interviews with a selection of people from across the US that are, ideally, involved in a death reform movement, or are simply interested in discussing this topic. I will be asking around 15-20 questions regarding the funeral industry and mortuary culture in the US; these interviews are likely to last around 45 minutes and will be conducted online, I will aim to keep to this timeframe. There will be a mixture of both closed- and open-ended questions to ensure that I can compare answers but that I can also give interviewees the opportunity to express their opinions in their own way; here I will be collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. The topic of this thesis will be sensitive to many; therefore, I will be taking ethical consideration throughout my project. I understand the need to ensure that all participants within this study are fully aware of the topic that will be discussed and that they feel comfortable throughout the interview; to do so, I will remind the interviewees of the topic before we begin and emphasise that they should not answer any questions that they do not feel comfortable doing so. Within the interviews, I will ask indirect questions, that ask the interviewee about concepts and ideas rather than directly asking them about their experiences. Although, there will certainly be opportunity for the participants to delve into their

own experiences should they wish to do so; I will remind them that they are welcome to share as much or as little as they would like too. I will remind all interviewees that should they request that the interview comes to a stop, I will do so immediately.

Appendix C:



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Consent Dissertation Research Project

I have read and understood the information sheet dated 25 th January 2023 explaining the above research project.	
I agree for the data collected from me to be stored and used in relevant future research [in an anonymised form].	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher [or person taking consent]	
Signature	
Date*	

***To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.**

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form will must be kept in a secure location.