

Emotions in Finnish funerals during COVID-19 restrictions

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ABSTRACT

Rituals are a way to express both personal and relational emotions. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted funerals around the world. Although the pandemic was not very severe in Finland, the restrictions on organizing and attending funerals were quite strict. This article seeks to uncover what kinds of emotions participants experienced when organizing and attending funerals during COVID-19, as well as what these emotions may reveal regarding funerals during a pandemic. The 45 letters that form the qualitative data of the research offer some important real-time insights into how funeral practices were experienced during the pandemic. Thematic analyses revealed the following main themes: irritation when organizing a funeral, contradictory emotions about attending a funeral, embodiment of emotions, and funeral ritual as a channel of meaning. The strongest negative emotions were directed towards the restrictions, rather than being the type of painful emotions normally connected with funerals and bereavement. Even though the letters focused on funerals, they additionally revealed reflections on the pandemic. This shows that the funeral acted both as a normal life cycle ritual and as a disaster ritual, which helped the writers to cope with the pandemic itself.

KEYWORDS

Funeral. Emotions. COVID-19. Ritual

Introduction

The funerals at the centre of this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, it serves to mention that Finland was one of the countries that managed to limit the number of infections. For example, during the first two waves of COVID-19 during which this study took place, the number of people who died from the virus was below 1,000. Nevertheless, the impact of the pandemic on face-to-face rituals, such as funerals, was enormous. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and radically reshaped experiences of bodily disposal and memorialization around the world. One key characteristic of almost all religious practices and traditions is the centrality of face-to-face gatherings (Baker et al., 2020). The imposition of restrictions on the number of people allowed to attend a funeral was rapid and severe (from 50 people to only ten people), and they were interpreted in a variety of ways. The restrictions and the discussion around the importance of attending the funeral even during a pandemic awoke my interest to study emotions connected to participation in funerals.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland (ELCF) is the majority church, with a 65.1% membership of the Finnish population in 2022 (ELCF, 2022). There is, however, a big difference in membership between urban (lowest in Helsinki, 47.4%) and rural areas (highest in Perho, Northern Finland, 91.3%) (ELCF, 2022). Even though its membership is declining, the ELCF enjoys a near monopoly when it comes to funerals, and this is clearly reflected in the statistics of ELCF burial services. In 2022, the total number of burials in Finland was 57,851; out of these, only 3,137 were not buried following Lutheran funeral practices (ELCF, 2022). This demonstrates the comparatively greater role of Lutheran pastors vis-à-vis clergymen in other countries, where the role of funeral agencies as organizers of the ritual is central (Schäfer, 2007). The role of funeral agencies in performing the ritual is, however, also increasing in Finland (Pajari, 2014; Høeg & Pajari, 2013). In Finland, a burial that follows Lutheran traditions is important for many, even those who are members of the civil registry (Butters, 2017). Meanwhile, there is a trend in Finland of public funerals being phased out in favour of private mourning, while the number of attendees at funerals is shrinking as well (Pajari, 2014; 2018).

Coffin burials can never be postponed for very long because of a limited amount of storage space for corpses. In Finland, cremation mainly occurs after the funeral has taken place, which means that during a crisis, funerals cannot be postponed for a better moment. If the cremation is done before the funeral, there must be special reasons, as well as permission from the vicar of the parish. The most common reason is that the deceased passed away while travelling (and transporting ashes is easier than a coffin), but most Finns wish to have the burial

ceremony in Finland (ELCF, 2009; Law on burial services 18 and 19 §). The practice of cremation after the funeral was not changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that at least a small number of participants could attend the funeral. The restrictions on the number of attendees changed rapidly, however, and the interpretation of who was included in this number differed from place to place. In some parishes, even the pastor and cantor were included among the maximum of ten people, while in others only the relatives and friends of the deceased were counted. This resulted in the National Association of Funeral Directors asking the Office of the Church Council and Regional State Administrative Agency to provide a clear set of instructions on how to conduct funerals, in order that these may be equally manifested among funeral attendees during the COVID-19 pandemic (Seppälä, 2021).

Funeral rituals during COVID-19 have been widely studied in various contexts and from various points of view. Memorialization and its challenges during COVID-19 were studied in terms of various aspects (Lowe et al., 2020; Maddrell, 2020). Another study discusses COVID-19-related deaths and the mourning of loved ones online (Myers & Donley, 2022). Similarly, some have studied digitally mediated funerals (Alexis-Martin, 2020; McNeil et al., 2021; Post, 2021). A Swedish study conducted in 2020 interviewed nine bereaved people during the restrictions and focused on emotions in the context of final farewells during end-of-life care, but not during funerals (Wasshede & Björk, 2021). A German study examined the content and emotions surrounding restrictions on touching the deceased person's body (Stetter, 2020). Other publications analyse the safety of a funeral due to the risk of a deadly virus spreading (Van Overmeire & Bilsen, 2020), but they do not analyse emotions as such. Furthermore, many of the chapters in *The Handbook of Disaster Rituals* deal with emotions (Pemberton, 2021; Wojtkowiak, 2021a) and various death rituals during the pandemic (Davies, 2021; Boret & Fukuda, 2021; Wepener, 2021; Wojtkowiak, 2021b). These help in interpreting the findings of the present study. In the Finnish context, there are only publications stemming from this same data set, which analysed the experiences of funeral participants for example, from spatial point of view (Vähäkangas, 2021; 2023a; 2023b).

There is, however, space for research that takes a more in-depth approach to the participants' experiences around attending funerals during the pandemic. Thus, this article aims to outline what types of emotions participants felt while organizing and attending funerals during the COVID-19 restrictions.

Emotions expressed through funeral rituals

Emotions are generally defined as conscious mental reactions experienced as focused feelings (Davies, 2011, 4). In this article, I understand that emotions are both personal and shared experiences (Riis & Woodhead, 2010). Furthermore, the shared experiences influence how intensely emotions are felt (Knottnerus, 2014), an aspect that is essential to consider when studying emotions created by and expressed in rituals during the COVID-19 restrictions. In a situation where only the closest family members could attend the funeral, only a small group of people had the possibility to share experiences and emotions. Previous studies on emotions in funerals highlight the painful emotions experienced by the bereaved during the funeral service (Giblin & Hug, 2006). Additionally, a range of emotions in funerals has been recorded (Davies, 2017). This variety of emotions needs to be acknowledged while studying funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, studying emotions in funerals is connected to a trend in funeral practice of personalization being central (Schäfer, 2007; Ramshaw, 2010). Personalization is rendered visible in how those planning the funeral wish to tailor the service to suit the personality of the deceased and follow their funeral will as closely as possible (Vähäkangas & Mäki-Petäjä-Leinonen, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the restrictions hindered personalization when many things such as large attendance in funeral or viewing the body were not allowed.

Rituals refer to a religious ceremony consisting of a series of actions which are performed in a certain order (Bell, 1997, 91-137). In this article, I focus on funerals as life cycle rituals and refer mainly to Lutheran funeral rituals in Finland. Rituals act as a tool to channel emotions (Romanoff, 2010), and this is why a lack of rituals – or restrictions on them – can also influence the process and experiences of bereavement. Furthermore, many emotions motivate individuals to search for and aim to live a meaningful life (Miller-McLemore, 2013; Moschella, 2016). The emotions felt in funerals may be connected to the identity change of the bereaved (Davies & Park, 2012). They are thus expressed in the continuing bond between the bereaved and the deceased (Klass et al., 1996; Valentine, 2008). The notion of such a connection additionally comprises the bonds among the bereaved while they are planning and organizing a funeral (Ellis, 2013; Caswell, 2011; Davies, 2017). Both bonds, the one with the deceased and those between the bereaved, are important when studying emotions. Previous research stresses the importance of the funeral in dealing with emotions during bereavement (Castle & Phillips, 2003), as well as the significance of funeral attendance as part of memorializing (Davies, 2011).

Data, method, and research ethics

I selected personal letters as a method that was suitable to the pandemic context in which this research took place. This was chosen so that writers could report on their experiences without worrying about being exposed to the virus, and so that they could have ample time to perform the task. An invitation to participate in the research was published in more than ten channels (for example, in newspapers and on social media, as well as through grief and religious organizations). The sampling strategy was to access the experiences of ordinary Finnish people in various parts of the country and from various religious/social/age/gender background.

The call to participate in the research included the following instructions: What emotions did attending a funeral awake in you? Was it difficult to decide whether to participate or not? How did the pandemic influence the organization of and participation in the funeral? How did the relationship to the deceased influence your experience? If one was responsible for planning the funeral, they were also asked to answer the following: In what ways did the wishes of others participating in planning influence the mode of the funeral and space of the funeral and burial? I also asked participants if they would be willing to be interviewed later.

The data consists of 45 letters by 35–79-year-old Finns. The writers are from various parts of Finland, mostly female (33) but also including males (12). This is a rather good proportion of men writing on issues connected to death and dying (see Guither et al., 2003; Damianakis & Marziali, 2012). All the letters were written in Finnish, and I have translated the direct quotations into English. The 45 letters were received between October 2020 and February 2021, and they include experiences during both the first and second waves of COVID-19. Most participants sent their letter via e-mail, but some did so in the mail; one participant sent a recording from a radio interview on the topic. Letters ranged from half a page to seven pages long. Many included attachments, such as the programme of the funeral, pictures, and the obituary. Most of the writers were relatives of the deceased: widows/widowers, children, and grandchildren. Among the participants were also some friends of the deceased. Most of the writers belonged to the ELCF, one to the Finnish Orthodox Church, one to a Baptist church in Finland, and four to the civil registry. The sampling of the data has its limitations, and the data represents mainly the Finnish-speaking population with one Swedish-speaking exception.

Geographically and religiously, the letter data represents the Finnish population well. The majority of the writers are middle-aged or senior citizens; this is natural, given that most are either widows/widowers or writing about the funeral of their mother or father. The data is multifaceted and rich, and the writers followed my instructions. As always in qualitative research, they also shared ideas

which I did not ask but contributed to the aim of this study. While I had initially thought that I would need to interview the participants as well, in the end I decided not to conduct these interviews due to the abundance of data in the letters.

People participated voluntarily in this study. I did not ask their names, only their age, gender, relationship to the deceased, and religious affiliation (or lack thereof). I did not ask their address, but many letters did include the location of the funeral. To safeguard the anonymity of the authors, I do not report these actual places. I have also obscured any personal names. I followed ethical procedures during data gathering, and the data is securely stored. In this article, I refer to the letters with a code for the data: for example, L8 refers to the eighth letter I received. Additionally, I reveal the age of the writer and his/her relationship to the deceased.

Thematic analysis and the structure of the paper

I conducted thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) in the old-fashioned way, labelling the printed letters with marker pens and adding comments in the margins. Thematic analysis is especially useful when seeking to combine analysis of meaning with context (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Therefore, I read the letters carefully to learn about the context of the funerals. In thematic analysis, it is important to consider the context of experiences. For this reason, I organized and grouped the material and found out at which stage of the funeral the feelings related to. The analysis showed that funerals were mainly associated with different emotions than the commemorations described by some of the authors. In addition to this, I wrote comments related to the themes in the margins of the material. In the first reading, I only highlighted direct comments on emotions, but as the analysis progressed, my understanding grew, and I also highlighted indirect remarks related to emotions.

Finally, I compiled the findings into a table which consists of both background data and the themes identified in the analyses. The background data includes age, gender, religious/nonreligious affiliation, relationship to the deceased, and information on restrictions during the funeral. The aim of the table was to increase my understanding of the full scope of the data. The table includes information by which an individual writer might be identified, and for this reason it is not attached here. The result of thematic analyses reveals the following main themes: irritation when organizing the funeral, conflicting emotions surrounding attendance, embodiment of emotions, and the funeral ritual as a channel for meaning. This article is data-driven and follows the thematic findings, after which the results will be discussed.

Irritation when organizing the funeral

The main theme of organizing the funeral included subthemes of emotions connected to planning, organizing, and the rapid changes of COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the government of Finland. Most of the writers discuss the influence of the pandemic in the planning and organizing of a funeral. Some had to change plans because of the sudden introduction of new restrictions – even between planning and organizing the funeral. This rapid change in restrictions is exemplified by a 58-year-old daughter-in-law, who articulates the effect of unclear restrictions on the organization of funerals:

During the pandemic, the situations changed almost from day to day, and the rollercoaster of emotions was intense. The parish of my father-in-law announced that the number of participants would be limited to 10 people, including the pastor and organist. This made us realize the fact that only the widow, daughter, and son, along with 5 grandchildren, could be present... Despite our efforts to explain to the congregation that the guidelines from the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (AVI) did not apply to a restricted private situation, the parish and the parish pastor remained firm in their stance. I was truly saddened that I could not attend the funeral service... but I had to accept the reality and imagine myself sitting alone at home following the livestream. Finally, the matter reached the bishop. Two days before the funeral, he provided an interpretation that allowed the children, grandchildren, their spouses, and the great-grandchildren to participate in the funeral service. (L8)

According to the letter above, virtual participation does not appear to be a particularly glamorous option. The daughter-in-law persistently demanded a mitigation of restrictions so that the entire extended family could participate in the funeral. This case is the only one where taking the matter to the bishop is described, but in several other cases, relatives sought to influence the restrictions through church officials. It seems that during the pandemic, those who knew how to contest the application of restrictions did achieve their desired outcome. Several letters describe similar restrictions that were adhered to without question.

The funeral arrangements were negotiated remotely with the congregation, which elicited astonishment from many close relatives. The following 62-year-old daughter writes about the planning process:

I managed the practical arrangements related to my father's funeral, which caused quite a bit of distress when dealing with the church. It was communicated directly from the church office that we would not meet with family members in person. (L24)

The daughter also received harsh emails related to organizing the event, and the parish pastor did not respond to any of the messages she sent. This made the writer feel distress.

The restrictions also made it difficult, or even impossible, to honour the deceased's wishes, and they made personalization of the funeral hard. A 58-year-old sister of the deceased describes her own emotional turmoil:

Great despair began when we were planning the funeral, gradually revealing that we could not organize the funeral at all as we had planned and as my sister had wished. (L19)

The sister had, prior to her demise, meticulously communicated her wishes for burial, and her loved ones experienced profound difficulty in being unable to fulfil these.

In the letter data of this study, there were strong emotions in organizing the funeral, such as irritation and despair. Organizing the funeral during the pandemic was clearly stressful. However, some wrote that the restriction on the number of participants did not bother them, as their family was already so small.

Ambiguous emotions surrounding participation

The main theme associated with participation in the funeral was a plethora of conflicting emotions. The funerals undoubtedly functioned to channel a variety of emotions that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many authors describe their own rollercoaster of emotions in their letters but tend to conclude the letter with positive memories. A 74-year-old widow describes:

As the procession stopped in front of the college, where we had lived for 22 years, our children had grown up there, and many family memories were attached to that place. A few former colleagues and friends had gathered to pay their respects to my husband by the gate. It warmed my heart. (L38)

Although participation in the actual funeral was limited to close family members, the daughter in charge of the arrangements had employed her creativity to ensure that important individuals and locations were acknowledged during the funeral procession. The family's memories were closely associated with the college, which, in addition to being the parents' workplace, had also been their residence. During the funeral procession that passed through the college, all these significant memories were duly acknowledged.

The experiences of participation evoked gratitude in many, as a 37-year-old niece recounts:

On the day of the funeral at 12:15 (blessing at 14:00), the funeral home called to inform that the hospital had set a limit of ten people for the funeral service. ... The funeral home apologized for this and said they could do nothing about it. Naturally, I was shocked and in tears. A while later, the pastor who was to perform the (deceased's) blessing called and said he had received the same notification. He was very sorry about the situation but understood the difficulty of it. However, he promised that he could hold two identical blessing ceremonies, with the actual blessing performed only during the first one. (L15)

In this case as well, the predominant feeling imparted by the experience remained positive, although the author already feared the worst in a rapidly changing situation. The ritual could be attended by everybody, and in this case it did not matter that it was repeated twice.

However, not everyone experienced gratitude for the pastor's actions at the funeral. A 58-year-old sister describes her own heavy emotions:

We all wondered why the pastor didn't say anything at the grave! ... We had the feeling that he was in a hurry to leave us due to the pandemic... (L19)

The same author who found it challenging to fulfil her sister's wishes when organizing the funeral also experienced disappointments in both organizing and participating, feeling that these disappointments hindered the initiation of the grieving process. Emotions were felt but the ritual did not help to cope with the bereavement.

Some individuals also felt isolated in their grief. The 67-year-old widow reflects:

While there were condolence flowers, people couldn't stay to engage in conversations, and discussions about death and the deceased remained superficial. The need to unpack the same final stages arises multiple times. (L29)

The fear of virus transmission left the widow alone with her memories. She acknowledges understanding the changes brought about by the pandemic but still longs for social interactions to help process her grief.

The descriptions of emotions which were more pleasant are linked to successful experiences after navigating challenging turns of events. However, not everyone felt well received by church workers, as exemplified earlier by the pastor's busyness and the experience of not being able to meet relatives.

Embodied emotions

The theme of embodiment of emotions was associated with various experiences related to expressing emotions without the dimension of physical contact. The embodied emotions also contained moralizing aspects of embodiment because of the danger of spreading the virus or being infected. Expressing emotions without physical touch seemed challenging to many of the writers. A 49-year-old nephew describes his aunt's funeral:

Unexpectedly frustrating was the prohibition on hugging, for which my cousin had sent a strict message in advance regarding compliance. This weighed on me throughout the funeral. My family, in general, is very reserved when it comes to physical contact with others, but when it would have been 'socially acceptable' for once, it was prohibited/impossible. For some reason, it felt somehow overwhelming – as if the most important way to show condolences had suddenly been taken away. (L10)

Due to the prohibitions, it seems that hugging had become like a forbidden fruit, and the significance of an embrace in expressing empathy is emphasized. In this case, the author describes their family as reserved but finds physical touch socially acceptable at funerals. The impact of the lack of physical touch on emotions is also analysed by a 50-year-old woman who writes about her grandmother's funeral:

There was nothing quite to replace a hug. The humorous 'Corona elbow' didn't convey those emotions... We mourned the loss of a loved one, but also the fact that we couldn't comfort each other and grieve in our natural way. That added to the sadness. (L37)

Touch was perceived as an important channel for conveying emotions, especially comfort, which is difficult to put into words.

Not everyone, however, longed for physical contact. A 51-year-old daughter writes:

I would have appreciated compassionate and empathetic words. On the other hand, the physical distancing also provided me with a mental distance from my mother; I didn't have to attempt artificial hugs but could stay at a comfortable distance with permission. I was also a bit nervous about infection risks in general and maintained safe distances throughout the entire event. (L14)

The author describes their relationship with their mother as traumatic, which made attending the funeral challenging. According to the author, their relation-

ship with their late father was closer but not entirely free of problems. This situation reflects the complexity of emotional experiences. On one hand, the participant felt relief about maintaining emotional distance, yet on the other hand, they longed for more participation and support. The embodiment of emotions is also evident in the testimony of a 61-year-old mother:

Before the funeral, we wanted to have one last viewing of the deceased so that all of us, the closest ones ... could bid our final farewells. The hospital chapel couldn't accommodate the viewing due to renovations, and no viewings were arranged in any of the church chapels due to COVID-19. Therefore, (the deceased) had to be transported to another hospital's chapel so that we could see her one last time. (L12)

In her letter, the mother states that her daughter did not die from COVID-19, and for this reason, the funeral agency was able to arrange a viewing. In many letters, the funeral agency was perceived as flexible and considerate of the families even in exceptional circumstances.

The authors of this study perceived the lack of physical touch during the COVID-19 pandemic as a problem, because the restrictions complicated the physical expression of emotions. However, they stated that despite odd experiences with embodiment, they found ways to express their emotions at the funeral.

The funeral ritual as a channel for meaning

The results related to the meaningfulness of life encompassed subthemes of existential reflections about mortality, eternal life, and belief. Experiencing two disasters, both the pandemic and the personal loss of a loved one, was found to be a disruption to a person's sense of meaning. Funeral rituals were thus an important way to reconstruct meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was possible to devote one's attention to the grief experience.

Funerals bring life's fundamental questions to the forefront, prompting many to reflect on the significance of life. This was seen in the letters, even though it was not directly inquired about in the writing request. The authors contemplated the impact of pandemic-era funerals on their attitudes towards death. This was articulated, for instance, by a 49-year-old nephew as follows:

On the one hand, it somehow felt exceptionally good that the epidemic had in some strange way made mortality and death seem more normal.... The speeches, liturgy, and songs about the transience of funerals resonated unusually powerfully. On the other

hand, I was also surprised that even in this situation, my aunt's death somehow felt less unjust. Sad, of course ... (L10)

Encountering death was normalized during the pandemic, and the loss of a loved one became a part of life. This emphasized the significance of funerals and participation therein. However, it did not eliminate emotions, and grief remained.

Death was also expressed from the perspective of hope for eternal life. A 65-year-old daughter writes:

We have a profound yearning for her, but foremost, we thank our Heavenly Father that the pains and suffering of our beloved mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother have come to an end. It is good to live with the hope of reunion. (L16)

The author stated that they belong to a revival movement in which the teachings of hope for eternal life is central. This hope gave the daughter comfort during their time of sorrow.

Some authors emphasized the communal significance of participation. The following 68-year-old friend writes:

The relationship with the deceased and his wife was close. I absolutely wanted to attend this event despite the mask requirement. There were many familiar faces and a strong sense of community. Despite the sorrow and longing, it was a joyful occasion, filled with a strong sense of hope for reunion. (L6)

The funeral and the loss of a loved one stirred an existential process in some of the participants, through which they contemplated various emotions related to the meaningfulness of life. In my research invitation, I did not inquire about the meaningfulness of life or existential reflections. This partly influenced the fact that only a portion of the writers raised emotions related to these topics. Interestingly, the writings on anger and despair were linked more to the organization of the funeral than the loss of a loved one. This does not imply that these emotions were not present in relation to the loss; they simply were not articulated in this dataset.

Discussion: Emotions of COVID-19 funerals

The results indicate that those who participated in funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic encountered their own diverse, often ambiguous emotions. The strongest negative emotions were directed towards COVID-19 restrictions, and they were not those painful emotions that are normally connected with funerals and bereave-

ment. The results of this study indicate that even though the letters focused on the funerals in which the writers participated, they additionally revealed reflection on the pandemic as well. This shows that the ritual acted both as a normal life cycle ritual but additionally also as a disaster ritual, which helped the writers to cope with the disaster and reflect on their meaning in life. The data of this study revealed that rituals help to reconstruct meaning during the disaster, not only after, as previous studies suggest (Wojtkowiak, 2021; Post, 2021). While rituals take on various functions, during the pandemic funerals carried a discharge function, which served as a channel for feelings and emotions, helping the participants to cope both with the bereavement and the disaster (Post, 2021). The pandemic situation thus influenced the emotions which arose from participating in funerals during COVID-19: they were not interpreted mainly as religious emotions (Riis & Woodhead, 2010) but rather “secular” emotions of irritation and anger.

This article is based on rich letter data, which revealed experiences of funerals during COVID-19. The study also has limitations, however. The expressions regarding emotions were mainly written in a rather brief manner, and because there was no double-checking of how emotions were expressed and interpreted by the writers themselves, some of the analyses on emotions is rather sparse. Additionally, the experiences of emotions are relational or lack a relational aspect because of the COVID-19 restrictions. Emotions expressed in and through funerals are normally relational (Davies 2017, 17–26), but the situation of the pandemic seems to have stressed this relationality even more. This confirms previous studies revealing that the pandemic was both a social and personal disaster (Davies, 2021, 123). Participants felt that the restrictions on participation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic complicated the grieving process. This corroborates prior research underscoring the significance of rituals in coping with loss and the opportunity to progress in the process (Romanoff, 2010). In many instances, the number of participants was limited, which influenced the shared experience of participation (Knottnerus, 2014). Nevertheless, previous research emphasizes that the quantity of participants is not the determining factor for a successful funeral experience. Rather, what holds greater importance is how meaningful participants perceive the funeral to be and how effectively they can establish a connection with the deceased and other mourners (Burrell & Selman, 2020).

The restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic made it challenging to adhere to the deceased person’s wishes, and this caused distress among several relatives. Under usual circumstances, the deceased’s clear preferences regarding funeral rituals facilitate arrangements for the bereaved and spare them unnecessary disputes (Vähäkangas & Mäki-Petäjä-Leinonen, 2020). In letters describing funerals during the pandemic, no one mentioned disputes within the family concerning

adherence to the deceased person's wishes. All efforts seemed to be directed towards understanding and attempting to comply with the COVID-19 restrictions. As depicted in the data, the limited ability of the relatives to influence funeral arrangements appeared to result in a sense of lack of control. Prior research has demonstrated that this lack of control affects participants' perception of whether funerals are supportive of the grieving process or whether they are perceived as not beneficial (Burrell & Selman, 2020). The findings of this article corroborate previous research by indicating that the restrictions seemed to treat relatives unequally (Selman et al., 2021). The results reveal local and individual differences in how the restrictions were interpreted.

In Finnish funeral culture, physical touch occurs among mourners, and the deceased may be touched during the funeral procession or occasionally during open-casket funerals. No letters mention the deceased having died from COVID-19 or the virus spreading from the funeral, which is in line with research from cultures where touching the deceased is part of burial rituals (Jaja et al., 2020; Wildman et al., 2020). The funeral ceremonies provided a channel for expressing emotions related to loss in a socially accepted context (Mitima-Verloop, 2019). However, expressing emotions without physical touch was perceived as challenging. In many cultures, physical touch is central to funeral ceremonies (Stetter, 2020).

Shared embodiment was a challenge during the pandemic, but the examples of the data used in this article show that even though there was a lack of physical touch due to the COVID-19 restrictions, there were physical encounters that assisted in the processing of particularly painful emotions. Previous research shares the finding of this study that rituals as embodied experiences assist in creating meaning amidst chaos (Danbolt & Stifoss-Hanssen, 2011). Recent research reveals that COVID-19 challenged our bodies in many ways, not least by moralizing embodied ways of being in the world as a possible avenue of infection with COVID-19 (Pemberton, 2021). This moralizing attitude was seen in the data of this study as well.

For the participants in this study, conceptualizing mortality was an essential aspect of life's meaningfulness. Life's meaningfulness is not linked to a specific emotion (Baumeister, 1991; Martela & Steger, 2016), but emotions are known to influence one's experience of the meaningfulness of life (Abeyta et al., 2015; Steger, 2012). The role of funeral rituals in discovering new meaning in life, despite loss, is significant when funerals are personally meaningful (Giblin & Hug, 2006). Studies on the meaning of life during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal how the pandemic highlighted life's fragility (Anthony et al., 2021) and how religious capital helped individuals cope with the crisis caused by the pandemic (Seryczynska et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Funeral rituals served to channel emotions and helped participants to cope both with their personal loss and COVID-19. The pandemic restrictions caused irritation among those who organized the funerals. Embodiment of emotions was not easy when the participants could not touch the other bereaved. Some of the participants sought meaning through the funeral ritual, and for them it clearly became a disaster ritual. Furthermore, the findings show the importance of face-to-face attendance in a funeral, so that emotions may be shared with the other bereaved.

Data

L1-L45 Letters on funerals during COVID-19. Anonymised letters are archived in the COVID-19 collection of the University of Helsinki archives.

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