

# Dead Bodies that Matter: A Consensual Qualitative Research on the Lived Experience of Embalmers

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**Abstract**—Embalmers are widely recognized as someone who mends the cadavers, but behind that is a great deal of work. These professionals are competent in physiology, chemicals, and cosmetics. Another is that such professionals face cadavers day-to-day. Given this background, the researchers intended to find out the lived experience of embalmers. The purpose of the present study is to discover the essence of the work of these professionals, to determine factors that influence their work, the depths of their life and on how the occupation affects upon physical, emotional-mental, spiritual, moral and social aspects. The researchers used the Consensual Qualitative Research, and eight embalmers, seven male and one female, from Manila and Bulacan were interviewed using open-ended questions and were used to triangulate the results. A primary research team conducted the consensus of domains, and an external auditor reviewed the results. A personal data sheet was also used, this helped the researchers group the respondents according to demographic profile. The results of the consensual qualitative research investigation revealed the four core components of the lived experience of embalmers which are motivation, struggles, acceptance, and contentment. The results revealed core components that play an important role in their everyday lives as an embalmer, daily hardships, and source of their pleasures. The present study will help future researchers, embalmers, and society.

**Keywords**—Embalmers, consensual qualitative research, lived experience.

## I. INTRODUCTION

DEAD bodies that matter, where one's loss is a gain of another, where from death a living is made, an occupation that treats the dead, those professionals are called embalmers, and they start executing the job when someone dies. The dead bodies may not be a family or related but it matters to the professional because this is a source of income. An embalmer makes a living through the dead. An embalmer treats the deceased ones by turning the decaying body into the alive old self, like sleeping beauty for a while. Being an embalmer is undeniably a heavy occupation in nature but despite everything, embalmers are still underappreciated. The fact that the professionals are dealing with the cadavers almost every day says a lot and should be remembered that the days usually start when a life has ended. Reference [7] shows, embalming is both a science and an art. Embalming is the process of chemically treating a dead human body to reduce the presence and growth of microorganisms, to delay organic decomposition and to restore acceptable physical appearance. Embalming includes injecting chemicals into the arteries and veins, washing or cleaning the cadaver, removing blood and

other fluids inside, applying makeup and the like. The process of embalming first occurred during the times of early Egyptians wherein the belief of life after death and in order to achieve that, the cadavers must undergo mummification. The process of mummification was passed to others and as it was passed it changed to embalming. Nowadays, not anyone can execute embalming except those who were willing to work as an embalmer licensed or not. Embalming is a dangerous kind of profession, according to [14], embalming formulas are made of toxic chemicals containing formaldehyde, when inhaled may cause asthma [1], and may also cause irritation of the respiratory system, eyes, lacrimation and in severe cases, pulmonary oedema; formaldehyde is commonly mixed with water to dilute. Profoundly being an embalmer has both positive and negative effects in the professional's daily lives as well as the people that are around. Being an embalmer might be everyone's last option in choosing an occupation as the struggles are really high; however, there are also certain factors that makes people contented with this kind occupation, and this is what our study purports to comprehend. In this study, the researcher aims to provide an in-depth study on the lived experiences of the embalmers, and on how the occupation affects the individual in physical, emotional-mental, spiritual, moral, and social aspects.

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Over the years, the funeral industry has evolved rapidly and has become a necessity for individuals to prepare and accept the fact that all must deal with it in our lifetime. According to O'Rourke et al. [10], the term "funeral" refers to a ceremony in which a body or remains are present, in contrast to a memorial service, where the body or remains are generally absent. Although funerals may actually function to help individuals avoid facing death, it is also an integral part of a culture's mourning system, in which a sense of structure and closure is framed. Funeral services are industries that are preneed due to the fact that one cannot know when it is his or her time to pass. Funeral customs have shifted through time. The rise of the modern funeral was marked by the development of the funeral industry as society knows it today, including changes in the process of embalming and the development of the profession of embalmer [5]. In the Philippines, funeral services greatly affects the burial customs, funeral arrangements, body disposition procedures, last rites, and aftercare services to attend to the special needs not only of the deceased but also of the bereaving family [23]. In line with this, The Irish Times Ltd. [11] describes an embalmer is a chemist, stylist and anatomist mashed into one. The

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professional must be strong to maneuver the heavy weight of the cadaver. Whereas according to Cardiff [13], embalmers are responsible for preserving and disinfecting a body until the cremation or burial. The job is to try to restore the physical appearance of a deceased person and eliminate as far as is possible the distressing signs of death, so the body can be viewed by the bereaved. In addition, as cited by the MGN Ltd. [13], there are no formal entry requirements for entry into embalming work. However, GCSEs (A-C) in subjects including English, math, chemistry, biology and religious studies may be useful. Embalmers often have to drive, so a full driving license may be essential. There are no upper age limits to this profession. Opportunities for mature entrants to embalming work are favorable because life experience and respect for others are considered important by employers. A mature, responsible attitude to work is essential.

Embalming is one of the difficult jobs in the world, indeed embalmers work every day by facing dead people. Reference [2] defined embalmment as the method of preservation of bodies after death. Moreover, Bernard et al. [6] argued that embalming is the process of applying chemicals to the deceased body to decrease the presence and growth of micro-organisms, to delay decomposition and to recover an appropriate physical appearance. In addition to this, embalming is a chemical process that aims the preservation and sanitization of the human body indefinitely. The technique of embalming is an important tool in teaching and research in anatomy enabling the preservation of cadaveric material in good conditions [17]. Thus, embalming in most modern cultures is the art of temporarily preserving human remains to retard decomposition and make it suitable for display at a funeral and important of all a science of preserving the human body for anatomical research and study [7]. There are new methods of embalming being developed these days, and one example of that is the soft embalming methods using phenol have been developed to preserve those qualities, whilst simultaneously reducing the biohazardous risk that fresh tissue possesses when the formaldehyde fixation, fails to maintain the natural color, texture and biomechanical properties that fresh tissue possesses [22].

According to the study of Batra et al. [4], there are different embalming processes that are being used today namely: a) Artificial embalming in which it involves the injection of embalming chemicals into the blood vessels usually via the right common carotid artery; b) Cavity embalming in which it is the suction of the internal fluids of the cadaver and the injecting embalming chemicals into body cavities by using an aspirator and trocar; c) Hypodermic embalming is the process in which it injecting embalming chemicals under the skin as needed; d) Surface embalming in which it supplements the other methods, especially for visible, injured body parts. There is also a method called Thiel's method and it is a novel embalming technique. This method can preserve the color and softness of the cadaver without risk of infections. Embalmers have used cadavers embalmed with Thiel's method for preoperative assessments and have confirmed the usefulness of this method especially for the prevention of complications

or in assessing surgical approaches [16]

In the study conducted by the Irish Times Ltd. [11], the researchers describe the embalmer's studio as a small, basic operating theatre. There are anatomical diagrams on the walls. Tools usually used are a variation of scalpels and knives, clamps and needles, and other tools used for embalming are typically neatly arranged on the working surface. An old container of biscuits is filled with additional supplies. Underneath, on a lower rack, there are various containers of splendid pink preserving liquid. There is a sink with a shower connection and a selection of shampoos. In a different zone, a wide selection of beautifying agents are shown on a plate: all shades of establishment, a bright palette of eye shadows, particular pastes to hold includes set up, substance hued undertakers' wax for concealing fastens, stamps, and scars. At the point when the embalmer gets a body, it is acquired on a wheeled metal trolley, typically wrapped in a white cloth sheet. The head is upheld by a molded plastic square; a container hangs underneath the trolley. In line with this, a person's religious background will typically entail some prescriptive content in regard to funerals. The nature of the bodily display, the formality and solemnity of services, and the participatory nature of funerals may be influenced by a person's sense of religiosity. In contrast, nonreligious persons are likely to be open to a broader set of funeral options and attitudes [19]. Furthermore, embalming exposes embalmers to the diseases which the corpse carries and diseases that can be acquired from the chemicals being used such as formaldehyde and the like.

Embalmers had a higher risk of infection because of the chemicals or formulas used while performing the job. However, compared to other healthcare professions, embalmers have been largely ignored by researchers evaluating the risk of occupationally transmitted infections. Formaldehyde is one of the common chemicals embalmers used in performing embalmment. Raja & Sultana [21] described formalin as an aqueous solution of formaldehyde, is the chemical most commonly used for embalming. While, [18] defined formalin as a noxious, flammable gas, extremely soluble in water. Formalin is a colorless irritant which gives out pungent formaldehyde vapors and is widely used in the medical field as fungicide, germicide, disinfectant, and preservative. Formaldehyde is a hapten and formaldehyde-protein complex may be immunogenic. The chemical is extensively used to preserve cadavers in departments of anatomy.

Patwary & Sarker [20] stated that there have been several reports that individuals working with, or who encounter, dead bodies are exposed to potential hazards due to infectious agents. Funeral directors and mortuary workers are involved in the routine embalming of deceased tuberculosis. There are significant factors of the health and environmental risk from mortuary waste, identified as the decomposition of dead bodies. Inadequacies in such dangerous mortuary waste management practices can create possible hazardous situations and display some significant risks of concern to the bigger environment. Finally, a reported case of HIV recouped from

bone pieces, cerebrum, bone marrow, spleen, and lymph hubs from a patient with AIDS at post-mortem examination six days after death [7].

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This consensual qualitative research on the lived experiences of embalmers was supported by the following theories: Clayton Alderfer's ERG Theory, Viktor Frankl's concept of Logotherapy, Marsha Linehan's concept of Radical Acceptance, and Carl Rogers' Person-Centered Theory.

According to Alderfer's ERG Theory, the less existential needs are satisfied, the more they will be desired. Existential needs are basically those essential for human existence such as food, clothing, or shelter. After satisfying existential needs, Relatedness needs arise. Relatedness needs are interpersonal relationships with significant others like family, friends, and even employers. After that, growth needs come into play. Growth needs refer to personal development and may vary depending on the person. ERG Theory also states that a frustration-regression effect may occur; it means that an already satisfied need can become active when a higher-level need cannot be satisfied. In fact, if a person continues to struggle to satisfy his/her growth needs, relatedness needs can become active once again and serve as a key motivator. Overall, the motivation of embalmers in doing their profession is to satisfy basic needs for them or for their family, achieve personal development by enhancing their inherited knowledge and fulfilling their own curiosity. In addition, Viktor Frankl's concept of Logotherapy focuses on the search for the meaning of human existence. This concept helps people to find meaning in their lives to avoid struggles. Embalmers need to answer questions such as: What is my most difficult experience in embalming? Why I choose embalming? Who inspires me to become an embalmer, and how is my life as an embalmer? Answering these questions can find meaning in their lives and further reduce life struggles such as challenges, lack of safety, and frustrations. Furthermore, Marsha Linehan's concept of Radical Acceptance talks about the importance of accepting reality to improve quality of life. Embalming in our society is considered a dirty profession, despite the importance of it. Radical Acceptance can help embalmers as well as society to completely accept the reality that embalming is essential to our lives; doing so, can yield to a healthy and progressive state of life not just to the embalmers but to the society as a whole.

Lastly, Rogers' Person-Centered Theory agreed with the idea of Abraham Maslow regarding self-actualization but added that for a person to reach the level of actualization the person must have an environment that will provide them with openness, unconditional positive regard, and empathy. For a person to self-actualize, congruence must be present. Congruence is when the ideal-self is almost identical to the self-image. All things considered, embalmers achieve contentment when they feel satisfaction, integrity, and happiness by fully accepting that their current life is almost identical to their ideal life.

### IV. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Design

The researcher utilized qualitative research, specifically, Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), an inductive technique that is portrayed by open-ended interview questions, small number of samples, a dependence on words over numbers, the significance of context, a mix of numerous perspectives, and agreement of the research team. It is particularly appropriate for investigations that require rich portrayals of inner experiences, demeanors, and feelings [15].

The following essential components of CQR will be followed by the researcher:

- a) Typical Interview with open-ended, semi-structured method to allocate for collection of consistent data among multiple individuals with more in-depth interpretation of experiences;
- b) Multiple judges for the whole duration of data analysis to provide multiple insights;
- c) Mutual agreement to come up with judgements regarding the context of the data;
- d) With a minimum of one auditor to analyze the work of the initial team of judges to reduce the effects of group thinking within the primary team;
- e) Cross analyses between the data analysis, core ideas and domains.

#### B. Description of Respondents and Research Locale

The respondents of this study on the lived experience of embalmers fit the following criteria: primary embalmers of the corpse, male or female, age range from 20 years old and above, has worked for a minimum of 12 months, can understand English and/or Tagalog, and who consented to join the study. Participants are recruited from several funeral homes around Manila and Bulacan.

#### C. Ethical Considerations

An informed consent was obtained. Participants are informed of the purpose of the study, type of research intervention, participant selection, the procedure of how the study will be conducted, as well as the benefits that can be derived from the study. The informants are given the right to withdraw or refuse (voluntary participation) and that confidentiality will be maintained. All participants are asked to sign a consent which includes permission as well as consent to be taped recorded prior to data collection.

#### D. Instruments

This section contains all the tools that were used for the study, the constructs that the instruments measured and significant facts about the tests.

##### 1. Personal Data Sheet

A personal data sheet was used. This helped the researcher group the respondents according to demographic profile. The personal data sheet contained the following information: name of the respondent, the address, contact number, age, sex (male or female), economic status, educational background and years of experiences as an embalmer.

## 2. Interview Questions

Each interview followed a semi-structured protocol; was 2 – 10 minutes long and was conducted in Filipino and English. The respondents were asked the following questions:

- 1) How do you describe your life / your experience as an embalmer/?
- 2) Why did you choose to be an embalmer?
- 3) What is your most difficult experience in embalming?
- 4) What are the lessons learned/tips that helped you to become a successful embalmer?
- 5) Who or what inspires you to become an embalmer?

## 3. Researchers as the Instrument

The research team is comprised of four 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year of Bachelor of Science in Psychology Undergraduates from National University.

### E. Data Gathering Procedure

#### 1. Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents. After having selected the respondents through purposive sampling technique, the researcher discussed the confidentiality and purpose of the research and gave the informed consent to the respondents. The personal data sheet that the respondents filled up was also presented. Participants were asked to answer the following interview. In addition, the researcher informed the participants that the interview will be recorded. In this manner, one of the members is responsible to facilitate the recording and the other to act as the note taker.

#### 2. Data Analysis

Using Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet, the researcher divided the responses from the transcribed interview. After reviewing the recorded interview, the researcher was assigned independently to code the participants' response and form a selective code for every response. After the researcher determined the initial code the researcher validate the initial code. This is to find out if the code is proper and appropriate for the responses and formulate the major domain based on the identified subdomain. Disagreements and inconsistencies emerged during the process were resolved through consensus and the domain list was revised. The stable list of domains was also established and reviewed until consensus was achieved and frequency labels were then assigned.

#### 3. Audit Trail

Auditing occurred throughout. The audit trail included original interview records; the unitization in an Excel spreadsheet; the assignment of domains, categories, and subcategories; working definitions of the domains, categories, and subcategories; and a resultant report. The initial audit occurred on rotating teams. As the team categorized the units in each domain, called attention to units of data that the researchers believed to be incorrectly assigned to the domains it was categorized.

The researcher brought these to the attention of the entire team and negotiated (a) distribution of data to different

domains or components, and (b) the extraction of domain names. Furthermore, examination occurred while writing the article. Though sometimes, it may occur that some categories might be divided, subcategorized, or collapsed, or that the assignment of certain data units would fit better in other subcategories, categories, or domains. In a final audit, a single auditor was asked to ensure that (a) the material was assigned to the correct domain, category, and subcategory; (b) the categories and subcategories represented the content of the domain accurately; and (c) the wording of both the domains and the category structure reflected the raw data well.

The final step involved determining the salience of the themes for reporting. Judges used the labels "rare," "variant," "typical," and "general" to categorize the frequencies of the core ideas. In accordance with the consensual qualitative research method, a label of "rare" was given to core ideas that were mentioned by one case; "variant" was given to core ideas that were mentioned by less than half of the cases; a label of "typical" was given to core ideas that were mentioned in more than half to three-fourths of the cases; and finally, a label of "general" was given to core ideas that were mentioned by all cases [15]. In this study, this translated to a labeling of "rare" for 1 case, "variant" revealed by 2-12 cases, "typical" mentioned by 13-22 cases, and "general" for 23-24 cases.

## F. Results

TABLE I  
 DOMAINS AND SUB-CATEGORIES WITH INDIVIDUAL FREQUENCY

Domain	SUB CATEGORIES	Frequency
Motivation	Money	16
	Family	5
	Inheritance	10
	Curiosity	7
Struggles	Challenge	12
	Frustration	9
	Hygiene	2
	Safety	2
Acceptance	Community	2
	Social	1
Contentment	Satisfaction	10
	Happiness	1
	Integrity	10

*N* = 23. Frequency labels (General 22 – 23, Typical 12 – 21, Variant 3 – 11, Rare 1 – 2)

Results included four categories with 13 subcategories. The representative of each category is indicated in the frequency column. General means the category is applicable to all or but one of the participants; typical can mean it can be attributed to more than half of all participants; variant states can be applied from one-third to half of participants answers; and rare may apply to only one or two cases.

The first category is **Motivation**, with an identified four sub categories namely: this theme, it includes the following: *Money* "It's easy because of the extra income" with a frequency of 16 (Typical); *Family* "maybe because of my children" with a frequency of five (Variant); *Inheritance* "Kuya Boy was the one who thought me" with a frequency of 10 (Variant); *Curiosity* "I got interested in embalming so that's why I became an embalmer" with a frequency of seven (Variant).

The second category is **Struggles**, with an identified four sub categories namely: Challenge “It’s not always easy. Sometimes it’s hard, sometimes it’s not, that’s the life of an embalmer” with a frequency of 12 (Typical); Frustration “There was a time that a patient came, his head was flattened by a dump truck, I spent five hours fixing him.” with a frequency of nine (Variant); Hygiene “You need to be hygienic” with a frequency of two (Rare); Safety “rule number one is always be careful” with a frequency of two (Rare).

The third category is **Acceptance** with an identified two sub categories namely: Community “I was with Soldiers and Policemen, there was this certain operation, I was trained an embalmer for operations” with a frequency of two (Rare); Social “we sometimes have training seminars” with a frequency of one (Rare)

The last category is **Contentment**, with an identified three sub categories. Namely: Satisfaction “my life as an embalmer is fine, I had my children finish college working as an embalmer” with a frequency of 10 (Variant); Happiness “If you’re comfortable with being an embalmer; embalming will support you, and you will die an embalmer” with a frequency of one (Rare); Integrity “You need to be 100% decided in this profession” with a frequency of 10 (Variant).

## V. TRUSTWORTHINESS

The trustworthiness of this research is supported by the researcher’s attention to several criteria which were identified in the study of [7]. Credibility was established through the examination of the phenomena where the researcher conducted an open-ended interview with the respondents, writing an ample description of the outcome of the study. The way the researchers conveyed the findings was supported by the following: first, the researcher clearly defines the phenomena of interest; second, sampling broadly with the definition and lastly, providing a comprehensive description of our research method, Dependability was supported by the audit trail and executing multiple waves of audits. Conformability has supported through acknowledgment that the result was a negotiated text.

## VI. DISCUSSION

When you look at death, it makes you understand the importance of the moment when you have life and death in front of you, and you witness seeing someone deteriorating in front of you - it's an overwhelming experience. If you don't learn from that, I don't know what else you're going to learn. - Mickalene Thomas

The results of this consensual qualitative research on the “Dead Bodies That Matter: A Consensual Qualitative Research on the Lived Experience of Embalmers” showed that there are four categories of the lived experience of embalmers with 13 subcategories. These categories are identified using a consensus with the members of the research team and followed the essential components of CQR [9].

### 1. Components of the Lived Experiences of Embalmers

The first category is Motivation, identified with four

subcategories namely: Money with a frequency of 16 (Typical); Family with a frequency of five (Variant); Inheritance with a frequency of 10 (Variant); Curiosity with a frequency of seven (Variant). These findings are supported by the study conducted by Armstrong, M. [3]. Money, in the form of pay or some other sort of remuneration, is the most obvious form of reward. Money provides the carrot which most people want. Also, to support one’s family is one reason of people to why an individual is motivated at work as stated by the study of [12]. In another study by [8], inheritance does not only mean physical and material inheritance, it may also mean leaving a good family connection in the future. In addition, curiosity is the intrinsic motivation for exploration, learning, and creativity. The different form of curiosity has developed to provide individuals with desirable functions [25].

The second category is **Struggles**, with an identified four subcategories namely: Challenge with a frequency of 12 (Typical); Frustration with a frequency of nine (Variant); Hygiene with a frequency of two (Rare); Safety with a frequency of two (Rare). These findings are supported by the study conducted by [15]. Research and theory have demonstrated that struggles are robustly tied to distress and ill health. Growth and positive outcomes are also possible. However, there is little research illuminating the factors that contribute to growth or decline in the wake of struggles, have been tied to positive and negative adjustment, respectively.

The third category is **Acceptance** with an identified two subcategories namely: Community with a frequency of two (Rare); Social with a frequency of one (Rare). These findings are supported by the study conducted by Vornholt, K. et al. [24], as social psychology suggests that acceptance is maybe ‘the’ most important factor for people’s well-being within a social context, it is surprising that it never gained a central position in research on people with disabilities at work. In particular, acceptance by colleagues is likely to be important for sustainable employment of people with disabilities. Sustainability implies that employees have the possibility and ability to function in the long term considering achievement and maintenance of participation and health.

The last category is **Contentment**, with an identified three subcategories. Namely: Satisfaction with a frequency of 10 (Variant); Happiness with a frequency of one (Rare); Integrity with a frequency of 10 (Variant). These findings are supported by the study conducted by [19], these are the realities that new job seekers entering the workforce are facing at the start of their careers, and will continue to face throughout their whole career. For career education to be relevant, it should go beyond the traditional employment tips and tools that are freely available from thousands of Internet sites, and address the dynamics of managing a career amidst these new workplace realities. Rather than cause students to expect job satisfaction, it gives a whole new employment mindset to achieve and maintain career contentment with or without job satisfaction.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Life and death are one thread; the same line viewed from

different sides according to Lao Tzu, in relation to this statement regarding the life of an embalmer, the death of someone marks the life of another. Embalmers preserve the dead to make a living.

The finding of our consensual qualitative with our eight respondents revealed four core components of the lived experience of embalmers which are Motivation, Struggles, Acceptance, and Contentment. Thus, revealed the daily hardships and struggles of the embalmer, but despite all of these struggles, they are still banking on the idea that they are working for their family, income, and to satisfy their curiosity. But the most important thing in this study is that embalmers are contented with their work because they are accepted by their families and society.

Recommendations for future researchers and practitioners in the field of psychology and other allied fields is to further explore the study by supporting the findings with (a) local works of literature, (b) use more participants to participate in interviews, (c) differentiate demographic variables such as: age, gender, occupation, religion, (d) involved respondents in urban as well as rural areas, and (e) to explore other theories that will support the research.

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