

Response by the Authors of “Cremation and Grief: Are Ways of Commemorating the Dead Related to Adjustment Over Time?”

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We appreciate the opportunity given to us by the editors, to respond to Becker’s commentary.

First, to avoid confusion, it is important to clarify Becker’s role on the study reported here, since he uses the pronoun “we”. However, it should be noted that Becker was not a member of the research team, his involvement was that of a member of the Board of Advisors and in that role he made constructive contributions to the UK study throughout. But references made by Becker to future work concern his own study in Japan, which was developed with reference to

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but independent from our own investigation and publications emerging from the Japanese study will reflect his work and conclusions, as our articles reflects ours.

Becker's points all have to do with limitations that emerged during our data collection and with the dangers of generalizing on the basis of the result that actually emerged. These are important points, but, as we summarize below, we highlighted each of the limitations mentioned by Becker in the article itself, and we cautioned explicitly against generalizing from our empirical results to bereaved persons in general or to those experiencing different circumstances.

The – to us disappointingly low – response rate at the first data collection point was addressed both in the Methods and Discussion sections of the article. By contrast, the completion of the second questionnaire by nearly 89% of the participants who responded to the first questionnaire was remarkably high. While not “compensating” for the former rate, the latter enabled us to carry out the analyses which were essential for addressing our research questions. We also reasoned that our participants were representative of a “normal” segment of the population (naturally limited to those with a cultural background/tradition of cremation): The sociodemographic and grief-level details that they reported in the questionnaires, for example, indicated that they were likely to be rather typical of the range of clients encountered by funeral service providers (at least of those before the outbreak of COVID-19). As such, in our view, their answers to the questionnaires could be considered worthwhile contributions to scientific understanding as well as for practical purposes (e.g., identifying funeral choice options that could be harmful for clients). We confined the scope of our analyses according to statistically-calculated recommendations following a post hoc power analysis.

Regarding the high level of satisfaction of the clients with the service (note that Dignity UK, the funeral provider with whom we collaborated, say this is typical for clients responding to their surveys), in the paper we acknowledged lack of generalization to those who have experienced problematic aspects, and ones which may cause dissatisfaction, among other reactions. We stated that our results may not generalize to situations where there has been adverse funeral experience, suggesting the hypothesis that this could be an important source of difficulties for a client diagnosed with complicated grief (we return to this matter in the pandemic context below).

In terms of the comparisons made between regular funeral services and direct cremation, these rest not only on satisfaction but – far more importantly for our basic aim – on comparisons in levels of grief over time. Reflecting the rates of choice for direct cremation, we could not have expected more than the 7% of participants in the direct cremation category (which was higher than the occurrence of direct cremation in the UK at the time). Statistically, that sample was small, but of sufficient size to permit basic comparisons, producing clear results on the absence of differences between the subgroups. Content-wise, we can only confirm the extremely-surprising, unexpected finding of the absence of any

relationship between choice of cremation and grief over the course of time (despite other systematic differences between subgroups that we reported, e.g., according to type of death or relationship to deceased, ones that fit well with results from other studies, being well-established risk factors). But we cannot contest that result for our participants: choice of cremation arrangements was simply not found to be related to their grief over time. Of course, we were hesitant and reanalysed and ran many more checks than were ultimately reported. As noted in our article, the comparable and convincing results of the subsequently-published, well-conducted study by Mitima-Verloop, Mooren, and Boelen (2019), which showed a lack of relationship between aspects, perceptions, and evaluations of funeral components with grief reactions, gave us confidence in our conclusions. However, we cautioned these conclusions, referring to them as a “tentative take-home message at this point in time” in our very last paragraph, since this is indeed only a second quantitative study addressing the topic, yet reaching remarkably similar conclusions. The need for replication and for extension were emphasized in our Discussion section, including Becker’s suggestions.

In the Introduction to our article we reviewed studies investigating the range of functions of funerals, acknowledging a variety of benefits that have been more- or less-well established so far. As described, this review was included – in part – to enable our results of relationships between cremation choices with grief specifically, to be placed in broader context. It was beyond the scope of our investigation to examine the broad range of social effects of funerals to which Becker draws the reader’s attention. Again, these are topics for future, different studies (though some of those mentioned by Becker have already been researched, as also noted in our review of the literature in the article).

A last word on generalization: Our article was submitted for publication before the outbreak of COVID-19. Clearly, the results may not apply to cremation funerals conducted under pandemic conditions (this too is an empirical question which is currently being investigated by other research teams). Given the timing of submission and review, with the cooperation of the OMEGA staff, we were able to insert an essential caution in our Discussion section at proof-reading stage, where we noted that the results “... relate to the free choices made by the bereaved and may not apply to situations such as a pandemic or other large-scale disaster, when the type of funeral may be imposed by circumstances or by government”. Having made a strong plaidoyer against generalization, all members of our research team stand by the importance and relevance to scientific knowledge of our research findings and their representation in our OMEGA article.