Older peoples’ attitudes towards death: barriers and opportunities to engaging with death preparation

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Abstract

Concerns regarding funeral costs and funeral affordability are being raised in the UK. In tandem with these concerns are uncertainties about the potential consequences of older people lacking financial literacy and tools for financial planning. While debates related to the provision and funding of care for older people grow, a significant universal cost faced by every older person – their funeral – is surprisingly neglected. In response to this gap in policy and academia, this paper draws on interviews with older people in England to examine their attitude(s) towards funeral planning and preparation for death. It concludes that funeral preparation involves decisions at the intersection of financial literacy, cultural expectations about care and attitudes towards death. Trust, confidence, fear, pragmatism and resourcefulness all contribute to the decision to prepare for a funeral in advance.

Keywords: attitudes, death, financial literacy, funerals, planning

Introduction

As the UK population ages, so too do concerns regarding the sustainability of pensions, the provision of social care, and the financial literacy of older people to make decisions regarding their (unknown) future. With the number of people aged 85 and over in the UK predicted to reach 3.5 million by 2035 (Office for National Statistics, 2011) – that is, around 5% of the population – the extent to which people are prepared to fund their old age and associated costs is becoming an ever more pressing social, political and economic issue.
Within debates regarding the consequences of an ageing population, scant regard has been given to one of the very few universal experiences that every older person will inevitably face: their own funeral. With the average funeral in the UK costing around £3590 (Sunlife, 2014), for the 80% of households that have less than £1500 in savings (TISA, 2014) the challenge of affording a funeral at the point of need would be significant for the majority of the population.

The aim of this paper is to examine attitudes towards preparing for funeral costs in advance. Drawing on interviews with older people in England, it considers the extent to which generational culture plays a part in preparing for death, alongside participants’ respective fatalistic, hopeful and pragmatist attitude towards planning for death. It concludes that while financial literacy has a role to play in preparing for death, this cannot be separated from more complex issues such as levels of trust, confidence, fear and resourcefulness.

**Background**

Evidence is repeatedly highlighting the rapid growth in older populations around the world. Between 1985 and 2010, the proportion of the population aged over 65 in the UK rose from 15 to 17%, an increase of 1.7 million people (ONS, 2012). This is expected to rise to 23% of the population by 2035. Of this population, the fastest growing segment is the ‘oldest old’ (those aged 85 and over). The ONS predict that the number of people aged 85 years and over will increase from 1.4 million in 2010 to 3.5 million in 2035, accounting for around 5% of the total UK population (ONS, 2012). The International Longevity Centre further predicted in 2012 that by 2060 there would be as many people in the UK aged over 65 than there were under.
The principle reason for the ageing of the UK population is the increase in length of life. The Pensions Policy Institute (2012) suggest that life expectancy after reaching 65 years will rise over the next three decades, with women reaching an average age of 93 years and men reaching an average age of 90 years by 2050. Indeed, TISA (2014) estimate that 25% of children born today will live to over 100 years old. Given these predictions, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a growing concern for the financial implications of living longer and particularly the risk of poverty in old age.

The UK has one of the highest poverty rates for older people in Europe (see Scharf, 2009), with AgeUK, the largest charity for older people in the UK, estimating that 1 in 6 older people (1.8 million) live in poverty (AgeUK, 2011). In 2013 the Department for Work and Pensions estimated that almost 2 million pensioners in the UK had a lower income than the household average. One source of poverty is explicable when one considers how much an individual must have allocated to a private pension over a lifetime in order to live comfortably in old age: suggestions indicate that to receive an average income from a private pension of around £12,000 per year (calculated by Axa Wealth, 2012), an individual will need to have accumulated a pension pot of over £220,000 (The Independent, 2013). Thus not only is there the issue of poverty in old age, there is also the issue of disparity between those who have managed to accrue a substantial private pension over the course of their working life, and those who have not. These concerns will not be revelatory for those sociologists specialising in ageing; as long ago as 1990 Walker was predicting that there would be a growing division in old age between those who had private wealth and those who were reliant on the state.

Moreover, when comparing older people’s incomes further, Victor noted over ten years ago that:
For most older people the experience of later life is one of restricted incomes.

Compared with other low income groups largely reliant upon the state for support, such as unemployed people or lone parents, older people are somewhat better off, but compared with those in employment the chasm in income remains as wide as ever (2003: 262).

In other words, when examining the financial situation of older people it is too simplistic to compare the incomes of retired older people with the average household income; it is important to recognise the specific factors and decisions that older people experience/have to make as they face their older age and end of their life. One of these factors is the extent to which the individual has privately accumulated financial resources for retirement.

Another, and one that is overlooked both politically and academically, is whether they have allocated resource for their own funeral.

Universal to the experiences of all older people is thus their withdrawal from the labour market and the resources that the individual has to see them through their non-working latter years. Over the last decade, increasing attention has been paid to pensions in both the academic and policy sectors, shaped by a number of factors: declining mortality, declining fertility, declining labour force participation of older men (Barr and Diamond, 2010). With the UK having one of the lowest state pensions in Europe (Gough and Adami, 2012), if Jappelli’s (2010) argument that the more generous the social security system the lower the financial literacy of the population held true, then the older population of the UK should be more financial literate than their European counterparts. Yet evidence suggests that overall UK population is not well equipped to make financial decisions (see Atkinson et al, 2007).
Financial literacy and the end of life

In the first instance, there is no universal consensus as to what financial literacy actually constitutes. It has been defined as:

“… a measure of the degree to which one understands key financial concepts and possesses the ability and confidence to manage personal finances through appropriate, short-term decision-making and sound, long-range financial planning, while mindful of life events and changing economic conditions.” (Remund, 2010: 284)

Elsewhere Hung et al (2009) have further contended that the relationship between financial knowledge, skills and behaviour needs to be included in the definition. Atkinson et al (2007) have further argued that ‘financial capability’ is a more appropriate phrase to describe the process-orientated way in which financial knowledge is learnt and applied. While discussion ensues regarding how to conceptualise funeral literacy, there is a broad agreement that those groups with the lowest levels of financial literacy are the young and the elderly (Lusardi and Mitchell, 2011). There has been a considerable amount of attention paid the financial literacy of younger people (see Cameron et al, 2013; Gudmunson and Danes, 2011; Lusardi et al, 2010), yet relatively little work has been done on the origins, causes and solutions for financial literacy for older people. The extent to which older people are financially literate also correlates with their engagement with commerce, yet there is little accord as to the extent to which older people are active participants in the market. While Gilleard and Higgs (2000 cited in Victor, 2003) have argued that older people are actively engaged in the consumer-based economy, Perry and Wolbury (2011) suggest that they may also be excluded owing to the evolution and integration of technology in business transactions.

In tandem with concerns regarding the financial literacy of the older UK population are political, social and economic concerns regarding care in older age. With calls for the relationship between families, the state and the market to be re-dressed (see Hervey et al,
2012; Mayhew et al, 2010), the issue of financing social care for the oldest old has in recent years become a political minefield. The sociological debates in this area are expanding and include international research into the gendering of care, the role of the state, and familial obligation (see Cooney and Dykstra, 2011; Da Roit, 2007; Haberkern and Szydlik, 2010; Martin-Matthews, 2007; Schmid et al, 2011; Ward-Griffin et al, 2011)). A significant factor within these debates is that intergenerational provision of care is often tied into inheritance (Twigg and Grand, 1998).

Within the literature on older people, financial literacy and care, very little – if any – reference is made to one of the very few universal costs that an individual/family will face towards the end of someone’s life: namely, their funeral. A large mixed-methods study by Corden et al (2008) demonstrated the wide ranging financial consequences when one partner dies in old age, yet little reference in this study was made to the funeral beyond it being a cost that the bereaved individual and their family had to navigate. Elsewhere, within the specialist Sociology of Death field of study scant attention has been paid to funeral costs, with scholarly attention typically focused on the ritual aspects of the funeral (Hoy, 2013), role of funeral directors (see Howarth, 1996), and the extent to which death is sequestered within the public domain (Mellor and Shilling, 1993; Stanley and Wise, 2011; Walter et al, 2011-12). Funeral costs, including how they are prepared for and expectations regarding who within a family is responsible for them, have for the vast majority of sociologists been overlooked. It is in this gap that this paper is situated.

**Methods**

This paper draws on a small qualitative study with older people in England, which sought to understand how participants regarding funeral costs in relation to their other financial commitments and priorities in older age. The study was funded by XXXXX, following a
bidding process and contributing in part to the organisation’s broader research programme on end of life care costs. The research was undertaken as an independent academic study, with the funders providing limited input into the research questions and methodology once the remit of the study was agreed during the bidding process. The project was framed by the following research questions:

1. What do individuals save for, and why, in their post-retirement years?
2. How do individuals reach decisions about managing their finances, specifically in relation to savings and selecting financial products?
3. How do individuals regard their savings/financial arrangements in relation to meeting everyday, unexpected and planned expenditures?
4. How are attitudes towards saving shaped and influenced by expectations regarding financial independence, inheritance and debt?
5. To what extent are funeral costs considered an expenditure post-retirement?

A qualitative approach was selected owing to the desire to discuss attitudes towards death preparation with participants, which required tact and, importantly, the building of rapport. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method, as the most appropriate tool for openly discussing attitudes towards financial management and preparing for funeral costs. 40 participants were recruited through local organisations and charities. All were aged 60 and over; with 22 women and 18 men taking part. Participants were asked to provide basic details regarding their income and savings, so as to contextualise their responses. 22 had savings over £3000, 18 below (£3000 being the average cost of a funeral at the time of the interviews). 26 had a household income over £13,000 a year, 14 below (based on Axa Wealth’s 2012 projection that an income of £10,000 - £15,000 was enough to live comfortably in retirement, and £15,000 - £26,000 for couples. £13,000 was chosen as a midpoint for single people and half of the upper recommendation for those living in a
Participants were both single and in couples, with all recruited and interviewed as individual participants.

All participants were fully informed of the project’s purpose and funder. Written consent was obtained from every participant. All interviews were recorded with the participant’s permission and transcribed in full. All identifying data was kept separately from the anonymised transcripts, in hard copy. In accordance with ethical research practice (see BSA, 2002), all participants are anonymised here beyond their participant identification number, and gender/age for contextual detail.

Data was analysed using a thematic approach. Transcripts were coded, and using the principle of grounded theory, key themes that repeatedly emerged were analysed in great depth. In the original project 10 key themes were identified. For ease of presentation these have been amalgamated into two themes here.

**Findings**

i. **Financial complexity in later life**

Common to almost all participants in the study was the complexity of their financial affairs, built up over a lifetime. Major sources of this complexity came from participants having wide-ranging financial arrangements, including multiple bank accounts, multiple income streams/pensions, being in receipt of social security, various insurance policies, and investment and asset ownership. These, coupled with their financial arrangements being a mixture of both on-line and off-line meant that the majority of participants were overseeing a complex set of affairs.
At the same time, all participants were managing their financial arrangements without the knowledge of how long these resources needed to last. As a result, most were engaged in managing risk associated with their health and finances. Attitudes towards this management of risk – as will be seen later in this paper – were key in the extent to which participants planned for the future. For some, the task was overwhelming and they chose to disengage; for others, exercising control over their financial arrangements was extremely important.

Importantly, the financial arrangements of participants were typically a legacy of decisions made much earlier in their lifetime. Child-rearing, career breaks, unemployment, self-employment, debt and inheritance all contributed towards their current financial circumstances, as well as the type of employment the individual had been involved in. One participant commented that they felt that those people who had been employed by large institutions had an advantage over others: “If I was maybe in a big business or whatever, then somebody might be coming along trying to bail me out [when I had financial difficulties]” (P21, male, 60-69).

The configuration of living arrangements and the distribution of resources among the family were other significant factors affecting the financial complexity of participants’ lives. A number of participants had pooled resources with other family members. For example, P16 (female, 80+) lived in a house adjoining her adult children, and P11 (female, 60-69) lived with her mother who had what she called a ‘granny flat’ within the property. P11 and another participant, P18 (female, 60-69) also cared for their grandchildren several days a week and in return received holidays/travel expenses from their adult children. Other participants felt an obligation to help family members financially. P1 (female, 70-79) loaned money to her family but always asked for it to be repaid so that she never dipped beyond her £3000 savings (which she had set aside for her funeral). P19 (male, 60-69) had paid in
part for his daughter’s first house purchase. Importantly, however informal or formal these arrangements within the family were, they served to further complicate their financial circumstances. P1 for example had to ensure that her family’s repayments covered her savings, and P19 had now used the majority of his saving to support his daughter and was having to call on other income streams to get by on a day-to-day basis. P16 negotiated her utility bills with her family.

When it came to seeking information to manage their financial arrangements, for those participants that sought professional financial advice, trust in the advice given was paramount:

Our financial advisor, I assume that he’s doing the best for us, but I don’t know. And I do worry that because I don’t know enough about it I can’t say to him ‘I want you to do this, this and this. So I have to kind of put myself in his hands. He’s invested my mother’s money for me and I have to assume that he’s doing it right. And it is a bit of a worry because I have no idea (P6, female, 60-69).

Participants articulated trust to mean an expectation of integrity, strength, ability, and surety in the provider. However, several also recognised the fluctuating nature of trust over a lifetime, and how events since the 2008 banking crisis had impacted on their overall levels of trust in ‘the system’:

You never know from one government to the next how things are going to change. I mean with the means testing of the pension. They’ve now brought a Bill in to change that, but when is it going to happen? 2017. Why don’t they do it now. I don’t understand the logic of it (P20, female, 60-69).
Fluctuating trust in advice and policy could lead to apprehension and caution for some participants when it came to experimenting or taking risks with their finances. Sometimes this translated into cynicism and wariness, and a lack of confidence in both their own and other’s financial literacy:

I’m a retired lawyer so I need to go away and look at it [my financial options] myself, but it’s very difficult. People need to have confidence in the people with whom they’re talking and I don’t quite know how you rebuild that. Because people have been getting away with it for so long, getting their commission rather than getting it right (P3, male, 60-69).

Thus, participants’ approaches to their financial arrangements, and their literacy in being able to make financial decisions, were not only associated with financial knowledge, but also their confidence and trust in advice and the providers of said advice.

**ii. Facing the latter years of their life**

Interestingly, and echoing a study by AgeUK (2011), no participant had financially prepared for ill health or social care, or either was willing to tell us what they had put in place. For example, P36 (female, 70-79) commented that in chats with her family about the future, “long term care, no, we haven’t discussed it. We haven’t thought about it. If we need to go into a home, we would have to go into a home. End of story”. Another participant felt that they had witnessed too many friends and family dying ‘before their time’, and as a result they were not prepared to save anything for an uncertain future:
I’ve seen so much tragedy in the last 15 years... where you think people have been doing things.... I’ve lost four quite good friends... my old mum and my younger sister on the family side. You know? And when it happens a lot you just think, ‘oh, it is worth having a big nest egg and not getting any enjoyment out of it?’ Not my attitude has certainly changed. We tend to spend the leisure money as and when something comes up (P14, male, 60-69).

A similar outlook was shared by P30 (male, 80+) who commented:

If you’ve got a chance to get money, get it and spend it because there’s no good saving it. You might not be here in ten years’ time. There was a guy who used to live down the bottom of the road. Lovely chap and his wife. And they saved all their life. They never went anywhere. Always saved for the future. When they retired they were going to do this, that and the other. Didn’t live long enough, you know? So my attitude to life is different from that. Get it while you can and make sure you’re ok. That’s the thing.

In contrast to questions about preparation for care in older age, when asked about preparation for death, there was a clear divergence in attitudes. Three broad categories were identified: fatalists, hopefuls and pragmatists. Fatalists believed that if you thought or talked about something it was more likely to happen, so they chose to not engage with preparations for death. For example, P30 (male, 80+ years) was quite clear that he had no intention of preparing for his own funeral:

I don’t wish to even think about it.... I get adverts around. One came today about funeral expenses.... I just read it and put it in the paper bin. Just put it away. I didn’t
need to have that hanging about…. Would you say it might be because I’m a bit afraid of it? In a way, maybe. But it’s a thing I don’t want to think about and I think if you start thinking and planning for these things, in a way, anything you plan for, you’re looking forward to, aren’t you, really? When you plan a holiday you’re looking forward to it. So why would you want to look forward to going to another – wherever you go [when you die]?

Another participant felt similarly, commenting that “I just want to stay healthy and let the finances take care of themselves” (P14, male, 60-69). In common with fatalists, hopeful participants chose not to dwell on plans for the future. In contrast however, their choice was informed by a more overtly optimistic outlook about the future, with a focus on day-to-day activities and expenses, for example P16 (female, 80+ years) remarked, “you just go from week to week, pension day to pension day, and that’s how it goes”. Such a short term outlook was common to both fatalists and pragmatists, but whereas fatalists were fearful of what the future held, hopefuls held onto a more positive conviction that life would work out in the end, and that they were actively opting to focus on living in the present rather than expending energy on planning for their death.

The third attitude group, the pragmatists, were very different to these two aforementioned perspectives. Functional in their approach to planning for the future, and their own death, the desire within this group of participants was to retain a degree of control:

You have to see things from backwards before you could go forward, and I think that’s always helped me in life. I have always tried to look forward, to plan things (P2, male, 60-69).
Most participants in this third group had a clear idea of what they were planning for, namely their funeral. P12 (male, 60-69) had insurance and P13 (male, 70-79) was planning to get insurance, both intending that the money released upon their death would be used for their funeral. Many participants within this attitudinal group (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P15 and P22) had ensured they had specific funds for their family to draw on when they died, to pay for their funeral.

In terms of the origins of their attitude towards preparing for death, in common to all participants was the centrality of their life experience in making decisions about their future and their culturally informed generational outlook. Many participants, for example, spoke to having been brought up as children to not get into debt, and that this shaped their approach to preparing for their funeral:

... What we want we save up for, and we do not put it on [a credit card]... we wouldn't have it unless we could pay for it (P39, female, 70-79)

I don’t like using cards and things. Because then I know where to stop, what to buy and what not to (P16, female, 80+)

A lot of people say, ‘oh, get a [credit] card’. I don’t want to do that, because if I get a card and put it on there, you’ve still got to pay for it and you’ve got to pay interest anyway, so I just don’t bother. (P13, male, 70-79)

I organise my finances so I feel as though I am getting the best out of that little money I’ve got. I’ve organised it so the main thing is I don’t have to borrow money. I
don’t owe money. So I’m a wealthy man really. That’s how I look at it.... I never crave for anything which I can’t afford (P30, male, 80+)

Several participants commented on what they perceived to be a generational shift in attitudes towards debt, and that as older people they felt fortunate to have never habitually partaken in debt-inducing behaviour when they were younger. For two participants, the thought of their adult children getting into debt for their funeral was abhorrent and sufficient motivation to prepare for it in advance:

I prefer to do that [have insurance] and know I’m going to get my funeral. I don’t want a big, flashy one. I just want to stop them [my children] paying for it. That’s all I want. (P13, male, 70-79)

I don’t want her [my daughter] paying money [for my funeral] (P12, male, 60-69).

Thus, whether or not participants had made any financial preparation for their own funeral was in part informed by their attitude towards debt, be it their own or another family member’s.

Discussion and conclusion

In bringing together these findings, it is clear that attitudes towards death preparation, and specifically the funeral, are a complex intertwining of both financial literacy and attitude towards (planning for) death. Each of these contributing factors is a nuanced combination of trust, confidence, fear, hope, pragmatism and resourcefulness.
Most sociologically interesting is how, in a risk orientated society (Beck, 1992), the individuals who took part in this study approached the inevitability of their own death. Unlike health, where risks can be taken as to whether or not ill health will occur and require treatment, death is a universal feature of life and, ultimately, is unavoidable. Thus, those individuals that chose not to participate in preparing for death were not taking a risk; rather, they were actively choosing to create a financial liability for others after their death. The decision to not engage in preparing for one’s own funeral was therefore not a risk to the individual, but instead can be conceptualised as a risk for others.

As a result, the question arises as to how to encourage older people to engage with the financial requirements of a funeral, or to even consider their funeral in the first place. Much research has examined the difficulties in shifting attitudes towards finances (for example, Borden et al, 2008; Lewis and Klein, 2009) and how a better level of financial literacy can enable financial decisions to be made. Yet is preparing for an event such as a funeral a purely financial decision for older people? Arguably not, as the data in this study has shown; decisions made by older people related to preparing for a funeral are shaped by attitudes towards death more generally, be they the idea that preparing for it tempts fate, that life will ‘sort itself out’, or that control over the funeral is important. The decisions made (or not) are also of importance to others who will have to ‘pick up the tab’ for the funeral if provision is not made by the individual themselves.

There are two areas for discussion here: incentivising preparation for death and sociological interest in the topic. In terms of incentivising preparation for funeral costs, in light of the data presented here, there is likely to be a population of older people – fatalists and hopefuls – with whom it will be harder to engage. Current commercial initiatives to promote interest in funeral costs are having an effect – for example, the number of pre-paid funeral
plans taken out in the UK has risen from just over 46,000 in 2002 to over 135,000 in 2013 (Funeral Planning Authority, 2014) – but it is not possible to tell if those who have acted in advance are pragmatists who would have done this regardless of the development of funeral products.

The role of the state in promoting preparation for death at a time when financial provision and social care are politically sensitive is also in question. There arises first the issue of whether or not an individual has the moral responsibility to provide for their own funeral. Beyond the remit of this paper, whether the older person themselves carries that responsibility is yet to be established within policy or academia. To even get to this point a wider acceptance of funeral costs as a key component of concerns related to care provision, resources and financial literacy needs to occur. Endorsing a culture which openly discusses these costs is, arguably, vital.

Given this to be the case, it is therefore unclear why sociologists have shied away from examining funeral costs. As noted, Corden et al (2008) acknowledged these as a cost for bereaved people to have negotiate and manage, but little work beyond that of AUTHORS (XXX) looking into state support for funeral costs has been done on this topic. In contrast, sociologists have focused their attention on the ritualised aspects of the funeral and the role of funeral directors (see for example, Howarth, 1996; Hoy, 2013). Yet, as AUTHORS (XXX) have shown, funeral ritual is intertwined with both national and local policy and practice, and thus funerals cannot be considered in isolation from the financial encumbrance they can create.

In future, sociological attention could therefore turn towards funeral costs as a lens through which to examine familial obligation (see Finch and Mason, 1993) at the end life, including
obligation towards older parents and their respective obligation towards their family. A key question within this is the responsibility of the older individual in managing their finances and planning in a risk-orientated society. Bringing together literature on financial literacy, risk and death has considerable mileage.

In conclusion, financially preparing for a funeral prior to death does not deserve to be omitted from discussion regarding older peoples’ financial literacy and the provision of social care. As one of the very few universal experiences that older people can face, the extent to which an individual is prepared to engage with financial planning for their funeral is shaped by their attitude towards their finances and death. Moreover, it is framed by a generational outlook on debt, and individual’s attitudes towards planning for death. This paper has shown that these attitudes are shaped by confidence, trust, fear, hope, pragmatism and resourcefulness. Financial literacy in relation to the end of life, and specifically the funeral, therefore needs to take into account the variation in outlooks when it comes to thinking about, facing, and preparing for death. This remains an overlooked area sociologically, and one which – given the ageing and eventually dying of the UK population – will grow.

**Statement of ethical approval**

This study was given ethical approval by the author’s home institution.

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