Book Review: Reconsidering Death: A Sociological Review of Brandi Schillace's *Death's Summer Coat*

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Brandi Schillace's *Death's Summer Coat: What the History of Death and Dying Teaches Us About Life and Living* is a unique perspective on the sociology of grieving, death, and dying. It is an interdisciplinary examination of death practices and how they have shifted, especially in the modern Western context. By blending anthropology, sociology, psychology, and history, Schillace explores societal changes that have distanced modern society from death, creating what she views as an unhealthy relationship with mortality. Her work utilizes the idea that Western society has developed a "death-denying" culture, hiding death from public view and ritualizing it in increasingly private and medicalized ways. Through a historical and cross-cultural lens, Schillace critiques this shift, arguing that understanding how death is handled can teach us to live more fully. Sociologically, Schillace's argument builds on classic ideas from scholars such as Philippe Ariès and Michel Foucault with topics like the medicalization of death, the secularization of death rituals, and the growing isolation surrounding the grieving process. This review evaluates Schillace's contributions to established sociological theories, considering her insights into contemporary Western death practices and assessing the book's collaborative approach and broader implications for sociology.

Death's Summer Coat is structured thematically, addressing various dimensions of death and dying through historical and cultural examples. She begins by outlining Western attitudes toward death from pre-modern to modern times, a shift famously attributed to sociologist Ariès ([1974] 1975). Death was a communal event in early societies, integrated into everyday life. Funerary rituals were public, and death was accepted as a part of life's cycle. However, as Schillace explains, with the rise of modernity and the medicalization of life, death has been removed from the home and placed in hospitals behind sterile walls.

The book uses cross-cultural comparisons to examine how non-Western societies approach death in more communal and ritualized ways. Schillace highlights practices such as those of the Toraja people of Indonesia, who keep their dead in their homes for extended periods and view death as a gradual process rather than an abrupt end. She contrasts this with Western practices, which often involve quick removal of the body, minimal public mourning, and an emphasis on efficiency rather than reflection or community support. Throughout, Schillace advocates reframing death in Western society, suggesting looking to outside cultures and historical practices for alternative approaches to dying, mourning, and grief. The final chapters discuss the recent "revival of death" (Walter 1994) in Western culture, evidenced by the rise of death cafes, death doulas, and other movements that aim to reintegrate death into everyday life.

Schillace's work, overall, provides a compelling sociological critique of contemporary Western death practices, echoing many of the arguments made by classic sociologists of death in their arguments that the modern West has progressively hidden death from public view- a phenomenon has been referred to as the "forbidden death." Schillace takes this further by exploring how the medicalization of death—where healthcare professionals primarily handle death—has stripped individuals of agency in their dying process. This shift can be seen as part of a larger societal trend toward medicalizing life. By situating death within hospitals and under the control of medical professionals, Western society distances individuals from their own mortality, in essence, turning death into a failure of medicine rather than a natural life event. In discussing the medicalization of death, Schillace uses Foucault's concept of biopolitics—the idea that modern institutions exert control over the life and death of individuals. Foucault argues that power over death has shifted from being an event that took place within the family or community to one controlled by state institutions and medical authorities. Schillace's analysis supports this, showing how medical advancements have enabled society to extend life but, in doing so, have also pathologized death itself.

While Schillace's critique of medicalization is sociologically grounded, her reliance on cross-cultural

comparisons occasionally oversimplifies the complexity of death practices. For instance, her discussion of the Toraja people lacks a deeper exploration of how these practices are embedded within the culture's specific social and religious frameworks. While Schillace's examples are illuminating, they could benefit from more sociological depth, such as analyzing how these practices are tied to broader social structures like kinship, religion, and power. Moreover, her argument for a "return of death" in Western society aligns with Walter's (1994) theory of the "revival of death," which suggests that after decades of avoidance, death is making a cultural comeback. Movements like death cafes- where people gather to discuss death- or the popularity of memoirs and literature about death are signs of this revival. Schillace notes that she views these as positive steps toward reintegrating death into everyday life and allowing people to confront mortality more openly. Sociologically, this reflects a shift from the privatization of grief and dying to a more public engagement with mortality. However, some critics argue that while these movements may represent a shift in discourse, they are still relatively niche and do not reflect broader societal change. Schillace's argument might have benefited from addressing these critiques more directly when considering whether these movements have the potential to fundamentally alter mainstream attitudes toward death.

Brandi Schillace's *Death's Summer Coat* offers a valuable sociological reflection on the ways in which death is managed, understood, and ritualized in contemporary Western society. Her critique of the medicalization of death and the privatization of grief resonates with long-standing sociological concerns about the alienation of individuals from communal, meaningful rituals surrounding death. By drawing on cross-cultural examples, she challenges Western readers to reconsider how death and mourning are approached, suggesting that more open practices might help to reduce the fear and isolation surrounding mortality. However, while her cross-cultural comparisons are interesting, they often need more sociological depth to fully appreciate the complexity of these practices in their own contexts. Furthermore, her optimism about the "return of death" in Western society may be somewhat overstated, as these movements remain largely subcultural. Nonetheless, Schillace's book contributes

meaningfully to the growing field of the sociology of death and dying, offering a thought-provoking reflection on what the history of death can teach us about living.

REFERENCES

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