Fare-Well Strategies: Caring Consumption As Part of the 'Good Death'

Darach Turley, Dublin City University, Ireland
Stephanie O'Donohoe, University of Edinburgh, UK

Terminally-ill people sometimes venture beyond disposition practices, using consumption to look after loved ones as they anticipate their post-mortem identities and relationships. Representations of dying in popular culture may be problematic as they suggest that consuming as part of "fare-well" strategies now forms part of a "good death".

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Fare-well Strategies: Caring Consumption as Part of the ‘Good Death’

Stephanie O’Donohoe, University of Edinburgh, UK*
Darach Turley, Dublin City University, Ireland*

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The role of consumption in negotiating identities and social relationships has been explored by many studies grounded in consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). A small subset of these studies has focused on life crises provoked by serious illness, impending death, or bereavement (Adelman 1992; Pavia 1993; Mason and Pavia 1998; Pavia and Mason 2004; Gentry et al. 1995; Kates 2001). Such events add particular urgency and poignancy to the exigency to leave behind a durable personal identity for family and friends, and possessions may be used strategically by those who are dying to “preserve identities over time and communicate their importance to survivors” (Unruh 1983, p. 343; Gentry et al. 1995). The identities in question are not monochromatic; they may comport implicit understandings of family values together with personal and family histories (Heisley et al. 1993; Curasi et al. 1994). Precisely because they will outlive the bequeathers, these goods embody the possibility and promise of post-mortem agency, of continuing bonds, in the lives those left behind (Klass et al. 1996). The meaning of these goods is meant for others - special and significant others.

Such disposition practices by those facing advanced age, illness or acute personal risk appear quintessentially relational and anticipatory: they may be interpreted as strategic actions undertaken in the face of impending death to facilitate and modulate future personal interactions with those left behind (Unruh 1983; Exley 1999). Seeking to leave such intellectual, spiritual, material or physical traces may also help those who are dying to deal with the grief associated with the loss of self (Viorst 1986; Gentry et al. 1995).

In this paper, we analyse popular media representations of dying people’s consumption practices as an extension of their duty of care towards their family. Many scholars have highlighted the role of popular literature in illuminating experiential and symbolic aspects of consumption (Friedman 1985; Belk 1987; Brown 2005; Holbrook, Bell, and Grayson 1989). Indeed, popular literature was the catalyst for this paper, since we noted that various novels, memoirs, news reports and even advertisements seemed to suggest that dying people were not simply disposing of possessions, but also using – and even acquiring - particular goods and services in order to communicate with and comfort their family beyond the grave. Our analysis of these popular cultural texts was complemented by personal interviews undertaken with six members of staff in UK and Irish hospices. In these interviews, we explored the range of material practices involved in forging continuing bonds by those who are dying, the rationale they provide for these, and the contribution of such practices to their sense-making and emotional well-being.

We suggest that popular culture tends to represent these anticipatory consumption practices as benign and beneficial for all concerned; bereaved people are comforted by consumer goods gifted “beyond the grave” that serve as helpful interventions and expressions of undying love, while those who are dying find in these consumption practices a sense of purpose and ongoing agency directed towards caring for those who will leave behind. In the international best-selling novel (and subsequent film), PS I love you (Aherne 2007), for example, a young widow receives a series of letters and cards prepared in secret by her husband as he was dying from cancer. The book details how his advice and instructions (including what to buy, how to dress, and where to holiday) aid her recovery and help him face death and physical separation.

“His mind was kept occupied as he mapped out his plan to remain with Holly even when he was gone. He was also fulfilling a promise he had made to her years ago.”

(Aherne 2007; p462)

It is not only in fiction that those facing terminal illness expend some of their final, limited energy forging and facilitating continuing bonds, not least through consumer goods. Thus, anticipatory consumption appears to form part of the repertoire of strategic actions used by those who are dying, contributing to their post-death identities and relationships (Unruh 1983; Exley 1999). For example, various newspaper articles featured terminally ill mothers buying cards to be given to their young children as they grew up, married, and became parents themselves, and Ruth Picardie’s (1998) cancer memoir describes buying memory boxes for the letters and photographs she planned to leave her infant twins. Such material legacies serve more than a memorialisation agenda. These consumers do not wish just to be remembered after their demise; they want to be listened to, to be involved, to continue to look after those who matter to them now. The goods in question need not be treasured family memorabilia; they are not intended simply as souvenirs encouraging the continuity of family lore and tradition. Their primary purpose is to signal an on-going post-mortem ‘duty of care’ to support and guide those left behind.

We suggest that these popular cultural texts constitute contemporary ars moriendi, revising the social scripts for dying in a culture where death is often private, sequestered, and unmentionable (Walter et al. 1994). Our interviews with hospice workers suggest that many terminally ill patients, particularly when they have young children, devote considerable energy to such anticipatory, consolatory consumption. While many patients find comfort in such practices, not everyone has the time, energy or inclination to engage in them and not all bereaved family members find them helpful. Furthermore, media representations seem to shade from description to prescription:

“... it's something that's being promoted in the general media as something that people should be doing, and really putting responsibility onto people who are dying. You know: 'If you don't do this you've missed or you're letting somebody down'….”

(Nuala, occupational therapist, Irish hospice)

The concept of the ‘good death’ as a nomological social construction is well documented in the thanatological literature (Mellor and Schilling 1993, Bradley 1999, Howarth 2007). This paper examines whether a ‘good death’ now appears to require the deceased person to have signalled, through material disposition, a desire to play a continuing supportive role in the lives of significant others.

REFERENCES


