

The Overtaking of Undertaking?: Gender Beliefs in a Feminizing Occupation

Sarah Donley & Chardie L. Baird

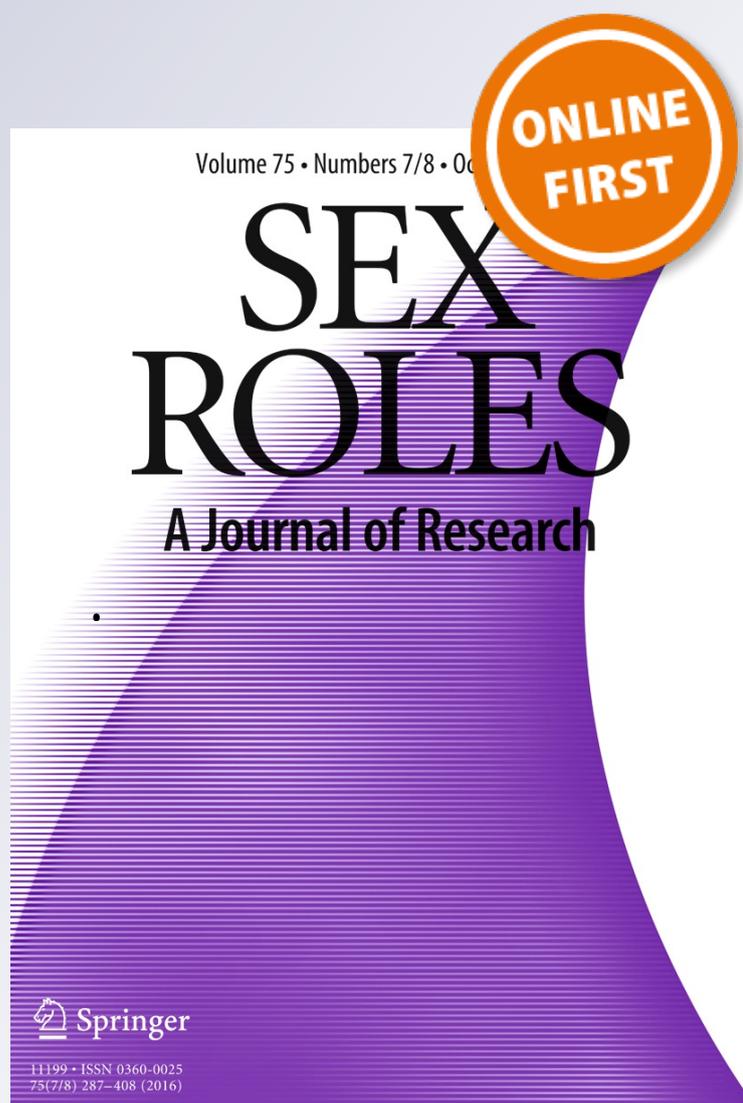
Sex Roles

A Journal of Research

ISSN 0360-0025

Sex Roles

DOI 10.1007/s11199-016-0699-6



Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Science +Business Media New York. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your article, please use the accepted manuscript version for posting on your own website. You may further deposit the accepted manuscript version in any repository, provided it is only made publicly available 12 months after official publication or later and provided acknowledgement is given to the original source of publication and a link is inserted to the published article on Springer's website. The link must be accompanied by the following text: "The final publication is available at link.springer.com".

The Overtaking of Undertaking?: Gender Beliefs in a Feminizing Occupation

Sarah Donley¹ · Chardie L. Baird²

© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2016

Abstract How gender beliefs are used to explain the division of labor in an occupation can recreate or disrupt inequality. Our study contributes to the growing body of research examining which narratives about gender segregation in male-dominated occupations are more or less oppressive to women. We asked 13 female and 9 male U.S. funeral directors to account for the shifting gender composition of their field. Most funeral directors explained women's entry into funeral directing and justified gender segregation in the occupation by drawing on gender beliefs about women's superior nurturing "natures" and men's "innate" superior physical strength and scientific ability. Our findings demonstrate the strength of cultural gender beliefs for shaping narratives about gender and work and suggest ways individuals grapple in their everyday interactions with "degendering" skills in feminizing occupations.

Keywords Gender · Work · Inequality · Stereotyped attitudes · Feminization · Funeral directing

In the United States, gender beliefs are so dominant and pervasive that narratives explaining the occupational segregation

of men and women into different jobs are framed by gender (Ridgeway 1997, 2009, 2011). These narratives tend to attribute the gender domination of an occupation to intrinsic, natural differences between women and men that justify the suitability of one sex, and not the other sex, for specific job duties within occupations (England 2010; Reskin and Roos 1990; Ridgeway 1997, 2009, 2011). However, how the "innate" skills of women compared to men are used to explain the division of labor varies across occupational context (Hatmaker 2013; Irvine and Vermilya 2010; Kelan 2010; Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996, 1999; Rabe-Hemp 2009; Ridgeway 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987; Williams 1989, 1995, 2015). Thus, scholars call for in-depth analysis of particular occupations to identify which narratives are more or less oppressive for women (Adams 2010; Britton 2000; Britton and Logan 2008; Le Feuvre 2009).

Our study contributes to this body of research by examining how funeral directors make sense of the ongoing feminization of an occupation dominated by men since the early 1900s. When the gender composition of an occupation shifts, existing narratives adjust in order to account for the participation of groups previously thought to be unsuitable for the work of the occupation (Bottero 1992; Lincoln 2010; Reskin and Roos 1990). In the case of the occupation of funeral director, narratives must explain why women are now considered capable of caring for the deceased.

The feminization of funeral work is the second shift in gender composition this occupation has experienced in recent U.S. history. Prior to the 1900s, the care of the dead fell predominantly to women (Torres 1983). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the occupation began to masculinize and narratives in trade journals framed women as unfit for caring for the deceased because death care needed science, and women were not skilled at science (Connors 2004; Rundblad 1995, 2000). The occupation is currently feminizing. In 2010,

✉ Sarah Donley
sdonley@jsu.edu

¹ Department of Sociology and Social Work, Jacksonville State University, 324 Brewer Hall, Jacksonville, AL 36265, USA

² Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Social Work, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS, USA

approximately 27 % of U.S. funeral directors were women, up from 13 % in 2000, demonstrating approximately a 50 % increase in a 10-year span (Current Population Survey 2000, 2010). In interviews with 13 female and 9 male funeral directors, we examine the narratives explaining women's inroads into the occupation. In the present paper, we ask: How do funeral directors make sense of the changing gender composition of their occupation?

Gender Composition Shifts

When an occupation is feminizing, the dominant frame is a narrative that justifies the previous male domination of the occupation. The justification tends to draw on gender beliefs, often reinforcing the ideas that women and men are opposites, that men possess the skills valued in our society, and that men's superiority is permanent and unchangeable due to physiology and biology (Correll 2001, 2004; Eagly et al. 2000; Reskin and Roos 1990; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). The dominant cultural narrative in the United States describes women as possessing devalued characteristics, such as being communal, nurturing, caring, nice, and lacking competence. In contrast, men are usually expected to hold valued characteristics such as being agentic, rational, instrumental, and competent (Correll 2001, 2004; Eagly et al. 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Reskin and Roos 1990).

How these cultural beliefs are applied in any particular occupation is context-specific (Hatmaker 2013; Irvine and Vermilya 2010; Kelan 2010; Leidner 1993; Pierce 1996, 1999; Rabe-Hemp 2009; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway 2009, 2011; West and Zimmerman 1987; Williams 1989, 1995, 2015). For example, the narrative that describes male litigators' manipulation of witnesses, a behavior stereotypically associated with women, as "shredding" and "destroying" witnesses perpetuates gender differentiation and justifies men's success at a job duty that does not fit the stereotype of their gender (Pierce 1996, p. 60, 64). At McDonald's fast-food restaurant, gender beliefs might lead us to expect women to do the cooking, however, managers believe the men should do it because it is dirty work (Leidner 1993). In occupations requiring emotional labor, male nurses describe themselves as having "a different form of compassion" and caring in a more "detached" way than women (Pullen and Simpson 2009, p. 570). Rhetoric about men's ability to perform emotional labor in a different way is used to justify men's perceived competency over their female co-workers (Pullen and Simpson 2009, p. 570). Thus, beliefs about gender regarding men's and women's abilities at work sometimes allow men to be considered better at stereotypically feminine jobs, including emotional labor.

Within an occupation, women are often working in the less valued and less compensated jobs, a process also known as

ghettoization (England 2010; Levanon et al. 2009; Reskin and Roos 1990). Occupations or jobs that require, or are interpreted as requiring, a large amount of care work and emotional labor are devalued because neither are counted as skills. Rather, they are understood to be natural characteristics of women, not earned through training, and therefore considered appropriate for low-skilled jobs that are underpaid (Cancian and Oliker 2000; Hochschild 1983). In veterinary medicine, for example, women are more likely to work with companion pets, whereas men are more likely to work with large farm animals (Irvine and Vermilya 2010). In health care, women physicians typically specialize in women's and children's health, whereas men are employed in emergency medicine, surgical specialties, and industrial/occupational medicine (Adams 2010; Lindsay 2005). To explain why women's work is segregated from men's work and considered less important, narratives often draw on stereotypes about women's compassion and nurturing. The dominant narrative among veterinarians and clients is that treating companion pets is compatible with women's natural skills because the work requires more emotional labor than does treating farm animals. Women veterinarians report that they are suited for companion pet care because "[the job] kind of feeds that nurturing side" and the job has a "gentler, kinder element"—characteristics they felt they possessed *because* they were women (Irvine and Vermilya 2010, p. 64–65).

Although stereotypical beliefs about gender largely influence workplace interactions and processes of gender segregation in male-dominated occupations, other empirical studies point to the ways women resist stereotypical beliefs about their ability as workers (Kelan 2010; Rabe-Hemp 2009; Ranson 2005). For example, women engineers presented themselves as "conceptual men," dressed less feminine, and acted more like their male counterparts (Ranson 2005, p. 152). This technique proved successful until they became pregnant and had children, and then their status as "conceptual man" was interrupted by motherhood. Similar strategies of resistance are found in construction work, where women prove themselves by not asking for help, complete tasks not typically considered compatible with femininity, and dress in less feminine ways (Kelan 2010). These strategies help to undermine stereotypical beliefs about women's abilities in male-dominated workplaces and challenge the assumption that engineering or construction is men's work.

In the present paper, we ask: How do funeral directors make sense of the changing gender composition in their field? Prior research would lead us to expect that gender beliefs will be adapted to explain women's inroads. In particular, both male and female funeral directors will likely rely on explanations that differentiate women and men based on gender beliefs, relegate women to jobs defined as less valuable within funeral directing, and attribute the differences to natural and unchangeable characteristics of each sex. We will likely see

women performing the job duties of funeral director that are associated with being caring and nurturing. Those duties will likely not be viewed as skills, and they will likely be less valued. How gender beliefs will be adapted within the occupation of funeral directing will likely be specific to the particular occupation (Britton 2000; Britton and Logan 2008; Ridgeway 2011). Our results contribute to the body of work attempting to identify which occupational conditions and narratives are more or less oppressive to women (Adams 2010; Britton 2000; Britton and Logan 2008; Le Feuvre 2009; Ridgeway 2011).

As several scholars warn, however, we are sensitive to the notion that not all frames disadvantage women. If we overgeneralize, we miss opportunities for seeing *how* oppressive various occupational contexts can be toward women (Adams 2010; Britton 2000; Britton and Logan 2008; Le Feuvre 2009). The acceptance, recruitment, or encouragement of women into formerly male-dominated occupations is less oppressive for women than are environments that are hostile to their presence, for example. In feminizing occupations like funeral directing, narratives draw on stereotypic gender beliefs to encourage women to enter the field and provide them job opportunities not previously afforded to them (Donley 2016; Irvine and Vermilya 2010). In this paper, we also highlight the narratives that do *not* rely on dominant cultural beliefs to explain women's and men's work. First, we provide a brief history of the funeral directing occupation in the United States.

The Overtaking of Undertaking?

Prior to the nineteenth century, neighborhood caregivers known as shrouding women were predominantly in charge of caring for the dead (Mitford 1998; Rundblad 1995, 2000). In the nineteenth century, undertaking was redefined as men's work in articles and advertisements in funerary trade journals (Rundblad 1995, 2000). Trade journal articles critiqued shrouding women's methods of caring for the dead as outdated and primitive. Advertisers and authors argued embalming was more scientific and the only appropriate way to care for the deceased (Rundblad 1995; Torres 1983; Trompette and Lemonnier 2009). Through this process, industry trade journals, such as the *Sunnyside* and *The Casket*, rewrote undertaking's history to highlight the "important founding fathers that developed advanced methods for caring for the dead" while shrouding women remained absent (Rundblad 1995, p. 182).

Articles and advertisements also framed women as physically unable to care for the deceased because "handling the dead is too heavy a work for a lady....They haven't got the constitution" and unable to perform embalming because a "good many young women study embalming and abandon the calling after a brief experience, unable to stand the strain

on the nerves and the abnormal nature of the work" (Rundblad 1995, p. 183). The only appropriate place for women, journals asserted, was as decoration. Women were depicted as "objects of art and beauty" in trade journal advertisements (Rundblad 1995, p. 183). Early funerary organizations such as the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) and mortuary science colleges discouraged women from enrolling because these locations were similarly deemed not appropriate places for women (Connors 2004).

Techniques have changed in contemporary funeral homes with the advent of embalming and other presumably modernized funeral practices. In the contemporary funeral home, funeral directors' duties typically cover two main areas: preparing the body for funerary display (e.g., going on removals, embalming body, preserving appearance) and attending to the family (e.g., setting up final ceremony, burial arrangements) (Cathles et al. 2010; Cahill 1991). A removal involves the funeral director going to the location of the deceased (typically a hospital, hospice, or someone's home), removing the body from the premises, and then bringing it back to the funeral home. Shortly after the removal, the body is typically embalmed. Embalming chemicals are used for preservation as well as to restore shape to the body. After the embalming procedure, makeup is often applied to the deceased to create a more life-like appearance. Following the body preparation, funeral directors meet with family members of the deceased. During this first consultation, the funeral director and family discuss the plans for final ceremonies, depositions, and any other associated arrangements. This process can take a few days to a week.

In the United States, the contemporary funeral industry is experiencing another gender re-composition. According to data from the American Board of Funeral Service Education (ABFSE), from 1971 to 2011, there has been a gradual, but consistent increase in the number of female students enrolled in mortuary science programs (ABFSE 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011). In 1971, less than 10 % of new students enrolling in mortuary science programs were women. The rate doubled to 20 % in the early 1980s, reached 40 % in the mid-90s, and in 2000 women surpassed men as the majority of new students enrolling in mortuary science programs. Currently, women compose about 60 % of new student enrollees in 2011. Graduation rates from mortuary science programs show similar trends. In 2000, 44 % of students graduating from mortuary science programs were women; in 2011, women composed 53 % of graduates (ABFSE 2005a, 2011). In 2010, approximately 27 % ($n = 23,070$) of employed funeral directors in the United States were women, up from 13 % in 2000, a 50 % increase in a decade (Current Population Survey 2000, 2010).

Despite women's numerical inroads, men continue to occupy the positions of power in the occupational hierarchy. To

date there has only been one female president of the NFDA National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) since its implementation in 1882 (NFDA 2012b). At the level of state funeral director organizations, women are present, however, men are more likely to be presidents or executive directors (Stelloh 2011). Women still continue to experience discrimination when seeking employment, when learning in school, or when working on the job. Research indicates that employers refuse to hire women, women have a harder time finding employment, and women have less of a direct social connection to the funeral industry than their male counterparts (Rundblad 2000). As recently as 2011, the New York Attorney General filed a law suit against Simmons Institute of Funeral Services and its CEO, claiming instances of sexual harassment of students and discrimination against pregnant women (Sharp 2011). In 2013, the Simmons Institute of Funeral Services agreed to pay \$30,000 in restitution to students and employees as well as implement systematic reforms (Sturtz 2013). Since then, the Simmons Institution of Funeral Services has closed.

U.S. women also receive lesser pay than their male counterparts in the funeral industry. In a recent report by *TIME* magazine, “Morticians, Undertakers, and Funeral Directors” are listed as one of the 25 occupations where women are the most underpaid (Magnarelli 2015). According to data from the American Community Survey (ACS) in 2013, the yearly salary for male funeral directors is \$51,129 and the yearly salary for women is \$31,023 (ACS 2013). The data show a roughly 40 % difference in women’s and men’s salaries in funeral directing, where women funeral directors earn 60.7 cents to every dollar a man earns (ACS 2013). In other occupations, firm ownership contributes to the gender wage gap. In a study conducted by the NFDA in 2011, women owned 14 % of the funeral homes, up from 5 % in 1998 (Stelloh 2011). Although the Census does not provide data for funeral home owners, it does provide salaries for funeral service managers. Funeral service managers are in charge of the day-to-day operations of the funeral home. Like salaries for funeral directors, salaries for funeral service managers are unequal between men and women. For funeral service managers, men’s median yearly salary is \$70,805, whereas women’s median yearly salary is \$52,125, a 26 % earning’s gap (ACS 2013). Salaries are lower for funeral directors than for funeral service managers, regardless of gender, and because more women work as funeral directors in someone else’s funeral home, funeral home ownership perpetuates the gender wage gap.

Evidence from contemporary funeral trade journals and other popular media outlets (*Slate*, *Jezebel*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *New York Times*) provide some insight into the developing narratives about women’s inroads back into funeral directing (Connors 2004; Donley 2016; Rontondaro 2011; Stein 2011; Stelloh 2011). Women’s movement into funeral directing is generally regarded as positive (Whittaker 2005). Trade journals depict women as an “asset”

and a “long needed addition” to the profession, particularly in the areas dealing with bereaved families and organizing funeral arrangements (Donley 2016, p. 15–16). Trade journal articles describe how their addition to the occupation is likely to improve business in the funeral industry because clients feel more comfortable and prefer to work with female funeral directors (Donley 2016). Contemporary trade journals, like past trade journals, continue to portray women in stereotypical ways (Rundblad 1995); however, instead of using gender essentialism as a deterrent for women in the funeral industry, it is used as a justification for the movement of women into the industry (Donley 2016). The National Funeral Directors Association, the largest professional organization for funeral directors in the United States, makes similar observations:

Many women might be particularly drawn to the occupation because they are attracted to the skills and traits needed to be a funeral director including communication skills, compassion, a desire to comfort those coping with a death, as well as organizational and event-planning skills (NFDA 2012a, para. 2).

The NFDA uses stereotypical beliefs about women’s work interests to explain why women are drawn to the industry.

Similarly, another shift in funeral work is personalization. The common practice in contemporary funeral homes is the movement from generic ceremonies to ceremonies that are tailored to reflect the uniqueness of the person who has passed (Schäfer 2007; Ramshaw 2009). As a result, funeral homes now employ “Advance Planning Specialists,” “Funeral Planners” or “Bereavement Coordinators” (Lovingly Managed 2016)—a seemingly good fit for women assumed to possess compassion and event-planning skills. This movement to personalization among funeral ceremonies might be part of the reason women see funeral directing as a viable career and why organizations such as the NFDA are recruiting women to seek employment in the funeral industry. According to queuing theory, a common practice in feminizing occupations is that employers begin to recruit women to replace men when the occupation becomes less desirable for men (Reskin and Roos 1990).

Method

Participants

We used purposive sampling to recruit our funeral director sample. The first author contacted representatives from national and state funeral directing professional organizations and provided information about the study. The representatives then sent emails with the study information to members and/or posted it on the professional organization’s

social media accounts, including Facebook and Twitter. The first author also contacted professional organizations for women funeral directors, such as *Funeral Divas* and *National Women's Funeral Professionals*. Respondents who were interested in participating in the study emailed the first author indicating their willingness to be interviewed for the study. Our final sample consists of 22 funeral directors (13 women, 9 men).

Table 1 shows that twenty respondents are White women and men and two are Black women (Charlene and Tamara). The respondents' ages ranged from 26 to 66 years-old. All had an associate's degree in mortuary science, with the exception of Wade and Terri, who each had a bachelor's degree. Their years of experience working in the funeral industry ranged from 3 to 31. It is often common to come to funeral directing as a second career; this was true for 5 of the 13 female funeral directors (Ashley, Jamie, Kay, Susan, and

Tamara) and 2 of the 9 male funeral directors (Richard and Brian). The majority of respondents were the first generation of funeral directors in their family, except Jamie and Edward who were both third generation funeral directors (i.e., their parents and grandparents had worked as funeral directors before them).

Eighteen of the respondents were currently employed as funeral directors. Two were currently unemployed: Susan recently left her job at a family-owned funeral home where she had worked the previous 10 years and Michaela, despite completing school in 2008, had been unable to find employment and has never been employed as a funeral director even after many years of searching for a position. These directors' funeral homes mostly provide services to White, middle class customers who practice Judeo-Christian funeral rites, except for the two Black women funeral directors, who served mostly middle class African American families. Sixty-four percent of the funeral homes were located in the U.S. Midwest, 14 % in the Northeast, 9 % in the West, and 14 % in the South. There are 22 respondents in our sample, and therefore we cannot generalize our findings to all funeral directors. Generalizability, however, is not the point of our study, instead we are interested in understanding whether and how work arrangements in funeral homes are framed by beliefs about gender.

Interview Procedure

Interviews took place during the spring of 2013 and were conducted by the first author. A little more than half of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the exception of respondents who lived far away from the first author; these 12 interviews were either conducted over the phone or via Skype. In-person interviews were conducted at the respondents' place of employment, typically in the family meeting room of the funeral home. With permission from the respondents, interviews were audio-recorded and interview length ranged from 22 minutes to 2 ½ hours.

We used a semi-structured interview schedule. There were a standard set of questions that were followed; however the interviewer remained flexible to allow for probing and further elaboration on important topics during the interview. The interviewer's primary role was to facilitate the interview, clarify any misunderstandings in questions, and probe for more information from respondents (Esterberg 2002). The interview schedule included questions about women's movement into funeral work (e.g., "Why do you think more and more women are moving into the funeral industry?"), obstacles women face (e.g., "Do women face obstacles or barriers as a funeral director? If so, what kinds?"), and instances of discrimination (e.g., "Do you think women face discrimination at all? If yes, what kinds?"). We also asked respondents questions about their work and educational backgrounds (e.g., "Tell me

Table 1 Funeral director sample demographics

Pseudonym	Age	State	Work Experience (in years)
Women			
Amara	30	NJ	8
Ashley ^a	45	TX	21
Charlene	45	PA	20
Hannah	28	CA	3
Jackie	64	OH	22
Jamie ^{a,b}	62	NY	15
Kay ^a	26	KY	4
Liz	34	KS	12
Michaela ^c	34	KY	4
Rose	33	CA	7
Susan ^{a, c}	34	MI	10
Tamara ^a	44	PA	20
Terri	40	GA	16
Men			
Brian ^a	36	NE	11
Devin	40	KS	14
Edward ^b	50	KS	29
Joseph	54	NE	30
Richard ^a	66	KS	20
Stan	45	MO	20
Wade	39	KS	17
Wally	57	KS	31
Will	29	NE	5

All respondents are White except Charlene and Tamara who are Black. All have an associate's degree in mortuary science except Terri and Wade, who each have a bachelor's degree

^a Funeral directing was their second career

^b Parents and grandparents were funeral directors

^c Not employed at the time of data collection

about your work and educational background”), workplace culture and division of labor (e.g., “How do you determine who does what? How are jobs/tasks split up or assigned in your workplace?”), about their day-to-day work duties (e.g., “Can you walk me through a typical interaction with a customer/family?”; “Can you describe the techniques and procedures used to prepare a body for funerary display?”), participation in professional organizations (e.g., “Are you a member of any professional associations? What is your role there?”), and changes in the funeral industry (e.g., “How has the funeral industry changed since you first started working?”). Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber and analyzed by the first author. We informed our respondents that they could discontinue the interview at any time and refuse to answer any questions during the interview. We use pseudonyms for respondents and locations to ensure confidentiality.

As a researcher it is important to be reflexive throughout the research process. The first author did this by being aware of her own positionality in relationship to the respondents. The interviewer at the time of interviews was a White woman, in her late 20s working towards a doctorate in sociology. Most of the respondents shared similar racial and ethnic backgrounds with the interviewer, whereas more than half of the sample shared a similar gender display. Some research suggests that similarities in gender and racial/ethnic background between respondents and interviewers may encourage respondents to feel more comfortable sharing their stories and experiences (Tewksbury and Gange 1997; Zavella 1996). Thus, White women interviewed might have been more forthcoming in their interviews than male and the two Black female respondents (Arendel 1997). The interviewer’s status as an outsider to the funeral industry and researcher may also have encouraged respondents to share more in interviews to ensure an accurate and complete portrayal of the funeral industry (Lofland et al. 2006). The interviewer also built rapport with respondents by asking open-ended questions, diligently listening to respondents experiences, and asking follow-up questions.

Data Analysis

To answer our questions about how funeral directors make sense of women’s recent inroads in the occupation, qualitative research techniques are appropriate because they allow the researcher to grasp nuance in the underlying and hidden meanings embedded in social processes (Berg 2006; Esterberg 2002; Weiss 1994). The first author used an approach similar to grounded theory to analyze the interview data and consulted the second author to ensure reliability and consistency throughout the coding process. The final coding schema was also reviewed by three qualitative experts. Although there are some variations in the particulars of

grounded theory analysis, our use of the grounded theory approach aligns with the key goal of “allowing respondents’ experiences to drive the results” (Hesse-Biber et al. 2010, p. 107). We used open coding, the development and refinement of themes through case comparison, and focused coding (Esterberg 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1990). NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software, was also used to assist with data analysis. NVIVO allows the researcher to digitally label parts of interviews during open coding, write coding notes and conceptual memos, and organize open codes into more complex coding trees. Consistent with the grounded theory approach, the first author openly coded interview transcripts line-by-line for relevant themes and commonalities across respondents’ interviews pertinent to the research question: How do funeral directors make sense of the changing gender composition of their occupation? (Berg 2006; Esterberg 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Weiss 1994). During open coding, the first author also wrote memos with the goal of analyzing initial observations for patterns and themes across interviews as well as attending to any exceptions to the patterns. By the end of this initial analysis stage, some of the initial codes we developed include “women are assets to industry,” “women are better funeral directors,” and “men are stronger,” as summaries of respondents’ understandings of women’s entrance into funeral directing and the division of labor, for example.

After all interviews were open-coded, the first author employed MindMeister, an online idea mapping website to better conceptualize the relationships among the open codes. Concept mapping is a visual tool used in qualitative research to organize open codes and reveal interrelationships between them (Novak 2010; Wheeldon and Faubert 2009). Specifically, we refined, combined, and categorically organized our initial codes. Table 2 shows the categories that emerged from the data through this process (open coding, memoing, and concept mapping analysis). For example in our initial coding, we found that “women are assets to industry,” “women are better funeral directors,” and “men are stronger” are really showing that most respondents’ comments mirrored Ridgeway’s (2009) definition of cultural gender beliefs about men and women in U.S. society (row 1, Table 2). In fact, all respondents drew on hegemonic U.S. cultural gender beliefs as defined by Ridgeway (2009) to explain and justify the entrance of women into the funeral director occupation and division of labor in funeral homes. They indicated at least one of the following beliefs: (a) men and women are different; (b) those differences have permanent, unchangeable roots; and/or (c) men are better-suited for activities with social value. Although all respondents’ explanations for women’s entrance into funeral directing were framed by gender, 41 % ($n = 9$) of our sample fit solely into this “framed by gender beliefs” category. Throughout the interview, their explanations for women’s entrance into the field and the division of labor in funeral homes was framed by dominant beliefs about gender

Table 2 Funeral director explanations

Explanation groups	Key characteristics	Example(s)
Framed by gender beliefs ($n = 9$)	<p>Respondents whose explanations consistently (i.e., throughout the interview) draw on at least one of the following hegemonic U.S. cultural beliefs about gender:</p> <p>(a) men and women are opposites (e.g. women are nurturers, caregivers compared to men who are rational, tough),</p> <p>(b) gender differences are permanent/unchangeable, and/or</p> <p>(c) men's characteristics are more socially valuable than are women's (e.g., it is better to be rational than to be nurturing)</p>	<p>"I think that women, and I guess it might sound a little sexist unto itself, but women are often able to emotionally understand and sympathize with people better." (Hannah)</p> <p>"I see more and more of the women in it [the funeral industry], my concern long term is my ability to lift and be able to...men typically are stronger and I see there could be a problem with lifting in the future if there's not a lot of men left in the business." (Rose)</p>
Grappling with gender beliefs ($n = 13$)	<p>Respondents' whose explanations grapple with hegemonic U.S. cultural beliefs about gender at least once during the interview</p>	<p>"I really don't think it's a male or female job. I think it's a people job. It's whoever has the strengths and the compassion to do it." (Ashley)</p> <p>"The embalming itself, women are too delicate to handle things like that, right? We aren't. The embalming portion of it is no worse than sick kids and dirty diapers." (Terri)</p>

in the United States, as indicated by the examples in row 1, Table 2. Stated differently, these respondents' explanations for women's entrance into the funeral directing occupation consistently, throughout the interview, were framed by dominant cultural beliefs about gender.

Although all our respondents accepted the notion of women's emotional superiority, 59 % ($n = 13$) of our sample challenged various aspects of gender beliefs used to explain women's entrance into funeral directing and the division of labor in funeral homes at least one time during their interview (row 2, Table 2). In order to be in this category, the respondent needed to grapple with hegemonic gender beliefs used to explain women's entrance into the funeral director occupation, even if in other times during the interview they contradicted this point. For example, we considered respondents to be grappling when they challenged assumptions about women's inability to perform removals or men's inability to be compassionate (see row 2, Table 2). Stated differently, these respondents were inconsistent in their use of the dominant gender beliefs frame in the United States to explain women's entrance into the funeral directing occupation and the division of labor.

Results

All of our respondents drew on the hegemonic gender belief that women are better suited for emotional labor than men.

Our respondents report that women are moving into the funeral director occupation because they are inherently more nurturing and thus are better suited to do the "front room" labor of dealing with the family, organizing the final ceremony, making burial arrangements, and decorating the funeral home and bodies (e.g. hair and makeup) (Cathles et al. 2010, p. 2). Men are still needed as funeral directors, our respondents explain, because they are stronger and more scientifically inclined than are women. They are needed for the "backroom" work of embalming and body removals (Cathles et al. 2010, p. 2). In the first section of the results, we analyze the funeral directors' explanations for women's recent inroads into the profession and how they are used to maintain the current division of labor—all of which are framed by U.S. gender beliefs (row 1, Table 2). In the second section, we highlight the funeral directors whose explanations are less framed by gender and "grapple" with gender beliefs about funeral work (row 2, Table 2).

Framed by Gender Beliefs

All respondents report that women's entrance is positive for the funeral industry. When they elaborate on why women's entrance is positive, all members of our funeral directors sample emphasize differences between women and men, view the differences as permanent and unchangeable, and/or attribute the most valued skills to men. The value of women's entrance into the occupation lies with women's compassion, which funeral directors believe is needed when interacting with

bereaved family members. According to the funeral directors, although men are not as compassionate as women are believed to be, men are unequivocally stronger, both emotionally and physically, and therefore better at embalming and removals.

As Jamie and Charlene illustrate in the following examples, their assessment of women's and men's skills as funeral directors tend to align with cultural gender beliefs. Jamie says women in the funeral industry are more compassionate than men. In contrast, men should be in the background doing the physical labor:

Women bring you into this world, alright, and women should take you out. Women are much more compassionate, much easier to talk to than men. In my opinion, men should be behind the scenes, doing the trade embalming and the lifting and everything. Women should be making all of the arrangements and dealing with the family because women have that soft side to them. (Jamie)

Charlene further highlights the differences in the types of funeral ceremonies that men and women funeral directors organize:

I definitely see a difference between the women funerals and the men funerals. Men just do the basic set up. The flowers, the burial, they do everything logically and women have a little more compassion with needs and things. That's the difference that I see. A lot of people like to have a woman funeral director because of the special touch they that they have. They feel like you really care about them. (Charlene)

Charlene taps into this preference for women funeral directors that many other respondents reported. Wally further highlights how customers might prefer women over men, preferences similarly based in gender stereotypes. He assumes that clients would prefer female funeral directors because of their compassion:

Again, I'm sure if you polled a lot of people... if people would like to meet a male or a female funeral director, I'm sure that probably 65 % would say that they would prefer a female for the simple fact that they're nurturing, caring, compassionate, and detailed. Those would be the attributes that would be of a female that they would want, whereas with a male they're "just the facts, jack," "do not waste my time," "let's just get it over with," "let's do it, come on," and they wouldn't show the compassion or the caring aspect that they would expect from a female. (Wally)

Jamie's, Charlene's, and Wally's descriptions invoke three dimensions of gender beliefs. First, they rely on pointing out

the differences between women and men. Second, they essentialize these characteristics. Finally, these explanations tend to argue that women's inherent compassion is superior to men's, and there is an apparent valuation of women's inherently compassionate nature—funeral directors need this characteristic to deal with bereaved family members.

This direct comparison between men's and women's skills, typically coming to the conclusion that women will actually be better at this part of the job than men will be, was a popular explanation among the respondents. This compassionate and caring demeanor that women naturally possess is a justification as to not only why they *should* be funeral directors, but why they would make *better* funeral directors than men. In this context, this justification of women as good funeral directors is directly related to the idea of seeing them as an asset to the funeral industry. Hannah says:

I know why we're an asset to the funeral industry... It has always been a male-dominant field and we're coming in and taking over I guess...I think women are able to get by with a more caring side than guys can. It's nothing to give somebody a hug or anything like that, whereas it might be looked at differently from a male director's standpoint. Guys just are kind of tougher, more stoic I guess. I know that women are kind of more approachable. (Hannah)

Starting in the early 1900s, funerary trade journals argued that women's emotionality was viewed as a detriment to being a funeral director (Rundblad 1995). They were seen as too emotionally fragile to be near a deceased body or death. The early characterization of women as too emotional to be successful as a funeral director continues to linger. Much like the women in other feminizing occupations, the women (and men) funeral directors rely on a fundamental assumption of gender beliefs to justify women's recent entrance into the funeral directing occupation (Donley 2016; Irvine and Vermilya 2010). They argue that women *should* be funeral directors precisely because they are emotional. Although this narrative seems to be taking hold and facilitating the acceptance of women in the occupation, its success for challenging gender-stereotypic beliefs is limited because gender is still a prerequisite for being a good funeral director. On one hand, the reframing of women's emotionality as positive suggests changes to gender beliefs that once saw women as unfit to be funeral directors; however, these justifications maintain essentialist beliefs about women and men in funeral directing and, thus, leave the reliance on gender as an organizing principle of the division of labor unchallenged. In the essentialist and binary conceptualization of compassion in funeral directing, if women are caring, then men cannot be. Assuming that emotional labor is strictly a capability of women maintains gender segregation in funeral work.

Although women's inroads into the occupation are described as positive due to their caring natures, respondents also report that men retain important funeral directing duties that are the sole domain of men—removals and embalming. Removals involve removing the body from the location where the person died and bringing the body to the funeral home. Typically, this job involves carrying or lifting the deceased. Shortly after the removal, the body is often embalmed. Embalming chemicals are used for preservation as well as to restore shape to the body and create a more life-like appearance. The following quote from Susan represents a pattern across interviews: funeral directors argue that the second main difference between women and men is in their physical strength and this is where men are superior to women.

I think the only difference would be in the strength. For instance, if you have to go for a removal, not everyone dies in their bed; they may die on the toilet or something. They may weigh 300 lb. I think the only difference there is how much a woman versus a man can lift. (Susan)

Limitations in physical strength emerged as one of the most common concerns about women in funeral directing. Susan sees physical strength as a permanent and unchangeable difference between men and women. Susan uses the example of a "300 lb. body" to illustrate this point. This example is a bit problematic because lifting a 300 lb. body is a feat for anyone, regardless of gender, as well as easier for some women than for some men. The claim of women's physical strength limitation is further rendered problematic when we take into account the technical advances made in lift technology used for removals—referred to as "lifts"—makes lifting possible for people of any physical stature. Instead, this differentiation between men's and women's physical strength demonstrates the construction of masculinity in funeral directing—it is symbolic rather than real. The "myth" of the 300 lb. body serves to maintain male domination, gender segregation, and ghettoization in funeral work. A similar critique can be made of the notion that men are not compassionate or caring. Gender essentialism rejects variability in physical strength and emotional expression among men and among women: not all men are big, strong, and uncompassionate and not all women are small, weak, and compassionate. It also asserts that these characteristics are attributable to gender, rather than to learnable skills.

After going on a removal, the body is brought back to the funeral home and is typically prepped for embalming. Although women were often referred to as being assets in terms of the emotional and caregiving side of funeral directing, they were not seen as assets in the realms of removals and embalming—that is men's work (Cathles et al. 2010; Rundblad 2000). Embalming is considered the core technical skill of funeral directing because it involves science and procedures to forestall decomposition. Bodily fluids and

organs are typically removed and replaced with chemical preservation agents, eyelids and mouths are either glued or sewn shut, and the body is washed and dressed. As one of the respondents in Cahill's (1991, p. 109) study on students attending a mortuary science program states, you have "to be a certain kind of person" or "have the stomach" to embalm the deceased, and in the gendered understanding of a funeral director, that person is not a woman. Women both, historically and contemporarily, are seen as unable to "stomach" embalming (Rundblad 1995, 2000).

Several female respondents describe experiences of being barred from embalming by their employers or coworkers. Hannah represents women's experiences when she explains how the jobs she was assigned were determined by expectations about her abilities because she is a woman. In a previous job she was kept from going on removals because of her small stature and was discouraged from going into the embalming room for similar reasons:

One of the things that people are pretty reluctant to do, and I'm pretty petite in stature, I'm about 5'2" and I weigh around 100 lb., so they're often very unwilling to allow me to go do things like make removals from houses because they're concerned about my ability to move the weight around. A lot of times, they are unwilling to let me back into the prep room. I worked for a funeral home where he [the owner] kept promising me that he would register me as an apprentice, but he would never let me in the prep room, and it wasn't ever explicitly stated, but there was definitely an air of "You're a woman, and I do not have any problem allowing myself back here to embalm, but I do not think that I trust you." (Hannah)

Hannah identifies this culture of not allowing women to perform certain duties as something that was never made explicit, yet was an underlying, unspoken belief system. Specifically, Hannah touches on how gender beliefs frame the basic social relations of the workplace "before we know it" (Ridgeway 2009, p. 148; 2011). Individuals have already been ascribed with these basic notions of what women and men can/cannot do and then use these standards to organize work in funeral homes. In Hannah's current work, where she is a funeral director at a corporate funeral home, she can do any of the job tasks required of her, freely, and is not deterred by the funeral home's owners or senior funeral directors. In our sample, those who had worked in what they identified as corporate settings perceived them as more egalitarian because work was organized differently. As Liz, explained, "When you're in corporate settings, you're specialized, so whether you're a funeral director or an embalmer. You can't do both in their settings, so I was hired to be a funeral director and never did any embalmings." Liz's description suggest that, in

corporate settings, you are hired to do a specific job, whereas in family-owned homes the assignment of job duties are less rigidly defined. However, Liz was still doing the jobs deemed appropriate for women funeral directors in a corporate setting.

The funeral directors in our sample drew on gender beliefs to create and explain the gendered division of labor within funeral directing. They defined embalming and going on removals as higher-status. Embalming is valued because it is a technical skill that required training and a science background following a specified procedure. Being able to “stomach” embalming and being able to go on removals, were valued because these are characteristics that are viewed as learnable skills that men are naturally better-suited to learn. On the other hand, for women, compassion and caring for grieving individuals is devalued because these are characteristics that are seen as inherently feminine, but not learnable skills. The explanations elevate men’s status by focusing on the superiority of their assumed physical and technical competence compared to women. The explanations are also essentialist—the implication is that the superior characteristics that men hold and the inferior characteristics that women hold are permanent and unchangeable. Men’s presumed inherent traits—stoicism and scientific inclinations—lead them to be better-suited for learning the skill of embalming. Women’s presumed inherent trait—compassion—is not assumed to lead them to be better suited for learning any skills, it seems. Furthermore and consistent with the application of stereotyping, variability within groups is ignored so that the assumption is made that all women are compassionate and all men can be trained to do removals and embalming.

These symbolic and real restrictions placed on women demonstrate the limits of the “emotional asset” narrative for the acceptance of women in funeral directing. Women are assets to the funeral industry so long as they attend to only the front room duties. Women’s physical strength and sensitive stomachs are assumed to be detrimental to their job performance. Much of the physical strength narrative reinforces gender stereotypical beliefs because it allows for the persistence of the division of labor to be based on gender rather than on individual capabilities. This perpetuates gender segregation and ghettoization in funeral directing: women working primarily in the “front room” while barred from the “back room” by employers who see them as incapable of performing the demanding funeral director duties. While men, on the other hand, work in the back room and are barred from the front room.

Although we do not know pay differentials between front and back room duties of the funeral home, because they are typically under the same job description, we do know that on average female funeral directors make about 40 % less than male funeral directors do. In other occupations, ghettoization typically is associated with lesser compensation for women (Irvine and Vermilya 2010; Levanon et al. 2009; Lincoln 2010; Magnarelli 2015; Reskin and Roos 1990).

Grappling with Gender Beliefs

In this section, we analyze the narratives of individuals who did not solely rely on gender beliefs about men’s and women’s abilities to explain the division of labor in funeral homes. Those who grappled with hegemonic gender beliefs did so by challenging beliefs that assert that men and women are inherently different, that men and women are only capable of certain tasks, and that women cannot handle removals. Consistently, however, grapplers did identify women as better suited for the emotional labor of funeral directing, but also challenged beliefs surrounding the elements of the job presumed to be the sole domain of men: going on removals and performing embalming. Tamara and Ashley allow for heterogeneity among men and women funeral directors. Tamara states:

I can’t say that men have different skills because I’ve seen, I guess, picking on the compassionate piece of it, I’ve seen men at our firm super compassionate, super detail-oriented. Where some people might assume that those qualities are strongest in women, it’s not necessarily...It depends on the person. I think we try really hard to choose funeral directors who exhibit those kind of qualities, whether male or female because people can tell when you really don’t care about them. It’s pretty obvious. I’ve seen quite a bit of compassion come out of females as well as males and I’ve seen where some males and some females didn’t have much of a compassionate soul and that was a problem. (Tamara)

Similarly, Ashley says:

I really don’t think it’s a man or woman choice. I think it’s in general, their personality. There are some men that do this so naturally and so well and their personality puts you at ease, their personality makes you feel comfortable, and not afraid. They give you that security and that’s what people are looking for when they’re upset and they’re afraid and there are women that can do it just as well and bring the strength that people rely on to know where they’re going. I really don’t think it’s a male or female job. I think it’s a people job. It’s whoever has the strength and compassion to do it. (Ashley)

As Tamara and Ashley indicate, it does not matter if the funeral director is a man or a woman; instead, it matters if they are compassionate, understanding, and emotionally strong. Both explanations emphasize that these characteristics are not determined by a person’s gender. By refusing to use gender as a predictor of a person’s caregiving capabilities, Tamara and Ashley take a first step to degendering funeral directing (Connell 2010; Denissen 2010). Tamara

and Ashley both indicate that these are inherent characteristics of a person, however (i.e., Tamara's mention of a soul and Ashley's mention of men behaving this way "so naturally"). Another step forward might be to view emotional labor, carework, and physical strength as learnable skills, similar to embalming.

In our interviews, respondents across the board, at one point during their interviews, stated that women would be better suited for the emotional labor associated with funeral work than men. The respondents who grappled with stereotypic gender beliefs would also say something similar to the comments from Tamara and Ashley during the interview. It is important to draw attention to the contradictions in their explanations. The contradictory notion that women and men are the same, yet simultaneously different, demonstrates the frame of gender beliefs that workers must navigate when they are trying to make sense of gender in a gendered occupation. Tamara's and Ashley's contradictions highlight the persistence of stereotypical frames that make developing a new, consistent, more equitable narrative difficult. This is further highlighted by the fact that interviews only lasted an average of one hour and a maximum of 2 ½ hours. Even within a 2-hour period, most of our respondents did not maintain a consistent narrative about women's entrance into funeral directing and division of funeral work.

Again, one of the most prominent beliefs about women in the funeral industry is that they are not physically strong enough to go on removals and lift bodies into caskets. In the following example, Richard, a funeral home owner, states how he was reluctant to hire women at his funeral home because he feared women would be unable to lift bodies on removals. He later rejected this belief once he was injured, which affected his own ability to go on removals and lift the deceased.

One of the things that was always a fear, and Jennifer's actually the first woman I've hired, and the only reason I did not hire women is because when you're doing removals and things you always have to have some brawn, and more brawn than brains sometimes. That was always the excuse I heard as I got into the industry: "Well, women are fine if they're here for funeral directing, but we can't take them on a removal. They're not strong enough." Well, to a point that's true. The funeral world now, most of those same funeral homes are hiring services to do that work, so it isn't an issue. Here's another change in the industry that has allowed women to move in easier, and, of course, we have a lot of hospice which are at home, but let's face it, most people die in some sort of care facility, and there's always somebody there. But that was my biggest concern is that I wasn't sure that I could have a woman when I needed brute strength, and then I hurt my neck,

and after my neck surgery, I realized I wasn't any stronger than a 90 lb. woman. I had to diligently start using all the equipment that's available to lift a body, move a body, and I have to have help with all of that. (Richard)

Richard did not hire women for many years because he feared they could not go on removals. Richard realized the ultimate error in his beliefs once he injured himself and had to begin using lifts for assistance. Technological advances make performing removals much easier and, thus, the privilege of physical strength male funeral directors claim to have over women is diminishing. Performing lifts is now a trainable skill as Wade elaborates: "There's a lot of physical things where you don't always have two or three people that can help you do things, you kind of have to take it on yourself, [you] would have to be trained." Richard also speaks to other structural changes within the deathcare industry that further contribute to the diminishing need for "brawn": first, when people pass in hospices or hospitals there is a greater likelihood of an orderly there to help with the removal, and second, the shift from funeral homes using their employees to hiring outside removal services. Thus, there is a chance for the legitimacy of perceived gender differences in physical strength to diminish as there is a lesser and lesser need for brute strength in funeral directing.

As the dominant narrative goes, women are not seen as capable of performing lifts. This belief however does not stop women from actually performing removals on the job. Many respondents spoke about experiences of proving themselves to supervisors, colleagues, or clients. First, Kay demonstrates the "flack" she gets from outsiders:

When I go on removals people will look at me and be like "Are you sure you can lift that?" I've lifted a 430-something man, he was pretty big. I lifted him up and on the cart all by myself just to prove that I could do it. I'll go in and I'll do removals and people will be like "Oh, are you sure you can do that? Are you sure? Can you lift that?" (Kay)

Similarly, Liz, when asked about how customers, coworkers, employers and others she had regular contact with reacted to her as a female funeral director stated:

I think originally it was kind of like it was a joke. "You can't do this." I had a long time minister say "You can't. That's not done. Don't even go there" and he's since passed so I can't even say "Look at me, ha!" But, anyway, I think there was a lot of "No, you can't do this" and so being able to work at Oak Hill, they too were like: "You can give it a try. I don't know if you're going to work out with this or not." I was able to go out at night by myself and went to hospitals and brought the loved

ones back to the mortuary for them and I think they were, first of all, shocked that I could do it and it gave me a lot more confidence in myself so that any time someone says “No, you can’t do it,” [I say] “well yes, yes I can” and I’m going to prove it to you every day and I’m going to do it. That’s what I want to do and I’m going to do it. (Liz)

Proving oneself in male-dominated occupations is a common response for women working in gender-rigid workplaces (Kelan 2010; Rabe-Hemp 2009; Ranson 2005; Yoder and Berendsen 2001). Kay and Liz resisted stereotypical gender beliefs about what women funeral directors can do by doing the things women were perceived as not being able to do. In doing so, Kay and Liz undermine stereotypical beliefs about women’s “limitations” as funeral directors.

In the previous two sections we explored how gender beliefs about emotional labor, going on removals, and embalming the deceased are used to organize labor and perpetuate gender inequality in the funeral industry. Alternatively, Ashley, Richard, Kay, and Liz do not use gender to frame their expectations of a person’s abilities. Rather, they assess the person’s abilities to complete specific job tasks. As a result, they provide opportunities for caring, compassion, and physical strength to be considered skills, something that is trainable and can be learned. These degendered explanations take a step toward desegregating funeral director duties and the deghettoization of women’s work within the field.

Discussion

The present study involved semi-structured interviews with 22 male and female funeral directors across the United States to examine how they make sense of the changing gender composition of their field. We find that stereotypical beliefs about gender frame explanations for women’s entrance into, and the division of labor within, funeral homes. This typically means women are assigned the “front room” duties—meeting with families and attending to funeral arrangements—because gender beliefs about women’s superiority at emotional labor are applied to the division of labor. In contrast, men’s tendency to be performing “backroom” duties—removals and embalming—is explained using beliefs about men’s superior scientific and technical skills, physical strength, and strong stomachs.

We also find that this gendered division of labor between men and women is hierarchical: masculine duties are valued over feminine duties within the funeral home. The hierarchical element of these explanations becomes clear when the history of funeral directing is taken into account. The masculinization of funeral directing began in the late 1800s/early 1900s. Men’s entrance into this field was explained by focusing on men’s superior scientific skills and strong stomachs. Thus, retaining

the scientific jobs for the men as women enter the field allows the men to maintain the valued positions in the field. In contrast, women’s caregiving traits are an asset, but one that the occupation did not really miss for the last 100+ years. Furthermore, caregiving is seen as an “innate trait” rather than a learnable skill compared to embalming.

Finally, our research gives insights into ways funeral workers challenge gender-stereotypic beliefs in their workplaces and, in doing so, shed light on ways the division of labor in funeral directing could be “degendered” in everyday interactions. A few funeral directors challenge stereotypes about gender by allowing heterogeneity among men and women and by performing duties that are considered inappropriate for their gender or refusing to assume gender is an indicator of abilities.

Our study confirms the findings of prior research demonstrating that the narratives individuals develop to make sense of their everyday work lives in feminizing occupations is framed by gender beliefs that emphasize gender differences, essentialism, and men’s superiority at the characteristics or skills valued in our society (Adams 2010; Britton 2000; Britton and Logan 2008; Hatmaker 2013; Irvine and Vermilya 2010; Kelan 2010; Lincoln 2010; Lindsay 2005; Nentwich and Kelan 2014; Pierce 1996, 1999; Pullen and Simpson 2009; Rabe-Hemp 2009; Reskin and Roos 1990; Ridgeway 2009, 2011). The claims that women are more compassionate than men and that this difference is permanent and unchangeable serve as the basis for the justification of women’s entry into funeral directing. Today’s funeral directors are attempting to understand and explain how women can do work they were considered incapable of doing in the recent past. For decades, trade journals justified the male domination of the field by promoting the narrative that women cannot do this work because it requires scientific skill, a strong stomach to endure embalming, and physical strength—characteristics that women do not possess and cannot learn, the narrative goes. This framing leaves individuals in a defensive position when explaining women’s entrance into the field.

In much the same way individuals in other feminizing occupations do, most of the respondents in our study highlight an element of the job largely ignored in the dominant narrative explaining men’s previous domination of the field—caring for the grieving relatives and friends of the deceased. Caring for grieving relatives requires compassion, a characteristic cultural gender beliefs specify is an inherent, natural characteristic of women and not of men. This characteristic, however, is not one valued in U.S. society at large. Women can be primarily responsible for these job duties, but the job duties are considered less important. In fact, caring for grieving family members had been missing from the funeral director job description as depicted by trade journals for decades. By adopting this explanation for women’s entrance, differences between women and men are highlighted, leaving segregation of job duties unchallenged

and the devaluation of that aspect of the job intact. Although none of the funeral directors we interviewed explicitly stated that women's superior compassion was devalued, almost all, including one funeral director who was attempting *not* to equate gender with skill, made sure to specify that men retain some duties that women cannot do. Given the lingering occupational narrative from the male-dominated era, without having to make it explicit, the narrative that women are not scientifically competent and physically weak is invoked.

Although the funeral directors' narratives for understanding women's entrance create job-duty segregation and ghettoization, they do begin to challenge the cultural understanding of funeral directing as "men's work." Women's very presence as funeral directors undermines the assumption that funeral directors can only be men. Because gender norms are one of the main mechanisms through which gender segregation at work is maintained (Denissen 2010), they are cast into doubt when women work in non-traditional occupations. Therefore, women working as funeral directors trouble gender segregation. Several scholars point to the significance of gender inequality's re-creation in interaction (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Risman 2009). Individual perceptions are subject to change through disconfirming experiences, such as women working as construction workers or men working as nurses. The accumulation of these disconfirming experiences (e.g., seeing women as funeral directors and women "proving" themselves by performing removals and embalming) is likely to change customers', employers', and the general public's perceptions about men's and women's roles and abilities in funeral work. Women now have job opportunities that once were not available to them, thus improving their material well-being and general standing within the funeral industry.

A few funeral directors emphasize the importance of not using gender as a proxy for abilities when determining the division of funeral director labor. By refusing to assume that gender indicates ability, they are degendering the skills and characteristics associated with funeral directing. As Lorber (2000) theorizes, the gender division of labor itself is the source of women's continued inequality because it relies on a system that values and advantages masculinity over femininity. Processes of degendering would eliminate the mechanisms that stratify people by gender in occupations. Some funeral directors' explanations begin to degender funeral work by challenging homogeneity among gender statuses and offering an alternative, more equitable explanation (Channon 2014; Connell 2010; Kimmel 2013; Lemaster et al. 2015; Lorber 2000). By reframing funeral directing in this way, "the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged" (Risman 2009, p. 83; see also Connell 2010). Identifying all the ways in which all funeral workers are assisted with removals—lift technology, hiring out removals services, and assistance from others in locations (i.e., hospice and hospitals) where most people pass away—

diminishes the legitimacy of stereotypic gender beliefs about women's (and men's) needs for physical strength in order to be successful funeral directors. It could also allow for caregiving and physical strength to be considered skills in much the same way embalming is considered a learnable skill.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

A limitation of our study is that our sample is predominantly White, middle-class funeral directors from Judeo-Christian backgrounds living in the United States. Funeral directing continues to be one of the most racially segregated services in the modern United States. Race/ethnic groups tend to provide death services for members of their own race/ethnic groups (Severson 2012). When the racial barrier is crossed, it is more likely that people who are Black seek out services in funeral homes run by Whites than vice versa (Severson 2012). Future research would benefit from exploring the similarities and differences in the gendered division of labor and how that division is understood in funeral homes serving Populations of Color.

Although not the focus of this paper, some of our findings indicate possible contextual differences in the ways corporate and family-owned settings are organized. In corporate settings, instead of having a funeral director as the "jack of all trades," their division of labor is specialized. Our study provides some evidence that corporate settings either hire out removals and embalming or hire people to specifically fulfill the role of funeral director, embalmer, or body remover. This indicates that the division of labor in corporate settings may be more rigid, whereas in family-owned settings, it may be more flexible. Future research should investigate how gender beliefs shape the division of labor in corporate settings compared to family-owned settings because research finds that formal rules and practices in workplaces often lead to less oppressive conditions for women than reliance on informal rules (Reskin et al. 1999; Ridgeway 2009). However, our study suggests that the rigid division of labor may encourage the same gendered division of labor in corporate-owned funeral homes as family-owned ones.

Practice Implications

Our findings demonstrate the importance of examining how individuals working in an occupation explain the changing gender composition of and division of labor in their occupation. To reduce the likelihood of the division of labor being framed by gender; employers, human resource staff, and employees could examine their organization's explanations for separating the work of women and men. Refraining from using gender as a proxy for skill would likely reduce gender segregation within an occupation. Occupations with professional organizations, such as the National Funeral Directors Association, could also consider the narratives

they are using to recruit and retain women to their occupation. Rather than appealing to women based on gender beliefs, professional organizations could reframe their recruiting tactics to focus on skill without assuming that certain skills such as nurturing or scientific ability are dominions of only one sex. We also suggest that women and men working in non-traditional fields continue to challenge gender in their everyday workplaces because these disconfirming experiences undermine the cultural understanding of what is “men’s work.”

Conclusion

Our study contributes to the call to consider the importance of occupational context when examining how gender inequality is recreated and challenged in feminizing occupations (Adams 2010; Britton 2000; Britton and Logan 2008; Le Feuvre 2009). Because gender beliefs are malleable, their application can be—and often is—variable across situations. Exploring the patterns and exceptions across occupational settings with an eye toward the history of the occupation will lead to more effective challenges to oppressive occupational conditions and the construction of less oppressive occupational cultures. Our study confirms prior work examining how justifications for the entrance of women into an occupation, at least early in the process of women’s entrance, often rely on the assumption that women can enter the occupation to do the emotional work and labor of that occupation (Ridgeway 2009, 2011). The justification of women’s entrance also tends to include a reserving of certain job duties as the sole domain of men and endowing those duties with higher importance than that given to duties considered women’s work. Compared to the previous frame in which women were considered unable to do the work of the job, explaining women’s entrance as having a positive effect on the occupation is an improvement. However, leaving the gender difference narrative unchallenged, in the long run, leads to women being ghettoized into the lower paid, less respected positions in the occupation. The stronger, more promising challenge to narratives about the gendered division of labor comes from impugning the notion that the “traits” individuals hold are permanent and unchangeable characteristics rather than learnable skills.

Acknowledgments The authors would like to thank Lisa Melander, Heather McCreia, and Dana Britton for reading earlier versions of this work. The authors would also like to thank the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Research Involving Human Participants All appropriate occupational and institutional ethical guidelines were met and followed.

Informed Consent Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

References

- Adams, T. L. (2010). Gender and feminization in health care occupations. *Sociological Compass*, 4, 454–465. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00294.x.
- American Board of Funeral Service Education. (2005a). *ABFSE 2011 statistical fact sheet: 1975–2005*. American Board of Funeral Service Education. Unpublished report.
- American Board of Funeral Service Education. (2005b). *American board of funeral service education statistical questionnaire for accredited institutions*. American Board of Funeral Service Education. Unpublished report.
- American Board of Funeral Service Education. (2006). *American board of funeral service education statistical questionnaire for accredited institutions*. American Board of Funeral Service Education. Unpublished report.
- American Board of Funeral Service Education. (2007). *American board of funeral service education statistical questionnaire for accredited institutions*. American Board of Funeral Service Education. Unpublished report.
- American Board of Funeral Service Education. (2008). *American board of funeral service education statistical questionnaire for accredited institutions*. American Board of Funeral Service Education. Unpublished report.
- American Board of Funeral Service Education. (2009). *ABFSE administration reports*. American Board of Funeral Service Education. Unpublished report.
- American Board of Funeral Service Education. (2010). *ABFSE administration reports*. American Board of Funeral Service Education. Unpublished report.
- American Board of Funeral Service Education. (2011). *ABFSE administration reports*. American Board of Funeral Service Education. Unpublished report.
- American Community Survey. (2013). *Full-time, year-round workers and median earnings in the past 12 months by sex and detailed occupation*. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/people/io/files/Median%20earnings%20by%20occupation%20031015.xlsx>.
- Arendel, T. (1997). Reflections on the researcher-researched relationship: A women interviewing men. *Qualitative Sociology*, 23, 341–368. doi:10.1023/A:1024727316052.
- Berg, B. L. (2006). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (6th ed.). Long Beach, CA: Pearson.
- Bottero, W. (1992). The changing face of the professions? Gender and explanations of women’s entry into pharmacy. *Work, Employment & Society*, 6, 329–346. doi:10.1177/095001709263002.
- Britton, D. M. (2000). The epistemology of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 40, 418–434. doi:10.1177/089124300014003004.
- Britton, D. M., & Logan, L. (2008). Gendered organizations: Progress and prospects. *Sociology Compass*, 2, 107–121. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2007.00071.x.
- Cahill, S. E. (1991). Emotional capital and professional socialization: The case of mortuary science students (and me). *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 62, 101–116. doi:10.2307/2695852.
- Cancian, F. M., & Olicker, S. E. (2000). *Caring and gender*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Cathles, A., Harrington, D. E., & Krynski, K. (2010). The gender gap in funeral directors: Burying women with ready-to-embalm laws?

- British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48, 688–705. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8543.2010.00808.x.
- Channon, A. (2014). Towards the “undoing” of gender in mixed-sex martial arts and combat sports. *Societies*, 4, 587–605. doi:10.3390/soc4040587.
- Connell, C. (2010). Doing, undoing, or redoing gender?: Learning from the workplace experiences of transpeople. *Gender & Society*, 24, 31–55. doi:10.1177/0891243209356429.
- Connors, L. L. (2004, March 23). Surprisingly, women choose funeral studies. *The Christian science monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0323/p14s01-legn.html>.
- Correll, S. J. (2001). Gender and the career choice process: The role of biased self-assessments. *American Journal of Sociology*, 106, 1691–1730. doi:10.1086/321299.
- Correll, S. J. (2004). Constraints into preferences: Gender, status, and emerging career aspirations. *American Sociological Review*, 69, 93–113. doi:10.1177/000312240406900106.
- Current Population Survey (2000). *Employed and experienced unemployed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, annual average 2000*. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unpublished table.
- Current Population Survey (2010). *Employed and experienced unemployed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, annual average 2010*. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unpublished table.
- Denissen, A. M. (2010). The right tools for the job: Constructing gender meanings and identities in the male-dominated building trades. *Human Relations*, 63, 1051–1069. doi:10.1177/0018726709349922.
- Donley, S. (2016). *You've come a long way baby. It seems today, a women's place is in the (funeral) home: Gender beliefs in funeral trade journals*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Eagly, A. H., Wood, W., & Diekmann, A. B. (2000). Social role theory of sex differences and similarities: A current appraisal. In T. Eckes & H. M. Trautner (Eds.), *The developmental psychology of gender* (pp. 123–174). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- England, P. (2010). The gender revolution: Uneven and stalled. *Gender & Society*, 24, 149–166. doi:10.1177/0891243210361475.
- Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Hatmaker, D. M. (2013). Engineering identity: Gender and professional identity negotiation among women engineers. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 20, 382–396. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2012.00589.x.
- Hesse-Biber, S., Livingstone, S., Ramirez, D., Barko, E. B., & Johnson, A. L. (2010). Racial identity and body image among black female college students attending predominantly white colleges. *Sex Roles*, 63, 697–711. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9862-7.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Irvine, L., & Vermilya, J. L. (2010). Gender work in a feminized occupation: The case of veterinary medicine. *Gender & Society*, 24, 56–82. doi:10.1177/0891243209355978.
- Kelan, E. K. (2010). Gender logic and (un)doing gender at work. *Gender, Work and Organizations*, 17, 174–194. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2009.00459.x.
- Kimmel, M. (2013). *The gendered society* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Le Feuvre, N. (2009). Exploring women's academic careers in cross-national perspective: Lessons for equal opportunity policies. *Equal Opportunities International*, 28, 9–23. doi:10.1108/02610150910933604.
- Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast food, fast talk: Service work and the routinization of everyday life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lemaster, P., Delaney, R., & Strough, J. (2015). Crossover, degendering, or...? A multidimensional approach to life-span gender development. *Sex Roles*. doi:10.1007/s11199-015-0563-0. Advanced online publication.
- Levanon, A., England, P., & Allison, P. (2009). Occupational feminization and pay: Assessing causal dynamics using 1950–2000 U.S. Census data. *Social Forces*, 88, 865–892. doi:10.1353/sof.0.0264.
- Lincoln, A. E. (2010). The shifting supply of men and women to occupations: Feminization in veterinary education. *Social Forces*, 88, 1969–1998. doi:10.1353/sof.2010.0043.
- Lindsay, S. (2005). The feminization of the physician assistant profession. *Women & Health*, 41, 37–61. doi:10.1300/J013v41n04_03.
- Lofland, J., Snow, D., Anderson, L., & Lofland, L. H. (2006). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Lorber, J. (2000). Using gender to undo gender: A feminist degendering movement. *Feminist Theory*, 1, 79–95. doi:10.1177/14647000022229074.
- Magnarelli, M. (2015, April 14). The 25 careers in which women are the most underpaid. *Times*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/money/3820458/equal-pay-day-careers-biggest-wage-gap/>.
- Lovingly Managed. (2016). *Bereavement co-coordinators and funeral planners*. Retrieved from <http://www.lovinglymanaged.com/>.
- Mitford, J. (1998). *The American way of death, revisited*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
- National Funeral Directors Association. (2012a). *Trends in funeral service*. Retrieved from <http://nfd.org/media-center/trends-in-funeral-service.html>.
- National Funeral Directors Association. (2012b). *NFDA past presidents*. Retrieved from <http://www.nfd.org/about-nfd/executive-board/527-nfd-past-presidents.html>.
- Nentwich, J. C., & Kelan, E. K. (2014). Toward a topology of ‘doing gender’: An analysis of empirical research and its challenges. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 21, 121–134. doi:10.1111/gwao.12025.
- Novak, J. (2010). *Learning, creating, and using knowledge: Concept maps as facilitative tools in schools and corporations* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pierce, J.L. (1996). *Gender trials: Emotional lives in contemporary law firms*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Pierce, J. L. (1999). Emotional labor among paralegals. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 561, 127–142. doi:10.1177/000271629956100109.
- Pullen, A., & Simpson, R. (2009). Managing difference in feminized work: Men, otherness and social practice. *Human Relations*, 62, 561–587. doi:10.1177/0018726708101989.
- Rabe-Hemp, C. E. (2009). POLICEwomen or PoliceWOMAN?: Doing gender and police work. *Feminist Criminology*, 4, 114–129. doi:10.1177/1557085108327659.
- Ramshaw, E. J. (2009). The personalization of postmodern post-mortem rituals. *Pastoral Psychology*, 59, 171–178. doi:10.1007/s11089-009-0234-6.
- Ranson, B. (2005). No longer ‘one of the boys’: Negotiations with motherhood, as prospect or reality, among women in engineering. *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 42, 145–157. doi:10.1111/j.1755-618X.2005.tb02459.x.
- Reskin, B., & Roos, P. (1990). *Job queues, gender queues: Explaining women's inroads into male occupations*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Reskin, B. F., McBrier, D. B., & Kmec, J. A. (1999). The determinants and consequences of workplace sex and race composition. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 25, 335–361. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.25.1.335.
- Ridgeway, C. (1997). Interaction and the conservation of gender inequality: Considering employment. *American Sociological Review*, 62, 218–235. doi:10.2307/2657301.
- Ridgeway, C. (2009). Framed before we know it: How gender shapes social relations. *Gender & Society*, 23, 145–160. doi:10.1177/0891243208330313.

- Ridgeway, C. L. (2011). *Framed by gender: How gender inequality persists in the modern world*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Ridgeway, C., & Correll, S. J. (2004). Unpacking the gender system: A theoretical perspective on cultural beliefs in social relations. *Gender & Society, 18*, 510–531. doi:10.1177/0891243204265269.
- Ridgeway, C. L., & Smith-Lovin, L. (1999). The gender system and interaction. *Annual Review of Sociology, 25*, 191–216. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.25.1.191.
- Risman, B. (2009). From doing to undoing: Gender as we know it. *Gender & Society, 23*, 81–84. doi:10.1177/0891243208326874.
- Rontondaro, V. (2011, March 25). Funeral divas: How women are returning to the death care industry in droves. *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2011/03/funeral_divas.html.
- Rundblad, G. (1995). Exhuming women's premarket duties in the care of the dead. *Gender & Society, 9*, 173–192. doi:10.1177/089124395009002003.
- Rundblad, G. (2000). Negotiating gendered occupational barriers: The case of women in funeral service. In H. Z. Lopata & K. D. Henson (Eds.), *Unusual occupations and unusually organized occupations* (pp. 95–123). United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Schäfer, C. (2007). Post-mortem personalization: Pastoral power and the New Zealand funeral director. *Mortality, 12*, 4–21. doi:10.1080/13576270601088319.
- Severson, K. (2012, June 23). Helpful hands on life's last segregated journey. *The New York times*. Retrieved from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C04EFDD123BF937A15755C0A9649D8B63>.
- Sharp, G. (2011, May 28). Funeral divas: Creating space for women in the funeral industry. *The society pages*. Retrieved from <http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/05/28/funeral-divas-creating-space-for-women-in-the-funeral-industry/>.
- Stein, S. (2011, March 28). How women are taking over undertaking. *Jezebel*. Retrieved from <http://ca.jezebel.com/5786451/how-women-are-taking-over-undertaking>.
- Stelloh, T. (2011, April 14). In her childhood dreams, a funeral home was the destination. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/nyregion/in-funeral-industry-womens-presence-grows.html?_r=1.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative researcher: Grounded theory procedures and techniques* (2nd ed.). California: Sage Publications.
- Sturtz, K. (2013, October 31). Syracuse mortuary school agrees to pay \$30,000 in sexual harassment suit. *Syracuse.com*. Retrieved from http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2013/10/simons_funeral_school_agrees_to_pay_30000_in_sexual_harassment_suit.html.
- Tewksbury, R., & Gange, P. (1997). Assumed and presumed identities: Problems of self-orientation in field research. *Sociological Spectrum, 17*, 127–156. doi:10.1080/02732173.1997.9982157.
- Torres, D. L. (1983). *An industry and its environment: Professionalism and its effects on the funeral industry (unpublished doctoral dissertation)*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University.
- Trompette, P., & Lemonnier, M. (2009). Funeral embalming: The transformation of a medical innovation. *Science Studies, 22*, 9–30. Retrieved from <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00451828/>.
- Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art of and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society, 1*, 125–151. doi:10.1177/0891243287001002002.
- Wheeldon, J., & Faubert, J. (2009). Framing experience: Concept maps, mind maps, and data collection in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8*, 52–67. doi:10.1177/160940690900800307.
- Whittaker, W. G. (2005). *Funeral services: The industry, its workforce, and labor standards*. The Cornell University ILR School. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1208&context=key_workplace.
- Williams, C. L. (1989). *Gender differences at work: Women and men in nontraditional occupations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Williams, C. L. (1995). *Still a man's world: Men who do "women's" work*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Williams, C. L. (2015). Crossing over: Interdisciplinary research on "men who do women's work." *Sex Roles, 72*, 390–395. doi:10.1007/s11199-015-0477-x.
- Yoder, J. D., & Berendsen, L. L. (2001). "Outsider within" the firehouse: African American and white women firefighters. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 25*, 27–36. doi:10.1111/1471-6402.00004.
- Zavella, P. (1996). Feminist insider dilemmas: Constructing ethnic identity with Chicana informants. In D. L. Wolf (Ed.), *Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork* (pp. 138–159). Boulder, CO: Westview.