

Mortuary Rituals



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a conventional action following the death
of an individual, conducted prior to, and during, corpse disposal
(...in Madagascar)



culturally learned practices that harness the
human psychological preparedness to perform them

Question



What are the main similarities and differences in the examples?



Preparing the body by sprinkling water from the Holy Ganges
to achieve absolute salvation in India.



Manipulating the body by tying the hands together so
that the deceased Vodou priest cannot practice Vodou with other corpses in Haiti.



Viewing the body during a 3-day wake in the Philippines to pay respects to the family and deceased.



*Community ceremonies around
the body* during a 7-year ritual to remember the person before they join the
ancestors in Madagascar.



Disposal of the body on a hole dug in a cliff side
for a high-status individual to leave the world the same way he entered it in the Philippines

Question



What are the main similarities and differences in the examples?

∞ Differences



∞ Local explanations of actions

∞ Action sequences

The Science of Mortuary Rituals: Cross-Cultural Surveys



∞ Differences

- ∞ Local explanations of actions
- ∞ Action sequences

∞ Similarities

- ∞ *Conventional practices
- ∞ Performed in groups
- ∞ Body is central
- ∞ Prior to disposal (re-disposal)
- ∞ Local explanations of actions
- ∞ *Highly stipulated
- ∞ *Redundant
- ∞ *Disconnected from everyday goals
- ∞ Costly

❧ Differences

❧ **Local explanations of actions**

❧ Action sequences

❧ Similarities

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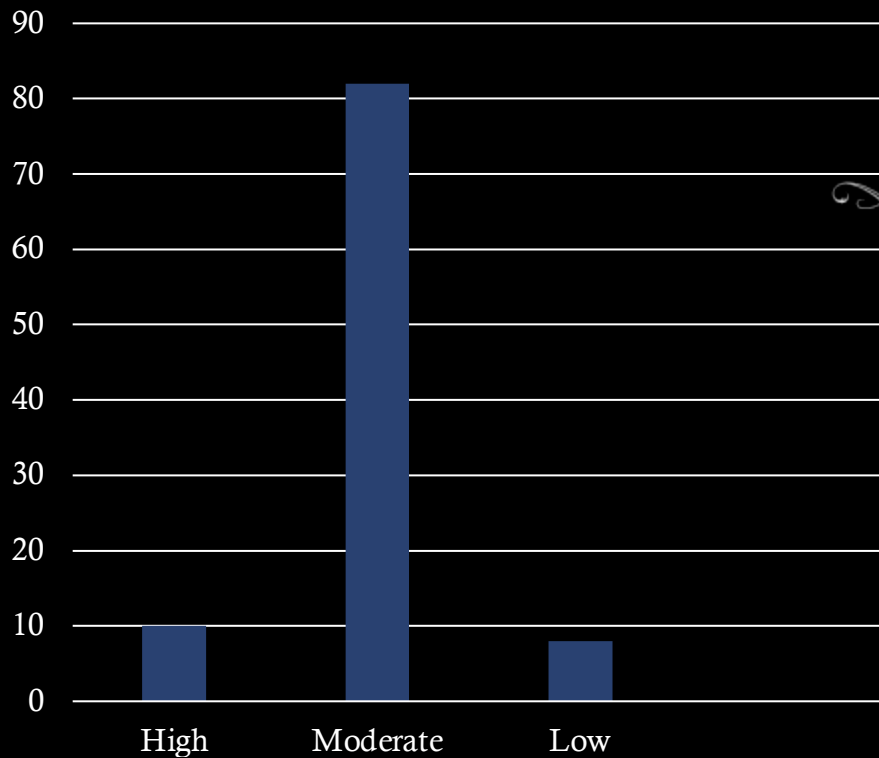
Local Explanations of Actions



- ☞ Mortuary rituals as a product of shared ideas about the self, the process of death, the identity of the dead in the afterlife, and the identity of the living.
- a) Inconsistent evidence for the relationship between particular afterlife beliefs (e.g., a parallel land of the dead in another sphere of existence), and specific kinds of mortuary practices (e.g., washing the corpse before burial).
- b) Just like many other collective rituals, people's explanations for ritual actions following death are often vague, circular, question-begging, mystery-ridden, and highly idiosyncratic.
- ☞ They are important. Local explanations/theology often converge with psychological tendencies to reinforce ritual behaviors.
- ☞ **We need to understand both similarities and differences to explain**

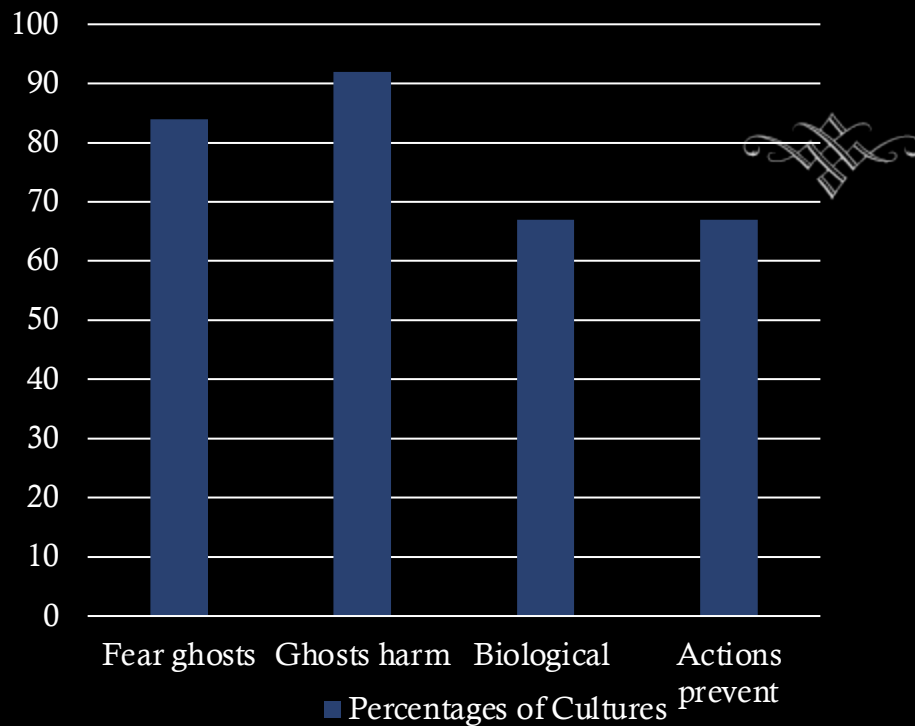
Example: Why are Mortuary Rituals Resilient?

Level of Corpse Contact



Example: Why are Mortuary Rituals Resilient?

Ideas about Recently Dead



The Science of Mortuary Rituals: Cross-Cultural Surveys; Interviews/Surveys



❧ Differences [culturally learned]

❧ **Local explanations of actions**

❧ Action sequences

❧ Similarities [psych. Prep.]

❧ *Conventional practices

❧ Performed in groups

❧ Body is central

❧ Prior to disposal (re-disposal)

❧ Local explanations of actions

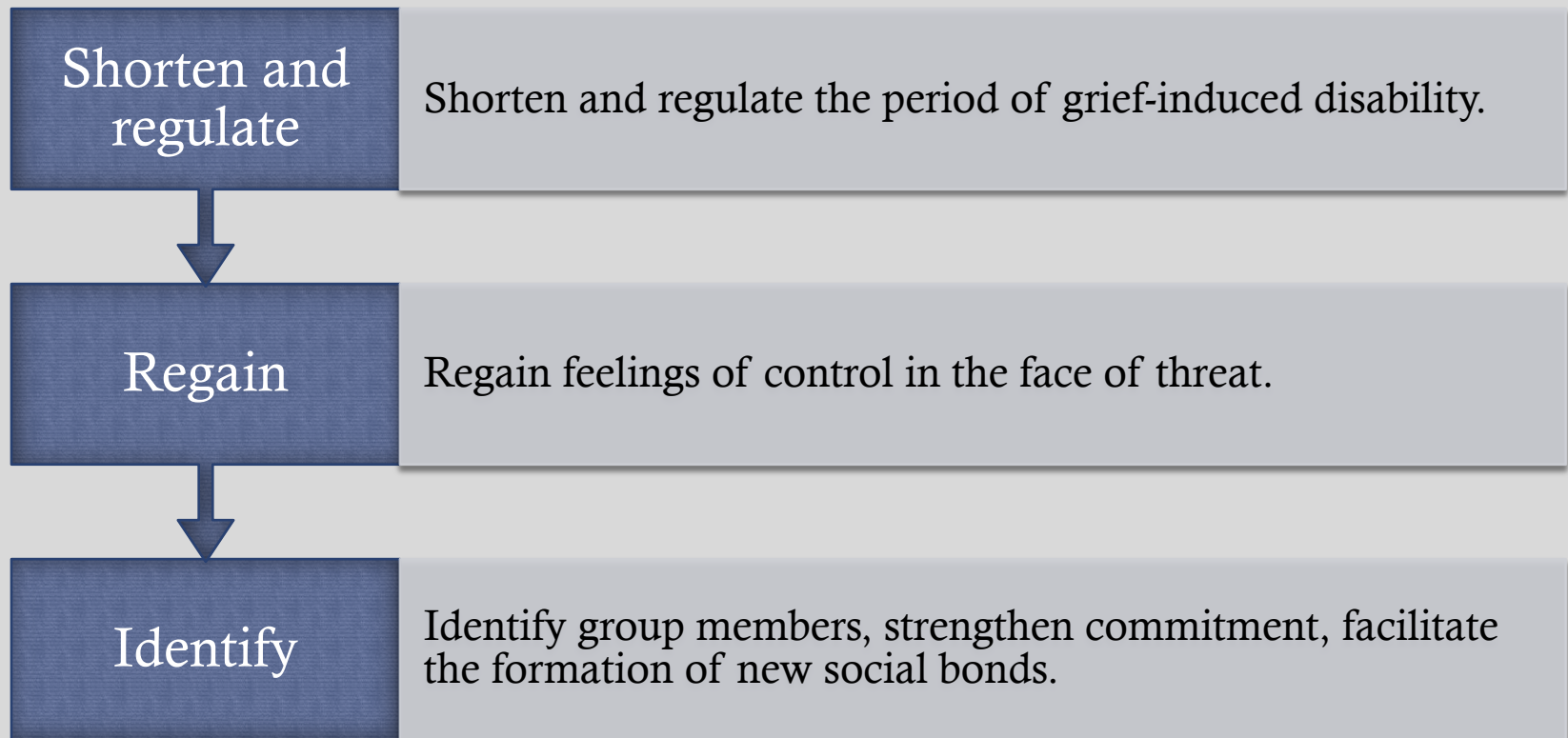
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The Functions of Mortuary Rituals



Shorten and Regulate

the period of grief-induced disability



∞

∞ Grief is detrimental to health & survival.

∞ Compelling desire + ritual conventions to see & touch the body.

∞ Interaction with the body diminishes the duration of grief.



Regain

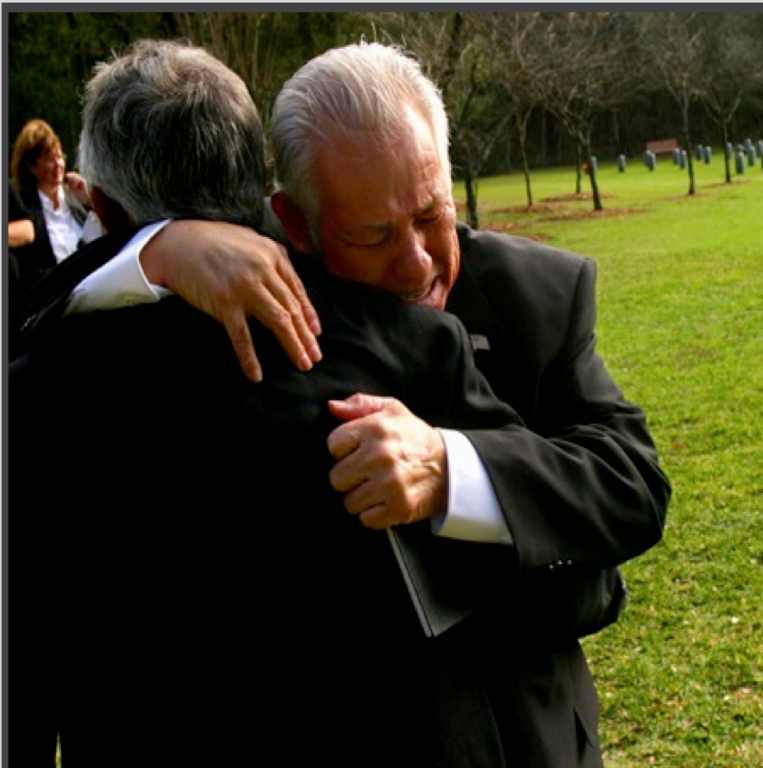
feelings of control in the face of threat.



- ☞ Corpses elicit distress/ambivalence.
- ☞ Performing scripted behaviors is automatic & compensatory.
- ☞ Rituals reduce anxiety & provides regained feeling of control.
- ☞ Interaction with the body diminishes the duration of grief.

Identify

group members, strengthen commitment, facilitate the formation of new social bonds.



- ☞ Grief is detrimental to health & survival of the grieving.
 - ☞ Opportunities for costly signaling group commitment.
 - ☞ Social group elicit resources to the bereaved.
 - ☞ Affiliation reduces stress.
- = replacement relationships.

Thank you

