

Reviews

L. H. Lofland, *The Craft of Dying*, Sage, Beverly Hills, 1978. 119 pp.
L. H. Lofland (ed.), *Toward a Sociology of Death and Dying*, Sage (Contemporary Social Science Issues), Beverly Hills, 1976. 150 pp. £3.
ISBN 08039 0586 6.

In the voluminous literature on dying which has grown up since the mid sixties, especially in the United States, there are often disturbing ambiguities. Dying is recognized as a subject of ultimate seriousness, and yet it is a vogue topic as well, with all the attendant follies. It is a subject which is said to be taboo, in the noisiest possible manner. Above all, it is a subject in which description and prescription are exceptionally hard to disentangle, and while there is often some excuse for their assimilation in practising arts like medicine and psychiatry, which have contributed some of the most important research on dying, nevertheless there is a special duty to distinguish them in the sociology of the subject.

It is one of the merits of the two books of American sociology reviewed here that these ambiguities are recognized, and an attempt made to make sense of them, and to plot out a line of study which is independent of them. One is a collection of articles which originally appeared as a special issue of *Urban Life* in 1975, and was then reissued by Sage. The articles have a perceptible coherence in their use of 'ethnography', in a strictly interactionist sense, and in their coverage of diverse organizations and officials who are concerned with death. The other book is a short reflective essay which attempts to bring together some of the principal themes which have emerged from recent studies in this tradition. Both volumes are very much 'West Coast' in style: readable, clever, sceptical, aware above all of diversity, rooted in the visibilia of social life, the jargon a little racy with overtones of technical slang.

'The Craft of Dying' can be read as an attempt to do for dying what Goffman did for stigma. There is the same use of popular and journalistic sources to provide limiting cases, the same absorption in the style of social behaviour, the same detachment from its content. Part One introduces 'the situation of modern dying' – slower, later and less violent than that of previous centuries, more bureaucratic and more secular – in order to show that it creates three 'problems and potentials': how is the individual to model his dying role, how is the organization of dying to be reformed, and how, through what ideology, can sense be made of death? In the remainder of the book, the first of these questions, that of individual style, is analysed by depicting the range of role construction, the dimensions on which the dying role can be made to vary. The second and third questions concerning the organization and meaning of dying, are analysed together as an aspect of the sociology of

social movements, and it is suggested that both the modern 'death taboo' and the 'classical death of Western nostalgia' are fictive products of the attempt of the 'happy death' movement to identify the 'enemy' which is a necessary feature of such movements. These are shrewd observations, well worth raising for debate.

'Toward a Sociology of Death and Dying' contains seven articles from research which in varying degrees has been grist for 'The Craft of Dying'. Six concern the ways in which officials and professionals organize their dealings with death: doctors in training, nursing and residential home staff, ministers, coroners (or more precisely the officials who announce accidental death to the family), and those responsible for executions. Laymen get an occasional look in as patients, residents or clients, but there is only one article, by Sarah Matthews, on the laity in private life, a byproduct of her research on older women. Many of these materials were to some extent previews of books which have appeared subsequently, by Coombs, Lofland, Charmaz, Gubrium, and Matthews; two, by Wood and Marshall, are independent items: but in general an individual assessment would be beside the point.

These volumes succeed in the limited aims with which they set out: to gather new empirical materials in the organization of death, 'towards' a sociology of the subject, and to suggest some 'preliminary understandings' arising from them, all more or less within the scope of symbolic interactionism, and all seeking to extend that approach beyond the analysis of hospital dying carried out by interactionists in the sixties. The coverage of the venture is still avowedly far from complete. The incompleteness of the enterprise is, however, in my view more seriously suggested by weaknesses in the interactionist approach itself. The chief of these weaknesses is the reduction of thought, belief and values either to epiphenomena of group activity, or to something in the individual which Lofland terms 'stance', that is 'tone', 'colour' or 'mood' – dying as 'the brave reformer', 'the disabled observer' and so on. There is something altogether too dramaturgical in this, too reminiscent of the formalism of 'characterisation' in literary criticism, too distanced from what it is that makes people act so differently in the face of death. For impression management, for encounters in public places, for group activity among professionals and organizations, including those concerned with death, this approach has suggested much of value. But for sociological accounts of what dying means to individuals, and why, more is needed than interactionists have yet offered.

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Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, E. P. Dutton, New York, 1980.
306 pp. \$12.95. ISBN 0 525 16955 5.

This is a study of the social organization of a Jewish day centre in Southern California, and its significance in the lives of its members. The author spent four years as an anthropologist, researcher, friend and family member (one old man claimed that she was his long-lost granddaughter) immersed in the