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Organizations and Identity: Obituaries 1856–1972

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Abstract

On the assumptions that the terms for portraying identities change as the structure of a society changes, and that one of the master trends in

American society has been the growth of organizations, I coded and analyzed the content of 630 urban, rural, and black obituaries, randomly selected from within five, 6-year time periods between 1856 and 1972. I hypothesized a trend toward organizationally related content and expected a growing presence of organizations within obituaries to be indexed by change in the ways biographical time was marked: personal characteristics were indexed, in the kinds of events and relationships used to depict lives, and in the settings from which they were drawn. I found, instead, inferential evidence for the presence of routinization in the form of trends toward impersonal, standardized, categorical, “objective” portrayals. Changes in obituaries over time suggest versions of identity as residing in social structures and arrangements.

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