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## Publication Patterns in *Death Studies*: 40 Years On

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As a living legacy to the founding editorship of Hannelore Wass, *Death Studies* has played a leading role in promoting scholarship in the field of thanatology for nearly 4 decades. In this article, the authors analyze publication patterns in the journal in the 25 years since Wass handed off the journal's editorial management to her successor, focusing on changing patterns of authorship, topical focus, and methodological emphasis of articles across this period. The results document the increasing feminization of the field, the impressive internationality of the research networks driving its development, and the substantial empirical foundation for major lines of research concerned with bereavement, death attitudes, and suicide. Placed against the backdrop of early trends in publication during Wass's overview, such findings suggest the maturation of research in this interdisciplinary specialty and validate her long-range anticipation of the field's prospects as this flagship journal moves toward its fifth decade of publication.

Considered alongside Hannelore Wass's other significant contributions to the field of thanatology summarized in the accompanying articles, the ongoing publication of the journal she founded is almost certainly her most substantial living legacy. Drawing on papers she recruited in 1975 and 1976, *Death Education* published its inaugural issue in 1977, expanding its mission beyond the field of pedagogy to encompass a broad range of social science research on death, dying, and bereavement with its evolution into *Death Studies* in 1986. Our goals in the present article are first to offer a brief summary of the journal's authorship patterns during Wass's 14 years of editorship, and then to provide a closer analysis of its evolution since that time. In this we extend early work by Crase (1992) and supplement recent reviews of publication patterns in both *Death Studies* and *Omega* (Doka, Wittkowski, Neimeyer, Vallerga, & Currelley, 2015; Wittkowski, Doka, Neimeyer, & Vallerga, 2015), concentrating here only on the former journal and continuing the coverage of its content into the present year.

Thus, we consider trends in authorship, content, and category of publications appearing in the journal following Wass's editorship, to more fully appreciate the contributions of *Death Studies* to an international, interdisciplinary specialty she did much to help launch. Before doing so, however, Robert A. Neimeyer will offer a brief recollection to salute Wass's contribution, in keeping with the personalism of this *Festschrift* issue, and to share a bit of the history of the journal's editorship.

### THE DIE IS CAST

In the summer of 1982 I (Robert A. Neimeyer) made my annual pilgrimage to Gainesville, Florida, to visit old friends at my undergraduate alma mater, taking advantage of the relatively lighter responsibilities in my first post-graduate position at the University of Rochester. As usual, connecting with Hannelore was a high priority for the trip, which typically included a long evening of conversation in her book-lined living room, and, before his encroaching illness made it difficult, a home-cooked meal shared with Hannelore and her husband, Harry Sissler, who had taught

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an Honors Social Studies Seminar in which I had been a student at the university some years before. On this occasion, though, Hannelore invited me to one of the two finest restaurants in town—one I could never afford during my impoverished college days—and, to my surprise and delight, invited me to join the editorial board of her journal effective in January of 1983. As I was soon to assume an Assistant Professor position at the University of Memphis, I accepted gratefully, the key lime pie that followed the deal being made all the sweeter by the honor she extended me.

Curiously, perhaps, I had never taken a class with Hannelore during my undergraduate years at the University of Florida, an irony made more understandable by our being in different departments (she in Education, I in Psychology). I had come to know her, however, by seeking her out for conversation, as I had already begun conducting research on the assessment of death attitudes as an undergrad, and soon thereafter publishing it (Neimeyer, Dingemans, & Epting, 1977), including in *Death Education* (Neimeyer, 1978; Rigdon, Epting, Neimeyer, & Krieger, 1979), which she had recently founded. As this line of research continued into my graduate school years (Neimeyer & Chapman, 1981; Neimeyer & Dingemans, 1980), Hannelore had begun to turn to me for occasional reviews of related papers submitted to the journal, which I made it a policy to return by post (in those pre-email days) within 24 hours of their arrival in my mailbox. Needless to say, that practice of lightening responsiveness in my early years gradually eroded under the press of mounting obligations by the time I was a decade into my own professorial position, but not before Hannelore had come to trust me as someone who could be counted on for a thorough and rapid evaluation of submissions.

My relationship to Hannelore thickened further when she decided to undertake a second edition of her substantial textbook, *Dying: Facing the Facts* (Wass, 1979), which I myself had adopted as a text in my early teaching of college classes in the Psychology of Death and Dying. For this second edition, Hannelore decided to recruit a colleague in sociology, Felix Berardo, and me to help shoulder the considerable responsibilities entailed in compiling such a sweeping work, giving me a front-row seat to observe her breadth of vision and rigor as an editor. Hannelore's gritty tenacity in demanding high quality work of her contributors was much in evidence as I reviewed and revised papers alongside her, giving rise to at least one emotionally charged "showdown" between her and a recalcitrant author who eventually implemented the major overhaul that Hannelore required. As a result, the new edition of the volume became the authoritative high-level text in death education, offering reviews of topics as diverse as the dying process, death attitudes, suicide, and cultural factors in grief, all written by leading scholars in their respective areas (Wass, Berardo, & Neimeyer, 1988). The success of the volume inaugurated a collaboration between Hannelore and me that continued into a third edition several years later

(Wass & Neimeyer, 1995). Thus, when Hannelore moved toward retirement in 1990 and considered who might take the reins of the journal she had founded 13 years before, she must have considered me a safe bet. In passing on the baton, she also did much to cement my loyalty to a field in which I had become increasingly active, such that I find myself still today remaining true to the editorial commitment I made to her some 25 years ago.

## DEATH EDUCATION/DEATH STUDIES: THE EARLY YEARS

When Wass first pitched the concept of a new journal in the field of thanatology to publishers, she did so in the heady heyday of death education, as a plethora of pedagogical initiatives proliferated in the field following the popular success of *On Death and Dying* (Kubler-Ross, 1969) only a few years before. By proposing a professional publication on this very topic, she strategically positioned the journal to advance the field, and to do so in a "niche market," effectively mitigating the perception of direct competition with the existing interdisciplinary journal in the area, *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying*, which had already established itself several years before. Soon enough, however, it became clear that there was more than enough scholarly productivity in the area to support two major journals, and the content of *Death Education* broadened to legitimate its retitling as *Death Studies* as it approached its second decade of publication.

Over the 14 years of her editorship of the journal, Wass reviewed and accepted for publication an impressive 405 articles in 64 separate issues, whose authorship was analyzed by Crase (1992). Inasmuch as a trend toward multiple authorship has been found to characterize many fields in the social and medical sciences as they grow in sophistication (Crase, 1992), it was noteworthy that 60% of the articles accepted under Wass's editorship were single-authored, 23% were dual authored, and only 17% were written by teams of three or more collaborators. Crase also reported, however, a 10% increase in multiple authorship from the first to second half of this period. He also noted that a review of authorship patterns in various professional journals supported the argument that more "scientific" publications tended toward greater co-authorship, whereas more "philosophic" or theoretical journals included higher percentages of single-authored articles. Thus, the trend toward multiple-authored papers may have been commensurate with *Death Studies'* shift across its first 14 years toward the publication of more empirical research and away from theoretical scholarship, though Crase did not analyze this directly.

A second finding of Crase (1992) concerned the relatively high percentage of women who were first authors: essentially 40% of all authors and single authors.

Moreover, when women and men coauthored an article, they did so with nearly equal frequency. On average, he found that articles had 1.65 authors fairly consistently across the two successive 7-year periods.

Finally, Crase reported that authorship was widely dispersed through the eastern half of the United States, with approximately 12% of the content of the journal originating in 8 foreign countries, with Canadian and Israeli contributions being the most numerous. Crase further predicted that the future content of the journal would likely be characterized by an increase in the ratio of empirical to non-empirical contributions, in the percentage of multiple-authored articles, and in greater geographic dispersion in authorship. He closed with the hope that the results he presented might “serve as baseline data that will be useful in making future comparisons” (Crase, 1992, p. 209). The analysis presented below attempts just this, examining not only authorship patterns, but also more directly tabulating the topical content of articles and their category (e.g., research vs. theory) in the 25 years of *Death Studies* that followed his study. As such, it clarifies the living legacy of Wass’s editorship by tracing the ongoing contributions published in the journal under the editorship of her successor.

## PUBLICATION PATTERNS IN *DEATH STUDIES*: 1991 TO THE PRESENT

### Authorship

In total, 942 articles have appeared in *Death Studies* from 1991 to the present (i.e., through May of 2015), whose distribution between single, dual, and multiple (3+) authored papers is depicted in Figure 1. As can be seen, single authored papers have dwindled in number across successive 5-year increments following Wass’s editorship of the journal, with a corresponding increase in co-authored papers, and particularly those having three or more authors, with the proportion stabilizing in the last decade. Indeed, relative

to the mean of 1.65 authors per article reported by Crase (1992) for the first 14 years of the journal, the number of co-authors has grown fairly consistently over the past 25 years: 1991–1995, 1.75; 1996–2000, 2.01; 2001–2005, 2.30; 2006–2010, 2.79; and 2011–2015, 2.65. This shift from 60% single authored papers in the early years of the journal reported by Crase to only 16% in recent years is commensurate with broader trends in the social and medical sciences, which likely reflect a greater pressure to demonstrate productivity defined by frequent publication in the academic world. However, it also likely suggests that the largely theoretical and rhetorical work produced by isolated scholars that appeared in the early years of the field has gradually been displaced by more empirical research requiring the efforts of larger teams of investigators. We return to this point when we analyze the type of publications in the journal below.

Crase had also reported the gender of contributors to *Death Studies* in the first 14 years of its publication, finding a ratio of 60% male to 40% female for this period. As Figure 2 depicts, this ratio has essentially reversed across the years, reflecting the increasing feminization of thanatology as a field of study. Combined with the co-authorship analysis reported above, this suggests that the “typical” contributor to the journal in Wass’s day was a male author of a theoretical paper working in isolation, whereas the typical contributor at present is a woman publishing collaborative work as part of a research team.

In terms of the geographic distribution of authorship, whereas Crase (1992) had found that only 12% of the contributions to the journal in its first 14 years originated outside the United States, we discovered a consistent trend toward greater internationality in the field across successive periods, culminating in over 50% of recent publications originating in other countries (see Figure 3). On closer examination (see Table 1), however, the order of top-producing countries was preserved from the earliest years of *Death Studies* to the present: the United States, Canada, Israel, Australia, and the United Kingdom. But in other respects we found remarkable diversification in the

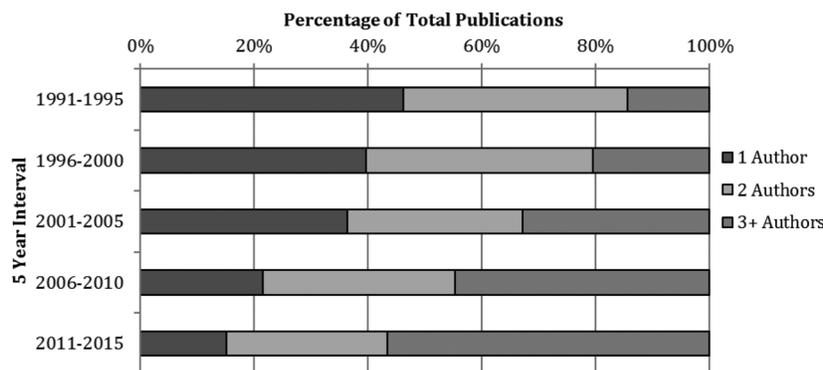


FIGURE 1 Number of authors as a percentage of total publications in five year intervals.

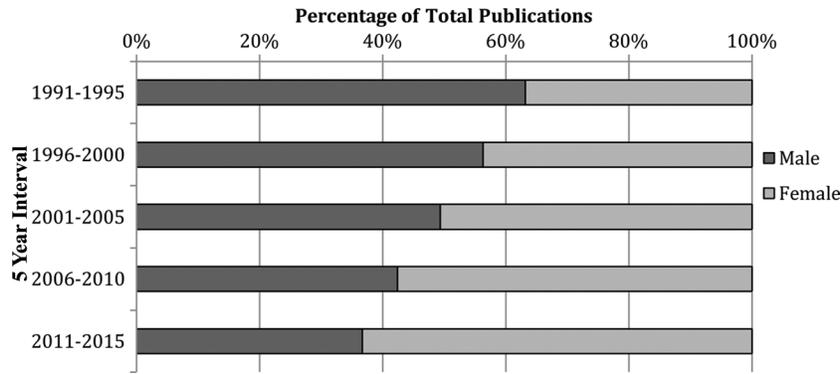


FIGURE 2 First author gender as a percentage of total publications in five year intervals.

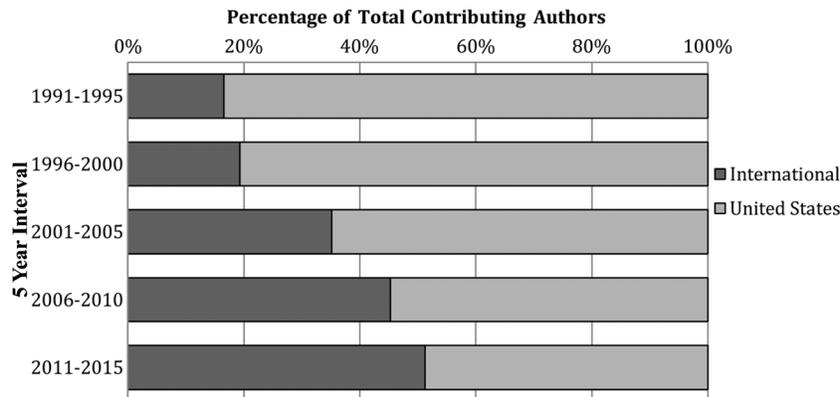


FIGURE 3 Author nationality as a percentage of total publications in 5-year intervals.

geography of the field, with the total number of countries contributing to the journal more than quadrupling from 9 in Crase’s analysis to 38 in our own. Such a pattern suggests the emergence of a more truly global field of study, one less dominated by an American perspective than in decades past.

Finally, as the literature has grown to include nearly 1,000 articles published in *Death Studies* over the last 25 years, we analyzed the nationality of the top-producing authors generating this literature, as reported in Table 2. As can be seen, eight of the top 10 contributors are American, with 15 others among the most productive authors also coming from the United States, most of whom function as leaders of large and active research networks. However, several Dutch, Chinese, Canadian, and Israeli authors also rank among the leading contributors, as do individual authors from Turkey and Norway. This testifies to the continued impact of American research teams in thanatology, as well as the growing contribution made by highly productive scholars from other nations.

Article Type

As Crase (1992) predicted, publication trends in *Death Studies* over the last 25 years reveal a consistent growth

TABLE 1  
Publications by Nationality of First Author in *Death Studies*  
Published 1991 to 2015 (Top 50% of Countries)

Nationality of first author	N	%
USA	616	63.8%
Canada	53	5.5%
Israel	44	4.6%
Australia	33	3.4%
United Kingdom	26	2.7%
Netherlands	25	2.6%
China	18	2.4%
Germany	12	1.2%
Norway	11	1.2%
Kuwait	11	1.1%
Belgium	10	0.8%
Ireland	7	0.7%
Turkey	6	0.7%
Taiwan	6	0.6%
Greece	5	0.5%
Japan	5	0.5%
New Zealand	5	0.5%
South Korea	4	0.5%
Sweden	4	0.5%
Total	908	100%

Note: First authors from an additional 19 nations published a further 34 articles in *Death Studies* during this period.

TABLE 2  
Publications by Top Producing Authors in *Death Studies* Published  
1991 to 2015

Author	N	Nationality
Neimeyer, Robert A.	32	USA
Lester, David	29	USA
Range, Lillian	24	USA
Abdel-Khalek, Ahmed	14	Turkey
Leenaars, Antoon	14	Canada
Balk, David	13	USA
Klass, Dennis	9	USA
Davies, Betty	9	USA
Field, Nigel	8	USA
Murphy, Shirley	8	USA
Prigerson, Holly	8	USA
Ho, Samuel	7	China
Marwit, Samuel	7	USA
Rosenblatt, Paul	7	USA
Stroebe, Margaret	7	Netherlands
Werth, James	7	USA
Chan, Cecilia	6	China
Dennis, Michael	6	USA
Dickinson, George	6	USA
Dyregrov, Kari	6	Norway
Lohan, Janet	6	USA
Servaty-Seib, Heather	6	USA
Schut, Henk	6	Netherlands
Barrera, Maru	5	Canada
Boelen, Paul	5	Netherlands
Cacciatore, Joanne	5	USA
Chow, Amy	5	China
Corr, Charles	5	USA
Ditto, Peter	5	USA
Ellis, Jon	5	USA
Gamino, Louis A	5	USA
Johnson, L. Clark	5	USA
Jordan, John	5	USA
Leichtentritt, Ronit	5	Israel
Ogden, Russel	5	Canada
Rubin, Simon	5	Israel
Sandler, Irwin	5	USA
Stack, Steven	5	USA
Wenckstern, Susanne	5	Canada
Currier, Joseph	5	USA
Total	330	

in empirical research, associated with a concomitant reduction in the number of more purely theoretical papers (see Figure 4). For example, theory accounted for fully 27% of the content of the journal between 1991 and 1995 compared to 44% for quantitative and qualitative research combined for this same period. However, by 2011–2015, theory had shrunk to account for less than 7% of the journal's content, whereas empirical work had expanded to account for fully 75% of all articles. Literature reviews, both of a meta-analytic and narrative kind, also have dwindled in prominence across the 20-year period. Such a strong trend toward the publication of original research documents the evidence-based character of contemporary thanatology, providing a stronger grounding for both long-standing perspectives such as terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980), as well as more recent models such as meaning reconstruction perspectives on grief (Neimeyer, 2011, 2014) and the Dual Process Model of coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

#### Article Content

A parallel analysis traced developments in the major topic areas addressed by articles in the journal since 1991 (see Figure 5). The most common content area throughout the 25-year period was bereavement, which has incrementally grown from accounting for about 30% of the work in the journal early in this period to more than 40% at present. By comparison, research on death attitudes (including death anxiety, acceptance, etc.) has ranged between 15% and 20% of *Death Studies* content across these years, as has research on suicide and traumatic death, the third most common focus, with similar temporal variation. End-of-life has been the focus of approximately 10% of articles over time, and “other” content areas, including applied, ethical, and legal issues, and death concepts in children, tended to account for about 10% of the journal's content over the 25 years studied. Interestingly, despite the titular focus of

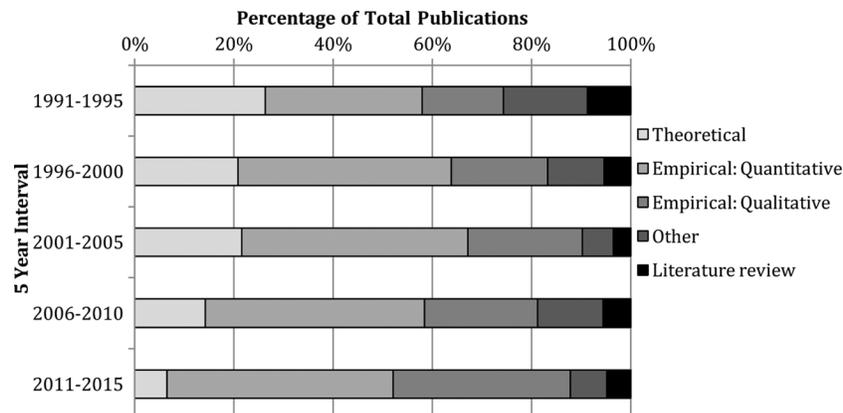


FIGURE 4 Article type as a percentage of total publications in 5-year intervals.

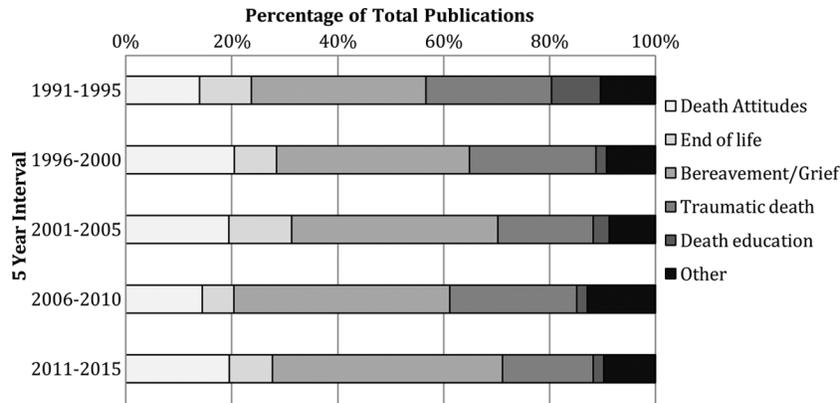


FIGURE 5 Article content as a percentage of total publications in 5-year intervals.

the journal when first launched by Wass, death education declined in prominence from about 10% of the journal’s content in 1991–1995 to a mere 2% at present. In summary, *Death Studies* has evolved to become perhaps the single most frequent outlet for research on grief and bereavement, while additionally providing a leading forum for basic science research on death attitudes. It also offers a consistent and high profile outlet for work in suicidology, and, to a lesser extent, end-of-life, palliative care and hospice issues. Despite its increased focus on these content areas, it remains open to a broad range of topics relevant to cultural, social psychological and epidemiological studies in thanatology, preserving the broader base of the discipline.

Finally, Figure 6 crosses these content areas with article type to characterize the methodological focus of work in each area. Of the four major topics addressed in the journal across the last quarter century, work in death attitudes has been the most solidly empirical, with nearly 65% of publications using quantitative methods, and close to another 15% using qualitative approaches, for a total of nearly 80% of all papers being empirical in form. Likewise, work in bereavement, suicide, and end-of-life all display a strong evidence base, with over 60% of articles being empirical and largely (especially in those concerned with suicide)

statistical. Significantly, however, each also includes approximately 20% theoretical contributions, suggesting the relevance of ongoing conceptual development in each area.

Coda

What picture emerges from the current study regarding the long-term contributions of Hannelore Wass’s farsighted decision to launch *Death Education/Death Studies*? By any measure it is a legacy whose impact has continued to grow in size and sophistication across its nearly 40 years of publication, in a way that validates and extends the vision of its originator. In the 25 years since she stepped down from her founding editorship, the journal has provided a forum for the publication of close to 1,000 peer-reviewed articles on a great range of topics concerned with death and loss, with particularly strong emphasis on studies of bereavement, death attitudes, and suicide. Moreover, this research has matured from early theoretical work to a solid and impressive program of empirical research drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods, while still granting space to the ongoing conceptual work the field requires and the novel applied contributions to which it ultimately

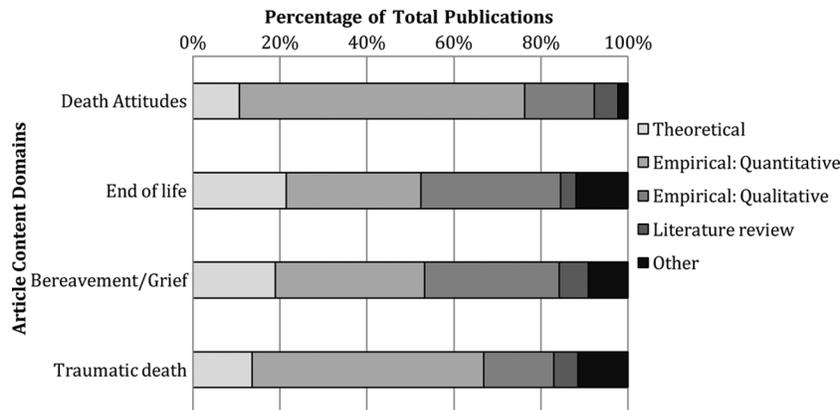


FIGURE 6 Article type as a percentage of total publications within article content domains.

aspires. Equally impressive are publication trends that document the increasing feminization of the field and the substantial growth in co-authorship networks, both within the United States and abroad. As *Death Studies* prepares to move into its fifth decade of publication, it is clear that it has done much to spearhead the international, interdisciplinary specialty of thanatology, a living tribute to the pioneering contributions of its founding editor.

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