Call for Abstracts

Annual Conference of the
THANATOLOGICAL WORKING GROUP
within the German Sociological Association

Gender, Diversity and Death

University of Applied Sciences, Emden/Leer • 26./27. Feb. 2027

Organized by Thorsten Benkel • Ekkehard Coenen • Nicole Kirchhoff

Are we all equal in death? There is hardly a certainty that seems more self-evident – but upon closer examination, it does not readily hold up.

A look at both history and the present reveals that death does not simply negate social differences. Practices surrounding dying, mourning and burial rituals, forms of remembrance and the representation of the deceased are shaped by notions of gender, origin, age, status, religion and other associations. In this context, identities can be altered, overwritten, or erased. The succinct addition to an inscription, frequently found on old cemeteries in Germany, says: »Here rest … and his wife«. It serves as a laconic example of this assertion: Who was this deceased wife – and what remains of her when her identity is retroactively reduced to a relational position?

To take this a step further: Does a corpse have a gender? The dead body is not merely a biological remnant. It continues to bear meaning. In autopsies and other medical-anatomical practices, material variables come to the fore. These are variables that may have been of little relevance to the person during lifetime yet seem to generate ›meaning‹ even after death. The fact that bodies are measured, compared, and categorized, and that identities are thereby solidified, is, in life as in death, thoroughly overwhelming and a practice of power.

Not only the corpse, but death itself can be gendered. From a cultural-historical perspective, personifications of death have by no means always taken the form of a genderless skeleton; and even this is often interpreted as the male »Grim Reaper«. Death appears as a man, a woman, an abstract figure, a lover, a beloved, an angel, a specter, always depending on the social context.

Based on these observations, a perspective on diversity and its connection to the end-of-life emerges. In this context, it is not only the category of gender that is notable, but also class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, religious affiliation, disability, family structure, migration experiences and other forms of identity. An intersectional perspective examines how these dimensions interact and reinforce or contradict each other. Concerning dying, death, and grief, corresponding effects are increasingly evident. It can be assumed that the growing social awareness of social inequality, marginalization, and exclusion, as well as of plurality and empowerment, exerts a significant influence on how people approach and interpret death.

The conference aims to explore these themes. It will examine how differences are established, perpetuated, made visible or erased at the end of life and even beyond death. We welcome theoretical, empirical, methodological and historical contributions in German or English. Relevant disciplines include sociology, gender and queer studies, cultural and social anthropology, history, medicine, and health sciences.

If interested, please submit an abstract of approximately one page (including biographical information) by **November 15, 2026** to all three of the following email addresses:

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We will provide prompt feedback. There are no conference fees. The event will be held on site in Emden. Unfortunately, we are not able to cover expenses. Conference papers will be published in the working group's journal, the *Annual Review of Death and Society* (peer reviewed and published by Beltz-Juventa in both print and open access). For more information, please visit **www.thanatologie.eu**.