

Slide 1

1495 UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN CELEBRATING 525 YEARS 1495 – 2020

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

ABERDEEN 2040

Limits and numbers
The implications of using numbers in restrictions on funeral practice

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for the Care in Funerals team

DDD15
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Introduction:

This paper considers how limits are posed and the consequent implications on how they are experienced. Restrictions have characterized the COVID-19 pandemic generally, and funeral practices have been limited in various ways. I will draw on illustrative examples from the ongoing Care in Funerals project, for examining how people experience restrictions in the practice of funerals focusing in particular on the use of numbers for setting limits.

In this presentation I will start by showing a few examples from fieldwork both from interviews and from artefact-news, of how numbers have been used highlighting their implications. I will then give a theoretical framework drawing in particular from Gregory Bateson and his notion of double bind, which might help us understand and clarify about the use of numbers and their context. In the end I will show a few creative examples and open questions about how limits might be set and presented differently.

This presentation is the beginning of a reflection on several notions around subjectivity, freedom and grief which deserve deepening and further exploration.

Fieldwork

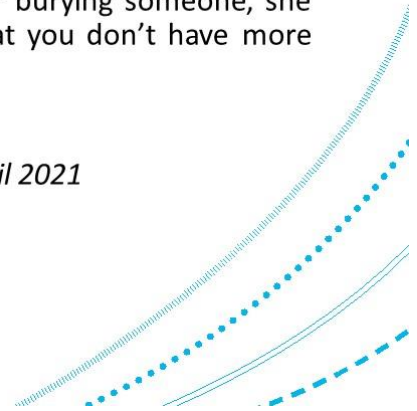
Example from interview:



A celebrant working in Scotland refers that in October 2020, the limit of people attending a funeral at the graveside has been set up by the local Council to 20 and the time frame for the ceremony to 15 minutes. She confessed that she found these limits intolerable. When asked how long it takes for burying someone, she said that the time is around 15 minutes, but knowing that you don't have more than that makes it unacceptable.

Care in Funeral project - Celebrant (C001) interview - 14 April 2021

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Fieldwork

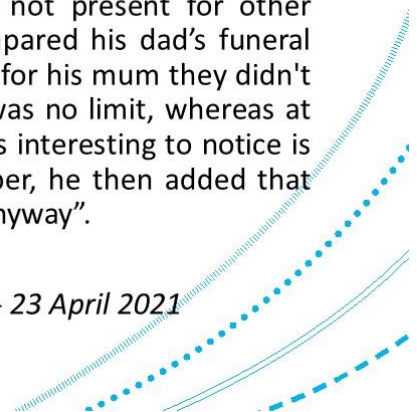
Example from interview:



A bereaved person talking about his dad's funeral, points out that only 20 people were allowed at the funeral. He commented that the decision about who could go, has been the most difficult to take. He considered how unfair this was given that rules were continuously changing and such limits were not present for other congregation of people such as football matches. He compared his dad's funeral with his mum's (which happened before Covid) saying that for his mum they didn't need to choose who was coming to the funeral as there was no limit, whereas at his dad's choosing 20 people caused a lot of stress. What is interesting to notice is that when he said that 20 people are really a small number, he then added that "even with more people allowed it would have been hard anyway".

Care in Funeral project – Bereaved person (B007) interview - 23 April 2021

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Fieldwork

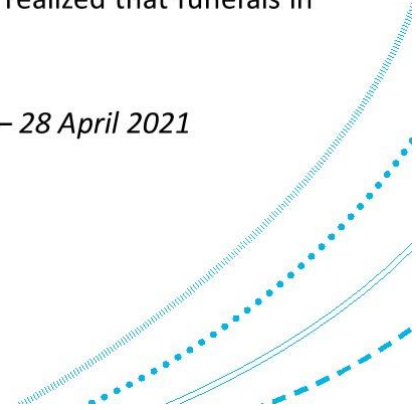
Example from interview:



A bereaved person has been told that the service at crematorium will be just 30 minutes long which is what 3 songs and a poem will take. After the ceremony she went back into the hall where the funeral took place and saw people frantically cleaning all the seats with pop music playing. She suddenly realized that funerals in this time are done one after the other like a conveyor belt.

Care in Funeral project – Bereaved person (B009) interview – 28 April 2021

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Slide 5 Fieldwork: Example from news

Fieldwork

Example from news:



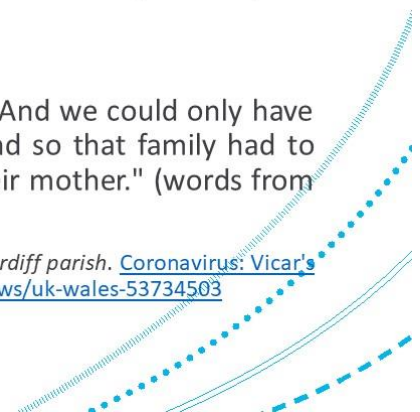
"If you can only invite 10 people, which 10 do you invite? If you're a family of 14, how do you pick the 10?", "I feel like it wasn't a proper funeral, it felt incomplete".

BBC news - 28 June 2020. *Coronavirus: How funerals under lockdown have 'felt incomplete'*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-52919218>

"I had one funeral and the lady who died had 12 children. And we could only have 10 of them at the funeral, because that was the rules. And so that family had to decide which two were not going to go say goodbye to their mother." (words from the canon of Cardiff parish)

BBC news – 16 August 2020. *Coronavirus: Vicar's story of shock and grief in Cardiff parish*. [Coronavirus: Vicar's story of shock and grief in Cardiff parish - BBC News https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-53734503](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-53734503)

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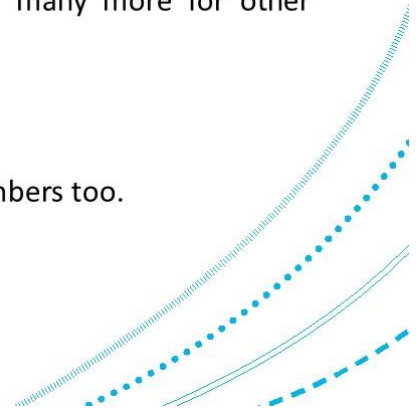
Slide 6

Implication of using numbers (in funeral practice) on people



- Imposition of freedom as choice
- Funerals needs to be “on invitation”.
- Issues of unfairness: why 20 people at a funeral and many more for other events?
- Funerals perceived as conveyor belt
- Inequality in treating families.
- Using numbers to put limits risks turning people into numbers too.

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Slide 7 Initial reflection on freedom and subjectivity

Initial reflection on freedom and subjectivity

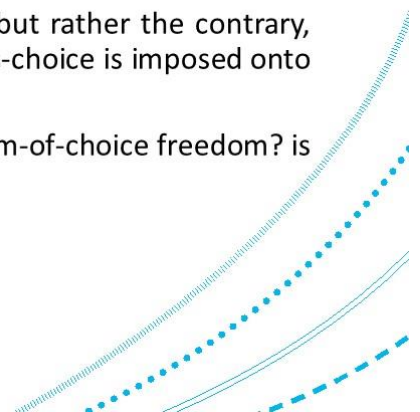


The limit in number of attendees for each funeral demands the bereaved person to become the subject who makes a choice on the people to invite. This subject is now *free-to-choose* who can attend.

The restrictions didn't cause any deprivation of freedom, but rather the contrary, they create a context where a particular kind of freedom-as-choice is imposed onto the individual.

At this point one might dare asking the questions, is freedom-of-choice freedom? is the individual free from freedom-of-choice?

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The limit in number of attendees for each funeral demands the bereaved person to become the subject who makes a choice on the people to invite. This subject is now *free-to-choose* who can attend. Before the existence of the contemporary limitations, funerals were actually free to attend, now they have become on invitation. This recent change is transforming completely funerals' structure and the way they are experienced. It is worth exploring its effect and monitoring a possible shift from a social

ritual of shared and known practices to a trend of commodified service where the bereaved can choose and personalize the funeral according to their own preferences.

What is interesting to notice is that before these restrictions came into place, the problem of choosing how many people would attend the funeral was not at stake and therefore there was no need of any freedom to make that choice. In this sense the restrictions didn't cause any deprivation of freedom as it would appear at a first impression. But rather the contrary, they create a context where a particular kind of freedom as choice is imposed onto the individual. At this point one might dare asking the questions, is freedom-of-choice freedom? is the individual free from freedom-of-choice? The context of limitations offered by funeral practice is precious in this sense because it might offer a new space where to explore what freedom might be beyond notions of free choice and independence.

Slide 8: the question making us curious

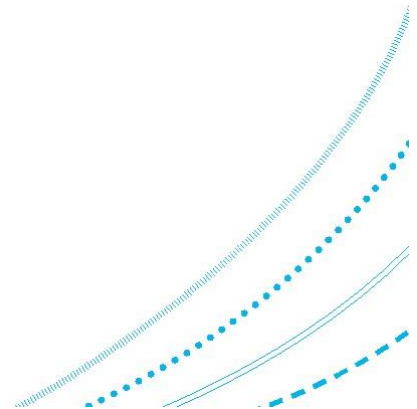
The question making us curious



One could consider intolerable to accept the limit of 20 attendees at the funeral and at the same time admit that for that same funeral there might be no more than 20 people.

Why is that?

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After having shown some of the implications of using numbers, I would like to share with you what actually attracted me to focus on the topic of numbers. This is actually a question that I am now sharing with our team and we are all exploring.

In our current work with interviews and analysis, we noticed how there have been several people saying for example that the limit of attendees of 20 was intolerable. But when asked how many people would come to the funeral if there were no limitations, they would reply saying "I don't know, probably around 20". What makes us curious is that one could consider intolerable to accept the limit of 20 attendees at the funeral and at the same time admit that for that same funeral there might be no more than 20 people. Why is that?

Our sense is that exploring this question might help us understand more about how people grieve and contribute to the contemporary debate on the notion of grief.

However, it remains beyond the intention of this presentation to offer conclusions on this central topic.

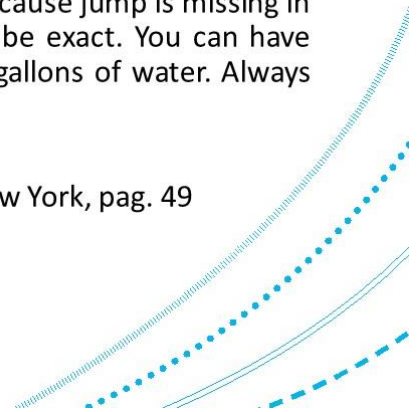
On Limits and Numbers



Numbers are the product of counting. Quantities are the product of measurement. This means that numbers can conceivably be accurate because there is a discontinuity between each integer and the next. Between two and three, there is a jump. In the case of quantity, there is no such jump; and because jump is missing in the world of quantity, it is impossible for any quantity to be exact. You can have exactly three tomatoes. You can never have exactly three gallons of water. Always quantity is approximate.

Bateson G. 1979, *Mind and nature*, E.P. Dutton, New York, pag. 49

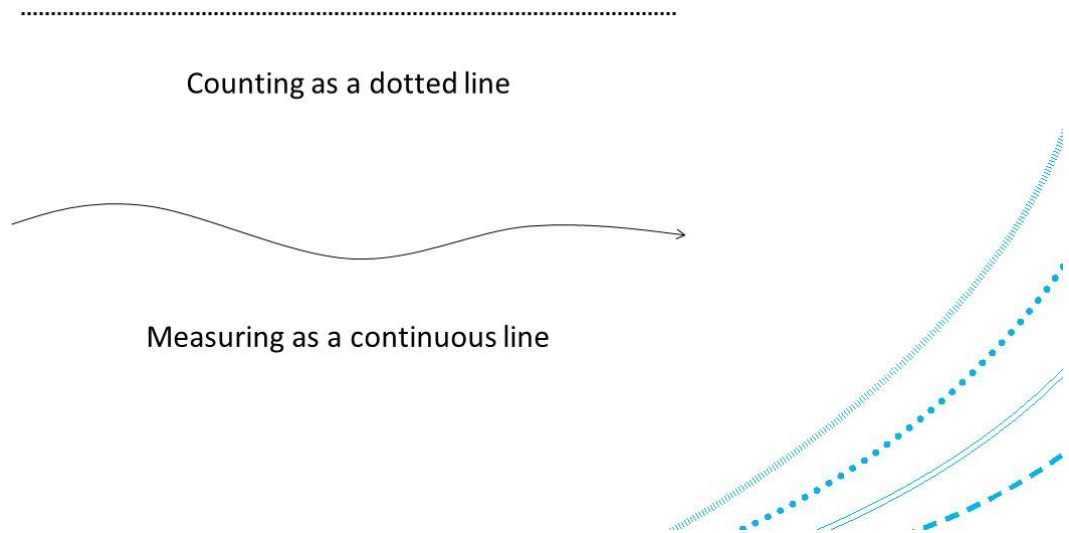
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I would like just to propose a path for exploring that question starting from a few ideas by anthropologist Gregory Bateson. He points out that:

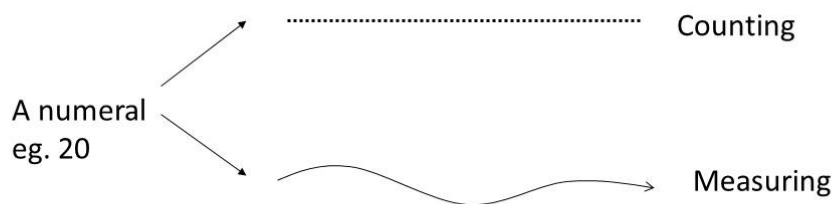
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On Limits and Numbers



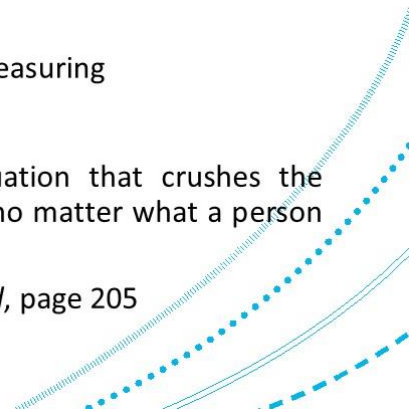
Then counting and measuring are, according to Bateson two very different processes. Counting implies a jump as Bateson reminds us. It is a discontinuous process producing numbers that are discrete entities, accurate and exact. We could imagine it as a dotted line. Measuring is very different. It implies continuity rather than discontinuity. In its process there can't be any jump and therefore it can't be exact but approximate. It can be imagined as a continuous line.

A double bind



A double bind is a paradoxical and contradictory situation that crushes the individual between irreconcilable demands and in which no matter what a person does, he "can't win".

Bateson G. 1987. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, page 205



In his book *Mind and Nature*, Bateson warns us to be alert of the bad habit of using numerals as names both for quantities and for numbers (Bateson G. 1979, *Mind and nature*, E.P. Dutton, New York, pag. 206). From this perspective, the numeral used to set up the limit can be confusing because it alludes simultaneously to the two different processes of counting and measuring. The individual at this point might be caught in what Bateson calls a double bind, a paradoxical and contradictory situation that crushes the individual between irreconcilable demands and in which no matter what a person does, he “can’t win” (Bateson 1987: 205).

In 1956 Bateson and others published ‘Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia’ and highlighted the notion of double bind recognising them in the often problematic relationship between mother and child, which can cause schizophrenia in the child. As Bateson explained, double binds arise because the communication is not clear and at the same time there is a lack of capacity to discriminate between messages which belong to different logical types, so that the individual finds themselves in loops causing disorientation, panic and rage (Bateson 1987: 205).

In our context of funeral practice, similar feelings have been registered and found expression in the preoccupation of not having accomplished a proper funeral, perceiving the funeral as incomplete and oneself in some sort of emotional limbo.

So far it seems that what this suggests is to emphasize the critical impact of the use of numbers on people. On the contrary I would like to clarify that my intention is not to blame numbers and therefore to propose of not using them as a direct and easy solution to solve the problem of distress. What I am suggesting is actually to focus on the context where numbers are used.

As Bateson recognised, double binds are not only a source of suffering but also the potential for promoting learning. In fact he argues that double binds are ambiguous and that they can produce either suffering or enlightenment. The difference between these opposite results depends on the context.

Slide 12-16: Constraints and creativity

From this last perspective creative solutions are already happening and we are witnessing them in our project. Here below some of them:

Constraints and creativity



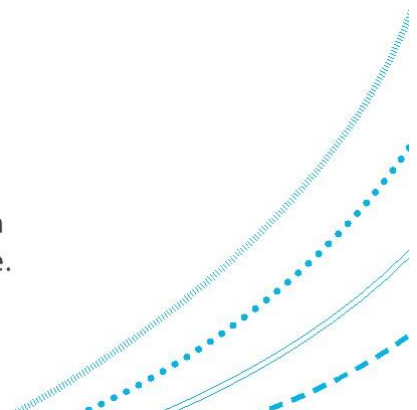
Drive-in funeral

A man planned his own drive-in funeral so that more than 100 of his closest friends and family could celebrate his life.

Suffolk farmer honoured at drive-in funeral he planned - 28 october 2020
[Covid: Suffolk farmer honoured at drive-in funeral he planned - BBC News](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-suffolk-54601549)
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Constraints and creativity



Shoreline to Shoreline

An example of a work of art born out of the restrictions

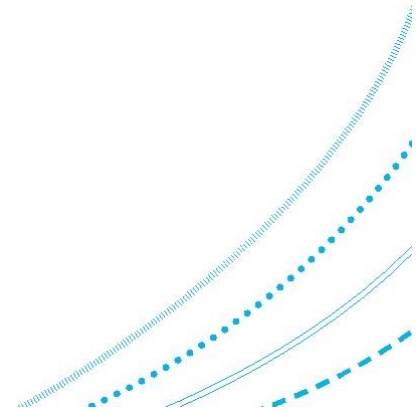
www.shorelinetoshoreline.com

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Shoreline to Shoreline. An example of a work of art born out of the restrictions.

www.shorelinetoshoreline.com

Shoreline to Shoreline. This public art event invited individuals, friends and families to travel to the water's edge on the same day; to stand on a beach or a rocky shoreline as the sea receded to the horizon to remember and mark or memorialise loss.



Constraints and creativity

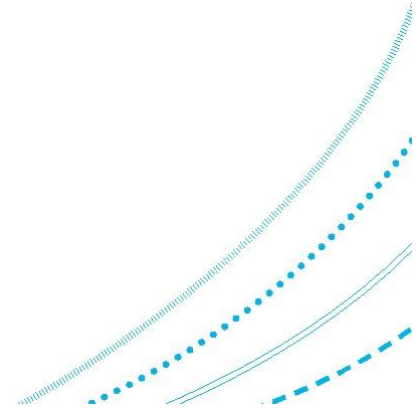


Reviving old tradition

Standing, waiting and bowing at the hearse

Call to revive funeral tradition during coronavirus lockdown - 22 april 2020
[Call to revive funeral tradition during coronavirus lockdown - BBC News](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-52370374)
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Reviving old tradition: standing, waiting and bowing at the hearse.

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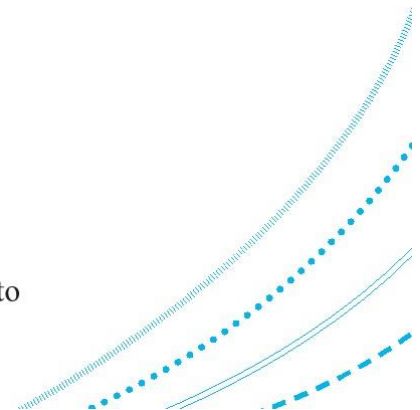
Constraints and creativity



Buffering from the impact/pressure

As a basketball player, celebrants and funeral directors act to allow a space-time of care for funerals

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Buffering from the impact/pressure of the restrictions

As a basketball player, Celebrants and Funeral directors act to allow a space-time of care for funerals. E.g. A celebrant (C004 interview – 24 June 2021) emphasizes the importance of not rushing. In the context of time limits on services (especially when crematoria slots were shortened) he takes responsibility for keeping to time and buffers the family from the impact/pressure of the restrictions

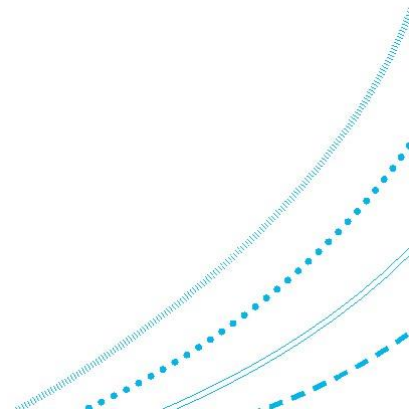
Constraints and creativity



Facing limits make us talk about death more freely
and break taboos as a side effect.

Covid is making us talk about death - 26 september 2020
[Covid is making us talk about death, says funeral planner - BBC News](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-54130747)
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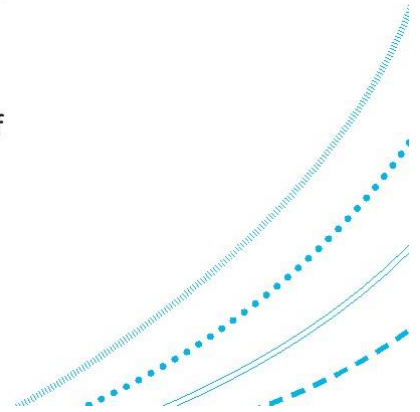
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Opening questions for nurturing a ground of care



- Can we find ways of posing limits which are coherent with the way one experiences the loss of a loved one and lives their grief?
- Can we ask the question about limits from the inside of the process of grieving?

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In conclusion I would like to open a few questions which might orient us in future policy making and setting up limits. The questions are: can we find ways of posing limits which are coherent with the way one experiences the loss of a loved one and lives their grief? Can we ask the question about limits from the inside of the process of grieving?

These questions might help to set up a context where the disorienting double binds could be turned into a more beneficial constraint enabling creative solutions. What is suggested is indeed not to respond with some direct or immediate ideas on how to pose limits differently in funeral practice. It is actually the attempt of framing the context where those limits might emerge in a different way. It is nurturing a ground of care.