

Expansion of the Sociology of Death: Toward a Representational Study of Death

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This paper aims to present a direction to extend the area of “sociology of death,” which has been in the process of being established as a sociological field in recent years in Japan. Until now, the sociology of death has largely been divided into three areas, “interaction with the patient surrounding death,” “bereavement,” and “narratives about death.” However, although these topics cover “living next to death” and “dying,” they do not approach “death” itself. In addition, research has only been conducted using case studies, which are not able to capture enough information about the subject of death.

Death is an object that can be talked about with few constraints because, for example, it cannot have been experienced by anyone alive. When sociologists target death, we hope to understand the mechanism behind what human beings talk about as well as what is being constructed socially. These are broad themes that have been pursued in sociology since it was established as a field. Thus, the sociology of death needs to be expanded to an area that challenges us with more general questions.

In this paper, in moving toward such a direction for studying death, we consider death as a social representation relying on social representational theory. We then refer to Mary Bradbury’s argument to explore its concrete research method.

Bradbury’s research has found three levels for the concrete progress of representational research: “fact - representation dimension,” “dimension of representation itself,” and “representation - action Dimension.” Each of these can be used to help us consider the possibility of a representational research of death.

By developing and expanding the sociology of death in such a direction, death will become an important subject that can elucidate the mechanisms of our semantic world. In addition, the sociology of death can expand an area for exploring social facts about our representations and meanings.