Roadside memorial policies in the United States

GEORGE E. DICKINSON & HEATH C. HOFFMANN
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, USA

ABSTRACT Roadside memorials in memory of a fatality dot the landscape of the nation’s highways. The appearance of memorials varies as much as the policies and practices states employ to manage them. The purpose of this research is to ascertain whether or not the states of the US have policies regarding roadside memorials and, if so, what the policies are. A postal questionnaire survey was sent to the director of the Department of Transportation in each of the 50 states of the US. Only the state of Alaska did not respond. Twenty-three states have policies regarding roadside memorials; some states’ policies are more specific than others. Though sometimes controversial, roadside memorials typically do not bring complaints, yet most states remove the memorial if complaints occur. Overall, the nation’s states are sensitive to the role roadside memorials play in expressing survivors’ grief, balancing those needs with any safety hazards that memorials may pose.

KEYWORDS: roadside memorials; policies; green memorials; grief; public memorials

Introduction

As one drives across the United States, it is not unusual to see a roadside memorial such as a cross, an official state sign, or some other secular reminder that death occurred on or near that spot. Roadside memorials often consist of a plaque with the name of the deceased, the date of birth and death, and sometimes messages from the deceased’s close friends or family. The memorial may be decorated with flowers, a teddy bear, a football jersey, a toy, photograph, or some other personal item of the deceased person. Memorial decorations may also change with anniversaries and holidays. The practice of erecting a marker or placing a grave along roadways can be traced back to prehistoric traders of amber and flint in Central Europe who buried their dead along trailways (Clark & Cheshire, 2004). Various roadside cross memorials to mark an accident or crime scene stand throughout England, dating from 1290 to the present (Everett, 2002). In the United States, the phenomenon of roadside memorialisation is often considered to have originated in the Southwest reflecting Hispanic customs and the influence of Catholicism after the arrival of Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century (Petersson, 2009). The religious symbols of a cross mark the sites as ‘sacred’, or ‘micro sacred sites’, as Weisser (2004) notes, and have been the predominant...
structure chosen for memorials (Collins & Rhine, 2003). The small white crosses were used to mark the rest areas for funeral procession pallbearers travelling by foot from the church to the graveyard, thus in this sense was influenced by religion. These sanctified holy rest areas called Descansos (Spanish for ‘resting place’) have since evolved into markers of the location of traffic fatalities (Nance, 2001).

Despite the deep historical roots of roadside memorials, it has only been within the last 15 years that roadside memorials have become a common practice in Australia, Central America, Japan, New Zealand, North America, Northern and Southern Europe, and South America (Churchill & Tay, 2008; Clark & Cheshire, 2004; Clark & Fransmann, 2002; Petersson, 2009). Today’s commemorative sites represent a shift in the way that western societies regard death, funerals, and mourning rituals; death-negating practices seem to gradually give way to greater expressiveness in public mourning (Klaassens, Groote, & Huigen, 2009). Memorials typically appear when there has been a sudden and violent death of a younger person. Such a memorial placed by an accident site could enable a connection between the deceased’s personal life and the impersonal site, reinforcing it as a memorial space (Petersson, 2005). Memorials serve as a means of engaging the issue of death and afterlife. Folklorist George Monger (1997, p. 114) suggested two primary reasons for roadside memorials, memorialisation and warning, describing the action of maintaining the site of the fatality as a ‘private and individual pilgrimage’. Everett (2002) observed that roadside memorials symbolically represent on-going grief work. For example, as a relative or friend passes the memorial, there is the reminder of the life, and death, of that person. Roadside memorials differ from cemeteries where death is kept ‘in order’ (Petersson, 2005). Yet, a cemetery is not where individuals previously lived. Petersson observed that roadside memorials may be seen as an additional way of expressing the deceased person’s identity and social person rather than as a replacement for the grave lot in the cemetery. A roadside marker located ‘outside’ the cemetery may allow the deceased to continue to exist in the world of the living. In this sense, as cultural geographers Kate Hartig and Kevin Dunn (1998) proposed, roadside memorials may be filling a gap in the trend towards gardens of remembrance and plaque-gardens, leaving the survivors with no personalised space to visit.

In America, Clark and Cheshire (2004) show that the Department of Transportation (DOT) in several states used crosses in the mid-twentieth century to indicate dangerous stretches of road where previous fatalities had occurred. These crosses were used to warn drivers, not to commemorate a lost life, and often included warnings such as ‘Drive slow, one killed’ (Clark & Cheshire, 2004). To this day, many states sponsor programmes that allow the deceased’s name to be placed along the highway as part of an Adopt-A-Highway programme or, in the case of drinking and driving-related fatalities, special signs are erected with the victim’s name placed underneath a message like, ‘Please Don’t Drink and Drive. In memory of . . .’ However, these memorials usually appear in the form of large, rectangular highway signs, not crosses, and thus usually attract little
controversy. Yet the placement of crosses on public property has been controversial in a number of American states. For example, the Utah Highway Patrol Association erected a separate 12-foot cross for each of 14 fallen Utah patrolmen. The crosses were placed on public property and included a plaque describing the life of the deceased. In 2005, American Atheists, Inc., a group that advocates for the separation of church and state, sued the state of Utah in federal court for allowing the group to post the memorial crosses on public land, arguing that the cross is a religious symbol. In *American Atheists, Inc. v. Duncan*, the federal District Court of Utah sided with the defendants, asserting that the cross is not exclusively a religious symbol but is also a secular representation of death and burial (Roberts & Shurtleff, 2006). American Atheists, Inc. appealed to the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver, Colorado, where the appeal was heard on 10 March 2009. A decision is pending and has implications for similar memorials in the states of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma (Coakley, 2009).

The use of the cross to memorialise roadside fatalities is only one of the concerns to emerge from the proliferation of roadside memorials across America’s roads and highways. In recent years, roadside memorials have been banned by states, counties, and city governments because they may constitute a safety hazard to maintenance crews and drivers passing the memorial (Coakley, 2009; Madigan, 2003; Ross, 1998). This is somewhat ironic since, as noted above, roadside markers were used by several states in the 1940s and 1950s to warn of dangerous roadways where drivers had previously died. In addition to safety concerns, some individuals oppose roadside memorials because they are ‘macabre eyesores’ (Urbina, 2006) that serve as unwanted reminders of tragic loss (Grabbe, 2008), which is why some states require family approval before friends can erect a memorial for the deceased (Ross, 1998). Memorials are often removed by state personnel as a matter of policy or by citizens who are offended by a cross or the reminder of death. The desecration and/or unauthorised removal of roadside memorials spurred the New Mexico state legislature to pass legislation in 2007 making it a misdemeanor to destroy a memorial that has been placed in the public right-of-way in memory of victims of fatal traffic accidents (New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee, 2007).

As is evident in the above discussion, roadside memorials carry tremendous diversity in style and origin. There are the roadside memorials created by the friends and family members of the deceased which has been the dominant focus of the published literature to date. However, there are also state-sanctioned memorials created by the state as part of Adopt-A-Highway or drinking and driving awareness programmes which conform to state regulations in terms of design, height, and location. For both lay and state-sanctioned memorials, the 50 American states have apparently employed an inconsistent patchwork of policies and practices that control how state personnel handle roadside memorials. US Federal laws prohibit placement of anything along interstate highways except highway-related signs and devices, yet it is state maintenance crews that are responsible for managing America’s highways. Despite prohibitions of and
opposition to roadside memorials in jurisdictions throughout America, these
memorials proliferate. Thus, as Ross (1998, p. 50) notes, ‘in probably no other
area of public life does public practice diverge so dramatically from official policy’
as is the case with roadside memorials. Having the right memorial policy is
important for each state because transportation agencies need to balance safety
and maintenance considerations with the needs of the public to grieve for the loss
of their significant other (Tay, 2009). So, while lay and/or state-sanctioned
roadside memorials can be found in all 50 states, as we report below, scholarship
on American roadside memorials has been limited to county (Barrera, 1991;
Zimmerman, 1995) or state-level (Everett, 2002; Reid & Reid, 2001) analyses that
focus primarily on the appearance, symbolic meaning, and/or purpose of
memorials. Any discussion of state policies toward those memorials has been
secondary. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to ascertain the current
status and content of roadside memorial policies in the 50 states in the US.

Methodology

Through the Internet, we obtained the mailing addresses of the Director of the
Department of Transport (DOT) in each of the 50 states. A survey, accompanied
by a cover letter and self-addressed stamped envelope, was mailed on 23 June
2008 to all 50 DOT Directors. We then twice mailed follow-up reminders to the
states that had yet to respond. Several respondents requested and completed an
electronic version of the survey, an option made available to all participants. We
received completed surveys from 47 of the 50 states. Massachusetts returned a
letter and Montana returned a description of its policy but did not complete any
questions on the survey. The respondent from Massachusetts reported that the
state has no formal policy regarding roadside memorials. With safety their primary
concern, Massachusetts officials were working on a policy but the current practice
allows ‘small, temporary, unobtrusive memorials to remain, as long as they do not
present a public safety hazard . . . [and] maintenance forces have been instructed
to remove any permanent or hazardous memorials in the course of general
highway maintenance activity’. Montana endorses the American Legion’s High-
way Fatality Marker Program, but did not respond about how the state manages
private memorials not installed through the Fatality Marker Program. Using the
information provided in those materials, we were able to code parts of a survey for
both states.

Alaska was the only state not to respond after three surveys were mailed to that
state’s transportation department. After consulting Alaska’s website, we were able
to identify some details regarding its roadside memorial policy (Alaska
Department of Transportation, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Since Alaska’s policy went
into effect in 2003 and was valid at the time data were collected for this study, we
have included Alaska in the results presented below.

We sought to determine whether states had a formal policy for roadside
memorials and, if they did, what that policy entailed, including the following
items:
• Are memorial markers required to be uniform in terms of size dimensions, design and/or materials (e.g., aluminium)?
• How do family members and friends apply for the erection of a memorial?
• Are state-sanctioned memorials limited to fatalities related to driving under the influence of alcohol and other drugs?
• What guidelines exist for the placement of state-sanctioned and private markers and are they allowed to face traffic?
• Does the state keep a record of the names of those memorialised?
• Is there a specific time limit for how long the roadside memorials can remain standing?
• What percent of roadside memorials contain religious symbols?
• What action does the state take if memorials fall into disrepair, if complaints about specific memorials are received, and/or if memorials are erected in defiance of the law?
• Does the DOT maintain an annual budget for the erection and maintenance of memorials?
• Do counties, cities, and other jurisdictions within the state have their own regulations governing roadside memorials?
• Are ‘green’ or natural memorials available (e.g., planting a tree in honour of the deceased)?

Findings

In this section, we summarise the aggregate findings from our survey, highlighting examples from states to illustrate important aspects of states’ roadside memorial policies.

States with roadside memorial policies

Twenty-three states (46%) adopted a policy regarding the placement of roadside memorials along state highways. Two other states (Iowa and Minnesota) reported not having a policy but included with their returned survey a ‘statement’ or ‘guidelines’ that spelled out how private memorials would be handled in the absence of state legislation. The Montana DOT also reported not having a roadside memorial policy. However, Montana formally recognises the Montana American Legion Highway Fatality Marker Program which, since 1953, places a white cross at the site of a fatal traffic accident (see Figure 1). Thus, we include Montana among those states with a formal roadside memorial policy.

Five of those states with a policy also said that ‘counties, cities, or precincts’ in their state have their own regulations regarding roadside memorials and four additional states without an official state policy indicate that counties, cities, or other jurisdictions have their own policies. Twenty-seven states report no existing policies at the county or city level and the remaining 14 states either did not respond or did not know whether policies existed at the local level. A number of respondents indicated that the DOT was also responsible for county roads
throughout the state, suggesting a broader reach of the state’s roadside memorial policy. We did not specifically ask respondents if the DOT was responsible for county roads so we cannot say how widespread the practice is.

Some states, such as Illinois and Washington, have a Driving Under the Influence (DUI) Memorial Sign Program. For example, a sign may read ‘Please Don’t Drink and Drive’ which is posted ‘In Memory of’ the deceased (see Figure 1). At least five states have Adopt-A-Highway (AAH) programmes for volunteer participation in roadside litter removal along designated roads. These AAH groups are recognised with a sign, which in some cases acknowledges the deceased person for the stretch of road that has been adopted.

In South Dakota, the DOT erects a sign near the right-of-way adjacent to where a fatal crash occurred. The sign will include words like ‘X Marks the Spot—Why Die? Drive Safely’ or ‘X Marks the Spot—Think! Drive Safely’ (see Figure 1). These signs are placed at the scene of the fatality unless opposed by the family of the deceased. Ten states’ policies require that the memorials be erected by the state, with an average cost of US$414 per memorial. When asked if the state charges the family/friends for the memorial erection, eight states answered in the affirmative, with an average charge of US$419.

Of the 23 states with a formal policy for roadside memorials, 11 states (48%) require that roadside memorials be applied for by submitting a paper application
and two states accept paper applications or an on-line electronic application. Respondents in three other states accept written requests from family members (e.g., paper letters or e-mails) but have no formal application for roadside memorials. While Washington State has a formal paper application process, the DOT representative who completed this survey reports that the DOT receives roadside memorial referrals from Mothers Against Drunk Driving and county level DUI Victim Information Panels. Eleven states’ (48%) policies require that friends who wish to erect a memorial for the deceased must first obtain permission from the deceased’s family. Six states (26%) permit memorials for drinking and driving fatalities only, whereas 14 states (61%) allow memorials for all highway fatalities.

In terms of location, 17 of the states with a policy (74%) require memorials to be placed in the right-of-way, whereas three states require placement on the ‘edge of the right-of-way but not on it.’ Eleven states require that the memorial face oncoming highway traffic. Other states, such as Texas, specifically place the markers so that they cannot be read by drivers passing by, except in special cases designated by the Texas Legislature. Instead, memorials erected by the Texas DOT are placed in rest areas or turnouts and are designed to be read by individuals on foot.

A particular size dimension must be adhered to in 15 states (65%), with variations ranging from a 15-inch round sign to 60” × 48” rectangular signs. Fifteen states (65%) require that memorials be made of specific materials (e.g., aluminium, wood, or natural vegetation), whereas six states (26%) do not specify the materials (the remaining states with a policy reported that this question was not applicable to their policy). Asked whether or not the states keep a record of the name(s) of the individual(s) honoured by the memorial, 14 states (70%) keep such records and five states (25%) do not.

Thirteen states (62%) have a particular time limit as to how long a memorial can stay up. The time limit ranged from 30 days to 10 years with 4.5 years being the average time limit for respondents who reported this information. Other states permit memorial signs to remain standing ‘until sign is faded’, ‘deteriorated’, or for the ‘life of sign’. Six states (29%) report having no time limit for roadside memorials but, as the data below suggest, many of these states would remove the signs if they fell into disrepair or otherwise posed a safety hazard for maintenance crews and/or drivers.

**States with and without roadside memorial policies**

None of the states allocates specific funds in their annual DOT budget for the erection, maintenance, and/or removal of memorials: managing roadside memorials is a cost that is absorbed by the general DOT budget. When asked what action the DOT takes if roadside memorials fall into disrepair, 29 respondents (63%) said they remove it and five states (11%) leave the memorial. Seven respondents report that all private memorials are removed regardless of their condition. This was not a question specifically asked in our survey but this
response was usually included in the ‘other’ response category. Respondents reported a range of ‘other’ actions taken against memorials in disrepair including removing the memorial ‘with [the] next work activity in the area’, making an ‘attempt to contact the family’, or ‘remove [the memorial] within 30 days after notification of family’. These quotes generally reflect a common theme among respondents in our survey who explicitly acknowledged trying to balance safety concerns while simultaneously respecting a family’s need to grieve for the loved one. This is an important finding given that 70% of respondents say roadside memorials are considered a safety hazard in their state (30% said memorials were not a safety hazard).

When asked whether the DOT receives complaints about roadside memorials, regardless of whether the memorials have been placed legally, or not, the majority of respondents indicated receiving complaints rarely (45%) or occasionally (41%). Four states (9%) report never receiving complaints and only Tennessee reports receiving frequent complaints. After receiving a complaint, 91% of the respondents said the DOT removes the memorial in response to the complaint and 9% leave the memorial as is. Of those states that remove the memorial following a complaint, 7% said that they destroy the memorial and 76% try to return it to the person who erected it. The remaining respondents either said the question was not applicable to their state (7%) or marked ‘other’ (10%), reporting a range of responses including storing the memorial and returning it to the person who erected it, or ‘work with [the] person who erected it and try to get it relocated or removed’. Vandalism of roadside memorials is one means by which memorials would become unsightly and require DOT action. However, only Maryland reported that vandalism of roadside memorials was a problem.

A number of states have adopted ‘green memorials’ where, instead of erecting metal or concrete memorials, trees, bushes, and/or gardens are planted to memorialise the site of the deceased. Green memorials were reported by 11 states (24%) where the DOT allows a tree to be planted near where a highway fatality occurred. Delaware was the first state to build a memorial garden dedicated to those who lost their lives in all types of traffic fatalities. The garden was created specifically to provide a safe, legal alternative for those families and friends who wish to place a roadside memorial. Similarly, Maryland has started a Living Memorial Program in which a grove of trees will be planted each year to memorialise the individuals killed in highway automobile accidents during the year. The Maryland programme includes a dedication ceremony in honour of the previous year’s victims. Tennessee had not yet developed a ‘green’ memorial programme but that state’s DOT representative reported that they are ‘kicking off a tree planting programme this fall to try and cut back on roadside memorials’.

We asked respondents to estimate the percentage of roadside memorials in their respective states that contained religious symbols or secular content. Thirty-seven states answered this question, each indicating that religious memorials (e.g., the cross) were more common than secular memorials, which is consistent with previous research in other countries (see Clark & Cheshire, 2004). Overall,
respondents estimated that 73% of memorials contained religious symbols and 27% were secular.

States where roadside memorials are not legal

We asked respondents what the DOT does if roadside memorials are posted in defiance of the state’s law and/or the DOT policy. Only Nebraska reported doing nothing. Twenty-seven states take down illegal memorials if they pose a safety hazard and 15 states report removing memorials if they interfere with the work of road maintenance crews (e.g., mowers). Three states take down illegal memorials only if they are considered an eyesore and eight states always remove illegal memorials. Respondents offered additional details to explain their state’s response to illegal memorials which include removing the memorial ‘after a 10–14 day grieving period’, ‘remove them in two months or so’, and/or ‘remove only if severely damaged or in disrepair’. Several states gave more than one response to this query, thus the total number of responses exceeds the number of states where roadside memorials are not legal.

Discussion

Roadside memorials overall are relatively new to the scene on US highways, yet they do not seem to be going away. These memorials may serve as a reminder of the deceased individual each time a family member or friend passes by. To others, it may be a reminder that they do not wish to encounter on a regular basis. The construction of memorials may fit within a larger context of decreasing interest in church-based rituals and an increasing tendency to view spiritual authority resting with the individual conscience (Clark & Franzmann, 2002). Individuals may feel that they have the right to establish roadside memorials which function outside of official burial grounds. Such roadside markers offer a meeting place for communication, remembrance, and reflection (Everett, 2002).

In addition to serving as an enhancement to coping with grief for some individuals, roadside memorials are beginning to be viewed as serving a range of other positive functions. First, state-sponsored drinking and driving memorials may be a possible deterrent against drinking and driving as the deceased’s name is placed beneath a sign that warns drivers not to drink and drive. Similarly, AAH programmes, where the victim’s name appears on an official state sign, allow family members to take responsibility for picking up litter along a mile stretch of a highway which helps to maintain the cleanliness of the right-of-way. Defenders of family-constructed roadside memorials have even suggested that, rather than constituting a road hazard, memorials actually prevent traffic accidents by providing drivers with stimulating scenery along stretches of highway that might otherwise induce sleep and result in an accident (Ross, 1998). Whether this is true cannot be verified but roadside memorials can also help to improve the landscape, as is evidenced through ‘green memorials’ in the planting of a tree (or numerous trees as in Maryland) or the construction of memorial gardens to honour all who
have died in roadway accidents. The centralised natural memorials also attempt to address safety concerns raised by the placement of individual memorials along the highway. However, it is unlikely that memorial gardens will replace individual memorials constructed by friends and family, given the importance the latter place on the specific location at which the death occurred (Klaassens, Groote, & Breen, 2007).

While only 23 of the states have officially adopted a roadside memorial policy, virtually all states report taking action against memorials if the circumstances warrant it (e.g., a complaint is made or safety is jeopardised). Memorials devoted specifically to fatalities related to drinking and driving are found in only five states. The DOTs in 13 states erect the roadside memorials themselves and 12 states require that an application be completed in order to put up a memorial. However, even when a state officially prohibits roadside memorials (i.e., ‘all’ lay memorials are unauthorised and will be removed) and/or the state has an official programme through which families can apply for a state-constructed memorial, there remains a discrepancy between policy and practice. For example, Ross (1998) recalls receiving conflicting information from two separate Nevada transportation officials regarding their roadside memorial policy. One person said that memorials are not permitted for safety reasons while another said that memorials are ‘a positive marker in life - a grim reminder that we all need to watch out for each other’ (Ross, 1998, p. 50). We found similar discrepancies in our survey. Slightly over half of the states said that roadside memorials present a safety hazard and are removed accordingly. Yet the states are generally sensitive to the grief of the survivors by balancing these concerns with the responsibility to maintain public safety. For example, the respondent from a western state said, ‘We try to take into consideration the sensitivity of this issue during a time when families are grieving. By contacting them directly, we can offer condolences and explain the safety issues [the memorials pose] for other drivers’. A similar sentiment was communicated by the respondent of a southern state who wrote, ‘Roadside memorials are illegal but we try to be sympathetic during the initial grieving period. These are mostly funeral wreaths or flower baskets, occasionally a small cross. If the grieving person moves the memorial to the right-of-way line we will not bother it’. Finally, a respondent from a southern state said, ‘Though we do not allow the permitting of these types of memorials, we are sympathetic to the families affected by these tragic accidents, and therefore do not actively pursue removing these types of memorials when they first appear, unless they are potential safety hazards or affect our routine maintenance operations’.

Confrontations sometimes develop, however, over the removal of a memorial, as it is a private symbol located in a public place (Kong, 1999). A recent case in Massachusetts exemplifies this potential for conflict (Grabbe, 2008). A cross, carved by the deceased man’s father, was erected to commemorate the fatality of his 17-year-old son. The home owners who live near the site where the cross is erected want it removed because it reminds them of the horror of the accident and the night they went to the aid of the accident victims. The parents of the deceased teen are going through mediation with the neighbours with the hope that
negotiation, in contrast to an adversarial civil court process, will help the opposing parties arrive at a solution amenable to all. In an earlier situation in Florida, the DOT began to receive complaints about the display of religious symbols after the state approved a programme to memorialise traffic fatalities with small crosses (DOT won’t, 1998). The Florida DOT later replaced the state-constructed crosses with small disks printed with the accident information (Porter, 2001). This public space may be regulated by the state but it is for the use of the wider community, thus the non-grieving may see roadside memorials as an intrusion upon their space (Clark & Franzmann, 2006). While complaints about roadside memorials are not frequent occurrences, according to respondents in our study, the overwhelming majority of states report removing the memorials when complaints are received. Further, the majority of DOTs that remove memorials in a state of disrepair complies with their mission of keeping roadsides beautiful as a shared public space. In addition, a shabby roadside memorial does not show respect for the deceased.

The one universal theme among roadside memorials, if indeed any exists, is that the cross is a dominant feature of most roadside memorials, perhaps a carryover of the Catholic influence in earlier days. Larson-Miller (2005) suggests that the establishment of roadside memorials is a type of popular religious activity. The cross is typically the memorial when a religious symbol is displayed. There is a belief among some individuals that the soul tends to linger on for some time after death and has the power to trouble the living if necessary precautions are not taken (Petersson, 2009). The construction of the cross, therefore, could help persuade the dead soul not to haunt or harm passers-by. That the symbol of the cross is often found in cemeteries, either carved into the grave marker or is itself the marker, further explains why the cross is so common among roadside memorials.

French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1915) said that the essence of religion is to divide the world into profane and sacred spheres or dimensions. Whatever a group designates as ‘sacred’, whether a totem animal or a roadside memorial, is to be approached and treated with respect and reverence. The spot where the roadside memorial is placed may be considered sacred, holy ground, yet not all members of the public recognise the location of the memorial as sacred (Klaassens et al., 2009). Moreover, the individuals choosing the cross may not do so because the cross has a religious connotation but rather out of a cultural tradition going back many years. As Clark and Franzmann (2006) note, the roadside memorial is a private expression of grief that turns a public place into sacred space, its sacredness directly constructed by individuals who would typically make no claim to such civil or religious authority. Collins and Rhine (2003) concluded that the expression of faith ranked low on the purposes of a memorial, suggesting that the use of a cross, which has been the source of so much controversy, is in most cases not a religious expression, but a cross-cultural symbol of death (Clark & Cheshire, 2004). This, too, was the legal opinion of the US District Court in Utah in American Atheists, Inc. v. Duncan. Though we have no data regarding this, several studies (Clark & Cheshire, 2004; Reid & Reid, 2001) have found that, while the cross was the prominent feature in nearly all of the roadside memorials analysed,
a smaller number of memorials added a crucifix to the memorial, suggesting an attempt to overtly express religious belief not otherwise reflected by the cross. It is also possible, as Collins and Rhine (2003) found, that the location of the death may be more important than the memorial itself and that the purpose of the memorial is to mark the place which is now considered sacred, whatever the ‘mark’ may be.

It has been suggested that contemporary society is ‘deritualised’ regarding matters of death as such assignments are given over to professionals (Freedman, 1997). Additionally, roadside memorials indicate a desire to reconstruct new forms of ritualised mourning because traditional mourning practices are old fashioned and inadequate (Haney, Leimer, & Lowery, 1997). Accordingly, in discussing grief work, Kamerman (1988) and Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson (1976) link the inability of many bereaved individuals to accomplish grief work to the limited availability of meaningful death-related rituals. They argue that, whether grounded in formal religious or civil culture or not, individuals and groups have developed for themselves death-related rituals in order to work through loss in a more timely and successful fashion. Thus, an increasing number of individuals have adapted a custom with roots from Europe into their way of life (Everett, 2002). Everett suggests that roadside crosses may not always reach a state of closure, regarding grief work. Nonetheless, such adaptations apparently have been helpful to many as evidenced by the proliferation of roadside memorials.

Roadside memorials can provide solace to grieving families and also serve as a reminder of the potential consequences of inattention at the wheel (Grabbe, 2008). To others, however, these memorials are seen as distractions to motorists or as eyesores. Sometimes roadside memorials are seen as private expressions of grief located in public places (Everett, 2000), much to the dislike of individuals who do not like seeing these on public land, especially when they contain religious symbols. Variation in how roadside memorials are viewed by the general public are reflected in the diverse state policies and practices regarding roadside memorials. The 50 American states, however, are seriously addressing this issue as they continue to debate and produce policies/statements on how to manage roadside memorials.

Note
[1] A state by state breakdown of the results can be obtained by emailing Heath Hoffman hoffmannh@cofc.edu

REFERENCES


Biographical Notes

George E. Dickinson is Professor of Sociology at the College of Charleston, Charleston, SC (USA). His research interests include death education in healthcare professional schools in the US and UK.

Heath C. Hoffmann is Associate Professor of Sociology at the College of Charleston, Charleston, SC (USA). His research interests include policies and practices affecting prisoner reentry in the US.