

What 38 million obituaries reveal about how Americans define a ‘life well lived’

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Obituaries provide a window into the prevailing traditions and moral values of their time.

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Obituaries preserve what families most want remembered about the people they cherish most. Across time, they also reveal the values each era chose to honor.

In a study published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, we analyzed 38 million obituaries of Americans published from 1998 to 2024. We identified the values families most often highlight, and how those values shift across generations, regions and major historical events.

Specifically, working with psychologists Liane Young and Thomas Mazzuchi, we examined the language used on Legacy.com, an online platform where families often post obituaries and share memories of loved ones.

During their lifetime, most people tend to be guided by a small set of broad values like caring for others, honoring tradition, keeping loved ones safe and seeking personal growth. To understand how these values showed up in remembrance, we used text-analysis tools built on curated lists of everyday words people use when talking about those themes.

By analyzing the words that appeared again and again in memorials, we could see which values communities chose to emphasize when looking back on the lives of their loved ones, and how those patterns changed over time. Because the dataset included 38 million obituaries, the analysis ran on a supercomputer.

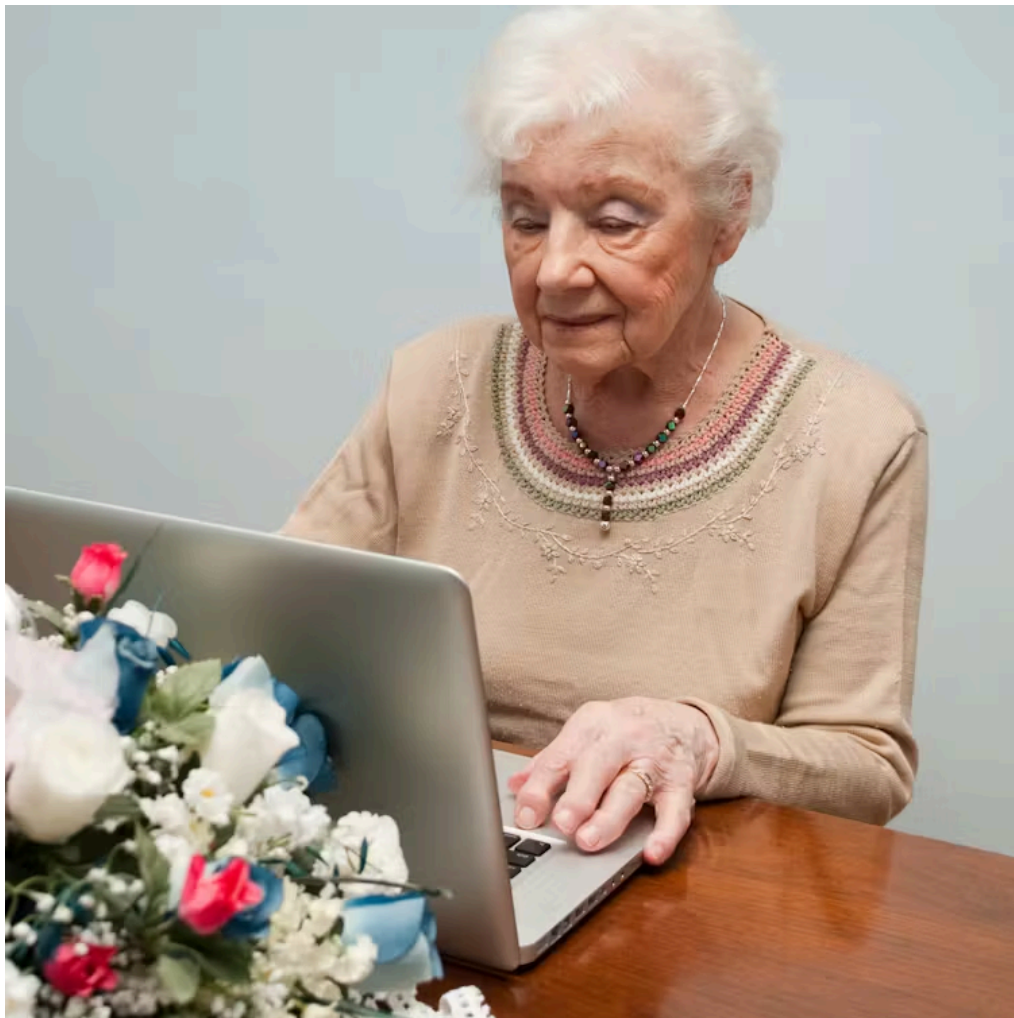
Across nearly 30 years of obituaries, words related to the value “tradition” appeared most often – many tributes described religious participation and enduring customs. Words related to the value “benevolence” – caring for the welfare of others – were also consistently prominent. In fact, tradition and benevolence formed the dominant value profile across the dataset: They appeared in more than 70% of the obituaries. By contrast, words related to values like “achievement” and “power” appeared far less often.

Historical events did leave a mark. After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the language families used to remember loved ones shifted compared with the period just before the attacks – and those shifts persisted for at least a year. Words related to the value “security” – including terms like “surviving,” “health” and “order” – showed up less often. At the same time, families used more language related to values like “benevolence” and “tradition.” Terms like “caring,” “loyal” and “service” showed up more often. These changes were especially strong in New York, where the attacks had the most direct impact.

COVID-19, however, produced the most dramatic shifts. Beginning in March 2020, benevolence-related language – including terms like “love,” “sympathy” and “family” – declined sharply, and hasn’t been the same since. Tradition-related language – terms like “service,” “faith” and “heritage” – initially declined as well, then rose above baseline levels during later stages of the pandemic.

These changes show that collective disruptions impact the moral vocabulary families use when commemorating loved ones. They shift what it means to have lived a good life.

We also saw differences that reflect stereotypes about gender and age. Obituaries for men contained more language linked to achievement, conformity and power. Meanwhile, obituaries for women contained more language associated with benevolence and enjoying life’s pleasures.



There are notable differences in the values highlighted in obituaries of older versus younger adults.

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Older adults were often remembered more for valuing tradition. Younger adults, on the other hand, were often remembered more for valuing the welfare of all people and nature, and for being motivated to think and act independently. Value patterns in men's obituaries shifted more across the lifespan than those in women's. In other words, the values highlighted in younger and older men's obituaries differed more from each other, while women's value profiles stayed relatively consistent across age.

Why it matters

The most visited parts of print newspapers and online memorial sites, obituaries offer a window into what societies value at different points in time.

This study contributes to the broader scientific understanding of legacy. People often hold strong preferences about how they want to be remembered, but far less is known about how they actually are remembered, in part because large-scale evidence about real memorials is rare. Our analysis of millions of obituaries helps fill that gap.

What's next

Obituaries allow researchers to trace cultural values across time, geography and social groups. Future work can examine differences across race and occupation, as well as across regions. It could also look to earlier periods using historical obituary archives, such as those preserved in older newspapers and local records.

Another direction is to examine whether highlighting how often kindness shows up in obituaries could inspire people to be more caring in daily life.

Understanding what endures in memory helps clarify what people consider meaningful; those values shape how they choose to live.

The Research Brief is a short take on interesting academic work.

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