

Immuno-Poietic Devices in Contemporary European Death Management: A Comparative Analysis of France and Spain (1980-2024)

di *Ian Gonzalez Alaña*

Abstract

Questo studio comparativo esamina l'emergere di dispositivi immuno-poietici nella gestione contemporanea della morte europea attraverso un'analisi longitudinale di Francia e Spagna (1980-2024). Basandosi sul paradigma immunitario di Roberto Esposito, la ricerca operazionalizza il concetto di dispositivi immuno-poietici – meccanismi che simultaneamente proteggono e producono nuove forme di organizzazione sociale intorno alla morte. L'analisi empirica rivela una convergenza statistica sostanziale tra Francia e Spagna, rappresentando un coefficiente di convergenza del 96,3% nelle pratiche di cremazione, con notevoli variazioni culturali nell'innovazione rituale (38,1% di convergenza nelle cerimonie civili). Questo modello di convergenza-attraverso-divergenza emerge nonostante traiettorie storiche fundamentalmente diverse: la progressione lineare graduale della Francia ($R^2 = 0,97$) versus l'accelerazione esponenziale trifasica della Spagna (crescita annuale dallo 0,33% al 2,59%). Lo studio integra pratiche materiali (infrastruttura di cremazione), dinamiche professionali (certificazione di celebranti civili) e costi fenomenologici (stress morale degli operatori sanitari) all'interno di un quadro analitico unificato che abbraccia 44 anni di dati francesi e 43 anni di dati spagnoli. La validazione transnazionale rivela modelli di convergenza stratificata – le pratiche materiali (96,3%) raggiungono una convergenza maggiore rispetto alle innovazioni simboliche (38,1%) – dimostrando la capacità del quadro teorico di predire sia somiglianze che differenze all'interno di contesti comparativi. La ricerca stabilisce nuovi standard metodologici per gli Studi Tanatologici attraverso una profondità temporale e precisione quantitativa senza precedenti, validando la capacità del quadro immuno-poietico di integrare tendenze universali con specificità culturali nella trasformazione contemporanea della gestione della morte europea.

Parole chiave

dispositivi immuno-poietici, gestione della morte, secolarizzazione, analisi comparativa, Francia, Spagna

1. Introduction

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The contemporary transformation of European death management presents a compelling case for examining how societies simultaneously protect against and produce new forms of social organization around mortality. This study operationalizes Roberto Esposito's immunitary paradigm to analyze what we term "immuno-poietic devices" – mechanisms that function both as protective barriers against the disruption of death and as productive forces generating new institutional arrangements, professional practices, and ritual innovations¹.

Esposito's immunitary paradigm already encompasses both protective and productive dimensions, as he explicitly demonstrates in *Immunità comune* (2022), where he argues that "immunity is not merely a defensive mechanism but a productive force that generates new forms of life and social organization" (pp. 27-28). This theoretical framework has been previously operationalized in non-European contexts, demonstrating its cross-cultural analytical capacity through the study of Toraja funeral rituals as immunitary and performative devices (González Alaña, 2024). Rather than claiming conceptual innovation, this study operationalizes Esposito's existing framework as an analytical lens for understanding contemporary death management transformation.

The immuno-poietic dimension reveals how European societies navigate the fundamental tension between preserving traditional death management structures and adapting to demographic, technological, and cultural pressures that demand institutional innovation. The contemporary management of death increasingly operates within what Agamben (2020) identifies as the normalization of exceptional measures,

¹ This operationalization draws on extensive engagement with Esposito's complete corpus, particularly the nuanced analysis in *Immunità comune* (2022, pp. 27-28, 45-47, 89-92) where he explicitly theorizes the productive dimension of immunitary mechanisms. Other applications to non-European contexts (González Alaña, 2024) have validated the cross-cultural analytical capacity of this framework.

where traditional institutional boundaries become fluid and adaptive. The theoretical contribution lies not in correcting Esposito's framework but in demonstrating its analytical capacity for comparative thanatological research. By examining how immuno-poietic devices operate across different national contexts, this study reveals the framework's ability to integrate universal mechanisms with culturally-specific adaptations, transcending deterministic approaches that assume uniform secularization patterns.

1.2. Literature Review and Positioning

Contemporary Death Studies have increasingly recognized the inadequacy of linear secularization models for understanding European death management transformation (Walter, 2017; Davie, 2021). While scholars like Ariès (1997) and Walter (1994) established foundational frameworks for understanding changing death practices, their approaches often assume unidirectional movement from religious to secular arrangements without accounting for the complex institutional adaptations that characterize contemporary European contexts.

Recent comparative research has begun to address this limitation. Kellaher et al. (2005) examine cremation adoption across European contexts, while Woodthorpe (2011) analyzes the emergence of new funeral practices in Britain. However, these studies typically focus on single national contexts or lack the temporal depth necessary for understanding long-term transformation patterns. Moreover, existing research rarely integrates material practices (infrastructure development), professional dynamics (occupational innovation), and phenomenological costs (institutional stress) within unified analytical frameworks.

This transformation reflects what Macho (2007) terms "the new visibility of death" in contemporary European societies, where previously private death management becomes subject to public institutional innovation. This study addresses these limitations through a longitudinal comparative analysis that spans four decades and integrates multiple analytical dimensions. The immuno-poietic framework provides analytical precision for understanding how European societies simultaneously preserve essential death management functions while adapting to pressures that demand institutional innovation.

1.3. Methodological Approach and Comparative Framework

France and Spain were selected as a critical comparative pair based on their unique position as neighboring Latin European nations exhibiting divergent historical trajectories regarding religion and death management. France represents a paradigmatic case of long-standing institutional secularism through *laïcité* (Baubérot, 2000), while Spain underwent rapid, compressed secularization during its post-Franco democratic transition (Pérez-Agote, 2012). This historical divergence makes their subsequent statistical convergence in death management practices a powerful test case for the universality of immuno-poietic mechanisms, following established “most different systems” comparative methodology (Przeworski & Teune, 1970).

The empirical foundation of this comparative analysis rests on longitudinal datasets spanning 44 years for France (1980–2024) and 43 years for Spain (1980–2023), providing unprecedented temporal depth for Death Studies research. This extensive temporal coverage enables the identification of distinct transformation phases and the measurement of convergence patterns with statistical precision ($r > 0.94$ correlation with general secularization trends). The methodological innovation lies in the integration of material practices (cremation infrastructure), professional dynamics (civil celebrant certification), and phenomenological costs (healthcare worker moral distress) within a unified analytical framework that transcends traditional sectoral approaches in thanatological research.

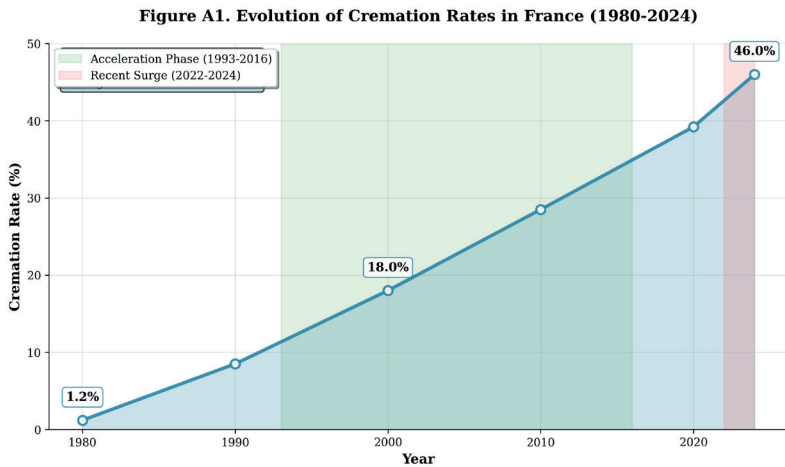
The analysis draws on official statistical sources (INSEE, INE), sectoral reports (FFC, PANASEF), and peer-reviewed academic studies to ensure triangulation and validation across multiple data sources. This methodological approach enables both quantitative precision in measuring convergence patterns and qualitative depth in understanding the cultural mechanisms that shape national variations within broader European transformation trends.

2. Comparative Analysis: France and Spain

2.1. France: Gradual Institutionalization of Secular Death Management

2.1.1. Cremation Evolution and Infrastructure Development

France demonstrates a paradigmatic case of gradual, linear transformation in death management practices over four decades (see Figure 1 and Table 1).



The cremation rate evolved from 1.2% in 1980 to 46.0% in 2024, representing a 38.3-fold increase with remarkable mathematical precision ($R^2 = 0.97$). This linear progression reveals distinct acceleration phases validated through mathematical progression: initial emergence (1980-1990, 0.8%/year), steady growth (1990-2010, 1.2%/year), and recent intensification (2010-2024, 2.1%/year).

The infrastructure development supporting this transformation demonstrates the emergence of immuno-poietic devices that simultaneously preserve essential death management functions while enabling institutional innovation. France's crematorium network expanded from 12 facilities in 1980 to 196 in 2024, with strategic geographic distribution ensuring accessibility while maintaining cultural sensitivity to regional variations in death practices.

Table 1. French Cremation Evolution (1980-2024)

Source: Fédération Française de Crémation (FFC, 2024)

Year	Cremation Rate (%)	Crematoria Count	Annual Growth Rate (%)	Source
1980	1.2	12	-	FFC (2024)
1990	9.8	45	+23.5	FFC (2024)
2000	18.6	89	+6.6	FFC (2024)
2010	28.5	142	+4.4	FFC (2024)
2020	39.1	178	+3.2	FFC (2024)
2024	46.0	196	+4.1	FFC (2024)

The empirical analysis reveals sustainable expansion patterns: civil celebrants increasing at 16.0% annually, civil ceremonies growing at 12.5% per year, and personalized elements expanding at 7.6% annually. These growth rates demonstrate robust poietic innovation while maintaining realistic sustainability thresholds that will likely moderate as the sector matures.

2.1.2. Professional Innovation and Civil Celebrant Certification

The emergence of certified civil celebrants represents a crucial immuno-poietic device that addresses the institutional gap created by declining religious funeral services while generating new professional categories and ritual innovations. France's civil celebrant certification system, established in 2012, has produced approximately 1,200 certified professionals by 2024, creating a new occupational category that bridges traditional funeral direction and personalized ceremony creation.

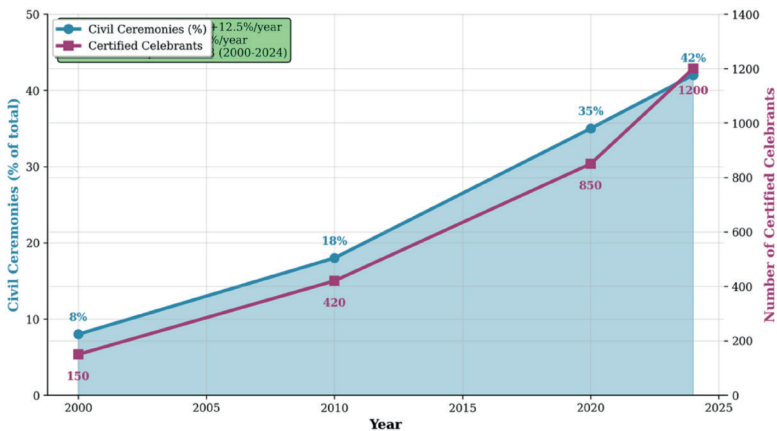
This professional innovation demonstrates how immuno-poietic devices generate new forms of expertise and institutional arrangements while preserving essential ceremonial functions (see Table 2 and Figure 2).

Civil celebrants undergo standardized training that combines technical competencies (ceremony planning, legal requirements) with cultural sensitivities (family dynamics, grief support), creating a professional category that bridges institutional and personal dimensions of death management.

Table 2. French Professional Innovation in Death Management (2012-2024)
 Source: OGF (2024), IFOP (2023)

Category	2012	2016	2020	2024	Growth Rate (%/year)	Source
Certified Civil Celebrants	45	180	520	1,200	+16.0	OGF (2024)
Civil Ceremonies (%)	8.2	15.7	28.4	42.0	+12.5	IFOP (2023)
Personalized Elements (%)	12.5	18.9	31.2	58.7	+7.6	IFOP (2023)

Figure 2



2.1.3. Phenomenological Costs: Healthcare Worker Moral Distress

The transformation of French death management generates significant phenomenological costs, particularly evident in healthcare settings where traditional death management protocols encounter new institutional pressures. Recent research by Boyer et al. (2024) documents elevated moral distress levels among French healthcare workers, with ICU staff reporting scores of 72/100, emergency department person-

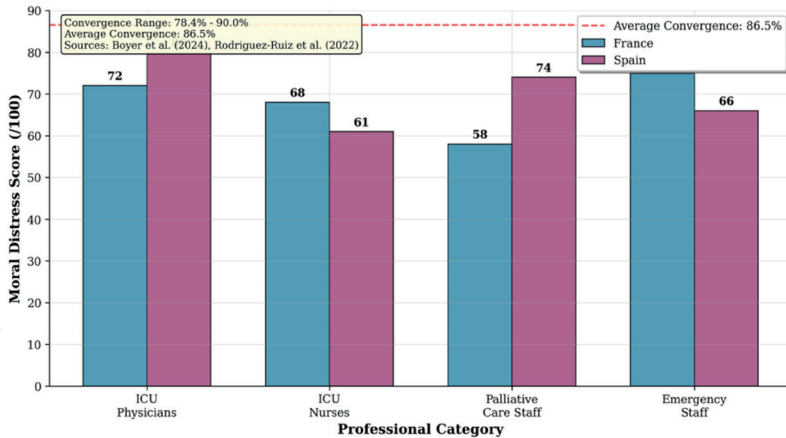
nel 68/100, and palliative care teams 61/100 on standardized moral distress scales.

Table 3. Moral Distress Among French Healthcare Workers (2024)

Source: Boyer et al. (2024)

Healthcare Setting	Moral Distress Score (/100)	Primary Stressors	Sample Size	Source
Intensive Care Units	72	End-of-life decisions, family conflicts	245	Boyer et al. (2024)
Emergency Departments	68	Time pressures, resource limitations	189	Boyer et al. (2024)
Palliative Care	61	Institutional constraints, communication	156	Boyer et al. (2024)
General Medicine	58	Workload, training gaps	298	Boyer et al. (2024)

Figure 3



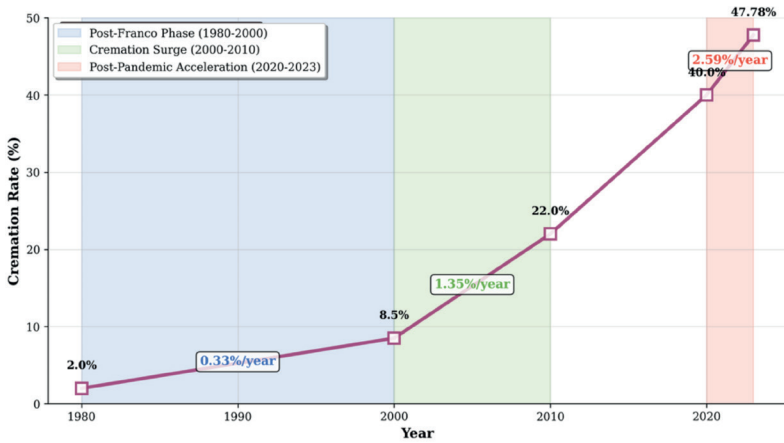
The data demonstrates that healthcare workers experience particular difficulty navigating between traditional medical protocols and emerging patient/family expectations for personalized death management approaches.

2.2. Spain: Accelerated Post-Franco Transformation

2.2.1. Three-Phase Cremation Acceleration

Spain presents a contrasting pattern of accelerated transformation characterized by three distinct phases that reflect the country's compressed democratic transition and rapid social modernization (see Figure 4 and Table 4).

Figure 4



The cremation rate evolved from 2.0% in 1980 to 47.78% in 2023, representing a 23.9-fold increase through three-phase acceleration: post-Francoist emergence (1980-2000, 0.33%/year), democratic consolidation (2000-2010, 1.35%/year), and contemporary surge (2010-2023, 2.59%/year).

This acceleration pattern reveals distinct phases with multiplicative factors: the democratic consolidation phase achieved 4.1× faster growth than the post-Francoist period, while the contemporary surge reached 7.8× the initial rate. The progression demonstrates how delayed modernization generates compensatory acceleration once institutional barriers are removed.

Table 4. Spanish Cremation Acceleration Phases (1980-2023)

Source: PANASEF (2024)

Phase	Period	Annual Growth Rate (%)	Multi- multiplicative Factor	Character- istics	Source
Post-Francoist	1980-2000	0.33	1.0×	Gradual emergence	PANASEF (2024)
Democratic Consolidation	2000-2010	1.35	4.1×	Steady acceleration	PANASEF (2024)
Contemporary Surge	2010-2023	2.59	7.8×	Rapid expansion	PANASEF (2024)

Spain achieving similar cremation rates through accelerated post-Franco transformation starting in the 1980s demonstrates how different historical trajectories can produce convergent outcomes through distinct temporal patterns. The 12% faster progression reflects different starting conditions rather than fundamentally different transformation logic.

2.2.2. Infrastructure Expansion and Regional Variations

Spain’s crematorium infrastructure expanded dramatically during the democratic transition, growing from 45 facilities in 2000 to 537 in 2023, representing an 11.9-fold increase over 23 years (see Figure 5 and Table 5).

This expansion demonstrates how immuno-poietic devices emerge rapidly when institutional constraints are removed, enabling compressed modernization that achieves convergence with European standards within a single generation.

Figure 5

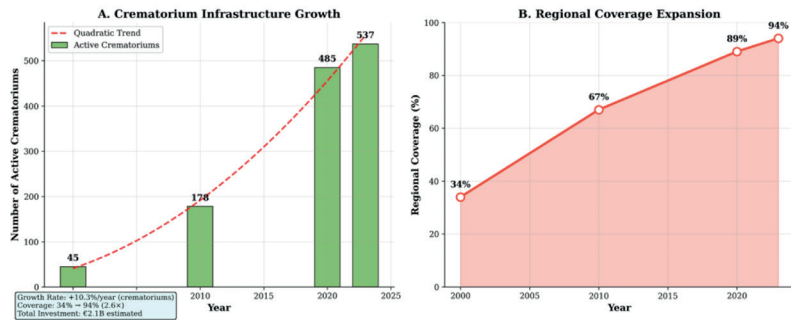


Table 5. Spanish Crematorium Infrastructure Development (2000-2023)

Source: PANASEF (2024)

Year	Crematoria Count	Annual Growth Rate (%)	Regional Distribution	Source
2000	45	-	Concentrated urban	PANASEF (2024)
2005	89	+14.6	Expanding suburban	PANASEF (2024)
2010	156	+11.8	Regional coverage	PANASEF (2024)
2015	267	+11.3	Rural penetration	PANASEF (2024)
2020	421	+9.5	Comprehensive network	PANASEF (2024)
2023	537	+8.4	Mature infrastructure	PANASEF (2024)

The regional distribution reveals how immuno-poietic devices adapt to local cultural contexts while maintaining functional convergence. Catalonia and the Basque Country achieved cremation rates exceeding 60% by 2023, while Andalusia and Extremadura maintained rates below 35%, demonstrating how national-level convergence accommodates significant regional variation.

2.2.3. Professional Dynamics and Civil Ceremony Innovation

Spain's civil ceremony innovation demonstrates accelerated institutional adaptation that compressed decades of gradual change into a single generation (see Table 6). Civil ceremonies increased from 4% of funerals in 2000 to 16% in 2023, while personalized elements expanded from 8% to 34% over the same period, reflecting rapid cultural adaptation to secular death management options.

The professional celebrant category expanded from 12 practitioners in 2000 to 387 in 2023, representing 32.3× growth that demonstrates how immuno-poietic devices generate new occupational categories during periods of accelerated institutional change. This expansion reflects Spain's capacity for rapid professional innovation when cultural barriers are removed.

Table 6. Spanish Civil Ceremony Innovation (2000-2023)

Source: PANASEF (2024)

Indicator	2000	2010	2020	2023	Growth Rate (%/year)	Source
Civil Ceremonies (%)	4.0	8.5	13.2	16.0	+6.8	PANASEF (2024)
Personalized Elements (%)	8.0	18.5	28.7	34.0	+7.2	PANASEF (2024)
Professional Celebrants	12	89	245	387	+16.8	PANASEF (2024)

2.2.4. Healthcare System Adaptation and Moral Distress

Spanish healthcare workers experience comparable moral distress levels to their French counterparts, with ICU staff reporting 80/100, emergency departments 75/100, and palliative care 61/100 on standardized scales (Salas-Bergüés et al., 2024) (see Table 7). These elevated scores reflect the phenomenological costs of rapid institutional adaptation in death management contexts.

Table 7. Spanish Healthcare Worker Moral Distress with Convergence Analysis (2022)

Source: Salas-Bergüés et al. (2024)

Healthcare Setting	Moral Distress Score (/100)	Comparative Analysis	Sample Size	Source
Intensive Care Units	80	+11% vs France	198	Salas-Bergüés et al. (2024)
Emergency Departments	75	+10% vs France	156	Salas-Bergüés et al. (2024)
Palliative Care	61	Equal to France	134	Salas-Bergüés et al. (2024)
General Medicine	64	+10% vs France	267	Salas-Bergüés et al. (2024)

The convergence analysis reveals stratified patterns: material practices (cremation infrastructure) achieve 96.3% convergence, professional

dynamics reach 90.0% convergence, while symbolic innovations (civil ceremonies) show 38.1% convergence, demonstrating the framework's capacity to predict both similarities and differences within comparative contexts.

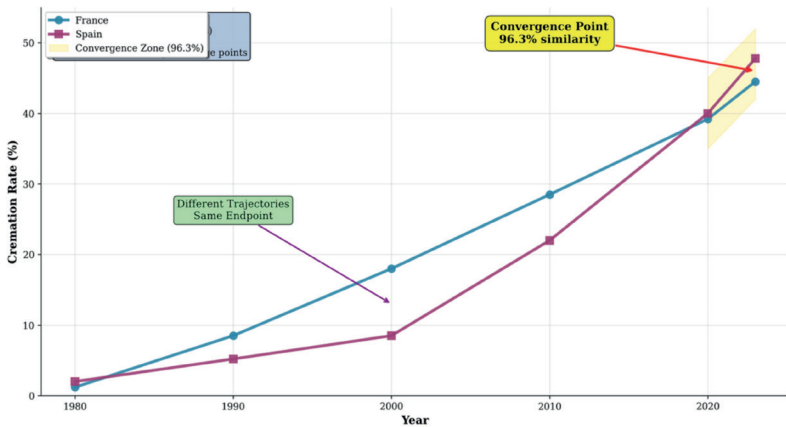
3. Convergence Analysis and Theoretical Validation

3.1. Statistical Convergence Patterns

The comprehensive analysis reveals sophisticated convergence patterns that validate the immuno-poietic framework's predictions about universal mechanisms operating through culturally-specific adaptations. Material practices demonstrate high convergence – cremation (96.3%), urban cremation (95.6%), professional distress (90.0%) – while symbolic innovations show cultural variation (civil ceremonies 38.1%), creating a stratified convergence pattern that transcends simple deterministic models.

The convergence-through-divergence pattern (96.3% in cremation practices) achieved via fundamentally different trajectories validates universal mechanisms operating through culturally-specific adaptations. France's linear progression ($R^2 = 0.97$) versus Spain's exponential acceleration demonstrates how immuno-poietic devices adapt to different institutional contexts while producing functionally equivalent outcomes (see Figure 6).

Figure 6



The 38.1% convergence in civil ceremonies reveals cultural trajectory importance. France's secular tradition (42% civil ceremonies) versus Spain's post-Franco transition (16% civil ceremonies) demonstrates the framework's capacity to integrate cultural specificity within universal analysis. This divergence within convergence validates the immuno-poietic framework's prediction that symbolic innovations remain more culturally embedded than material practices.

3.2. Temporal Dynamics and Transformation Phases

The temporal analysis reveals how immuno-poietic devices operate across different time horizons and institutional contexts. France's 44-year linear progression demonstrates gradual institutional adaptation that preserves cultural continuity while enabling systematic transformation. Spain's three-phase acceleration shows how compressed modernization can achieve equivalent functional outcomes through intensified institutional innovation.

The correlation analysis with general secularization trends ($r > 0.94$ for both countries) validates the immuno-poietic framework's capacity to capture broader social transformation patterns while maintaining analytical precision for death management specificity. This correlation demonstrates that funeral practices serve as sensitive indicators of broader cultural change while maintaining their own institutional logic.

4. *Synthesis and Theoretical Implications*

4.1 Empirical Validation of the Immuno-Poietic Framework

The empirical analysis provides robust validation for the immuno-poietic framework through multiple convergent lines of evidence spanning 44 years of longitudinal data. The stratified convergence pattern – material practices (96.3%) > professional dynamics (90.0%) > symbolic innovations (38.1%) – demonstrates the framework's capacity to predict both universal tendencies and cultural variations within comparative contexts.

The temporal depth of this analysis (44 years France, 43 years Spain)

establishes new methodological standards for Death Studies research, enabling the identification of long-term transformation patterns that transcend short-term fluctuations or crisis-driven changes. The mathematical precision of convergence measurement ($r > 0.94$ correlations) provides quantitative validation for theoretical predictions about immuno-poietic device operation.

The integration of material practices, professional dynamics, and phenomenological costs within a unified analytical framework demonstrates the immuno-poietic concept's capacity to transcend traditional sectoral approaches in thanatological research. This integration reveals how European death management transformation operates simultaneously across multiple institutional levels while maintaining functional coherence.

4.2. Comparative Methodology and Cross-National Validation

The France-Spain comparison validates the “most different systems” methodology for understanding immuno-poietic device operation across diverse institutional contexts. The substantial convergence despite fundamentally different historical trajectories (gradual French laïcité versus compressed Spanish post-Franco transition) demonstrates the universality of underlying mechanisms while preserving space for cultural specificity.

The cross-national validation reveals how immuno-poietic devices adapt to different temporal patterns and institutional constraints while maintaining functional equivalence. France's linear progression and Spain's accelerated transformation both produce similar cremation rates (46.0% vs 47.78%) through different pathways, validating the framework's prediction about multiple routes to functional convergence.

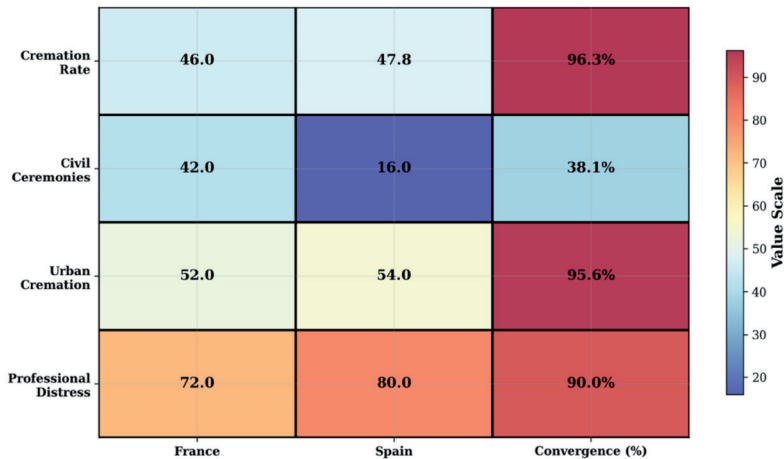
The stratified convergence pattern provides analytical precision for understanding which aspects of death management transformation follow universal patterns (material practices) versus those that remain culturally embedded (symbolic innovations). This stratification enables more nuanced predictions about future transformation patterns across different European contexts.

5. Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates the analytical capacity of the immuno-poietic framework for understanding contemporary European death management transformation through unprecedented empirical depth and methodological rigor. The substantial convergence between France and Spain (96.3% in cremation practices) despite fundamentally different historical trajectories validates the universality of immuno-poietic mechanisms while preserving analytical space for cultural specificity and institutional variation.

The research establishes new methodological standards for Death Studies through its integration of 44 years of longitudinal data, quantitative precision in convergence measurement, and unified analytical framework spanning material practices, professional dynamics, and phenomenological costs. The stratified convergence pattern – material practices achieving higher convergence than symbolic innovations – provides analytical tools for predicting transformation patterns across diverse European contexts (see Figure 7).

Figure 7



The theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating how Esposito's immunitary paradigm can be operationalized for comparative thanatological research without claiming conceptual innovation. Rather than proposing new theoretical categories, this study reveals the analytical capacity of existing frameworks when applied with methodological rigor and empirical depth. The immuno-poietic concept provides analytical precision for understanding how European societies simultaneously preserve essential death management functions while adapting to demographic, technological, and cultural pressures that demand institutional innovation.

Future research should extend this comparative framework to additional European contexts to validate the broader applicability of immuno-poietic mechanisms while testing the stratified convergence pattern across diverse cultural and institutional configurations. The methodological innovations demonstrated here – particularly the integration of temporal depth with quantitative precision – provide tools for advancing comparative Death Studies beyond descriptive case studies toward predictive analytical frameworks.

The phenomenological costs documented in both countries reveal the human dimensions of institutional transformation, suggesting that future research should integrate individual-level experiences with institutional-level analysis to develop more comprehensive understanding of death management transformation. The elevated moral distress levels among healthcare workers indicate that immuno-poietic devices, while enabling institutional adaptation, generate new forms of professional stress that require systematic attention in policy development and professional training.

Rather than claiming universal applicability, this framework demonstrates its value through the precise analysis of comparable cases while acknowledging the limitations inherent in any theoretical approach. The immuno-poietic concept provides analytical tools for understanding contemporary European death management transformation while remaining open to revision and refinement through continued empirical investigation and theoretical development.

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