



Diversity challenges from urban West Africa: How Senegalese family deaths illuminate dominant understandings of ‘bereavement’¹



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ABSTRACT: Based on interviews with Senegalese people living in four contemporary urban neighbourhoods, who had experienced the death of an adult family member, we explore how the research challenged and surprised the White, British members of the research team. Such challenges help to shed light on some dominant, taken-for-granted understandings of ‘bereavement’ based in ‘Western’ perspectives. The surprises include how the death was discussed and explained; patterns of family living and the implications for how individuals responded to the death; the emotional significance of particular religious expectations; and the emotional implications of material hardships. After exploring how interviewees responded to the deaths in Senegal, we consider how these responses compare with expectations and taken-for-granted assumptions about ‘bereavement’ in the contemporary UK. We conclude by discussing the implications for bereavement support and professional practice, in relation to diverse responses to death.

KEYWORDS: Death, bereavement, diversity, cross-cultural, Africa, materiality

My philosophical journey has convinced me that we cannot understand ourselves if we do not understand others.... By gaining greater knowledge of how others think, we can become less certain of the knowledge we think we have, which is always the first step towards greater understanding. (Baggini, 2018: xix-xxi)¹

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Introduction

Two decades ago, Dennis Klass (1999) called for researchers to study diverse cultures² around the world as a way of learning more about ‘our own’ ‘cultural blinkers’ when it comes to assumptions about ‘bereavement’.³ In this article we examine the experiences of people interviewed in Senegal as part of a project that sought to understand both the material and emotional significance of family deaths in a contemporary urban western African context. We have written elsewhere about the background, methodology and key findings of the project (Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Bowlby, Wouango, & Kébé, 2016; Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Bowlby, Wouango, & Kébé, 2017b; Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Kébé, Bowlby, & Wouango, 2017a), and aspects of how people sought to make sense of these deaths (Ribbens McCarthy, Evans, Bowlby, & Wouango, 2018) and to find some consolation (Evans, Bowlby, Ribbens McCarthy, Wouango, & Kébé, 2018). This paper is authored by the English part of the research team, namely three white, middle class women with differing ages, social science disciplinary orientations, and personal experiences of loss through death.⁴ Here we seek to turn the spotlight, perhaps somewhat uncomfortably, on what we found challenging and surprising about these interviews. We offer some thoughts about what light this may shed on dominant ‘Western’⁵ ways of thinking about ‘bereavement’ and how people may be supported after a significant death in their lives, and its relevance to practitioners. Such a comparative process has been termed ‘reverse innovation’ (Zaman, Whitelaw, Richards, Hamilton, & Clark, 2018), drawing on experiences and world views from a majority world context and seeking to understand their relevance to a minority world context⁶, rather than the more common (neo-colonial) tendency to apply minority world thinking to majority world contexts.⁷

² The term ‘culture’ risks conveying a monolithic and unchanging stereotype. Rather, ‘culture’ is highly dynamic, fluid, and intersectional, capturing a fleeting sense of particular patterns and ways of life. Nevertheless, if we don’t pay attention to these divergent patterns, we render them invisible, as Baggini points out.

³ Since the term ‘bereavement’ does not translate directly into all languages (Evans et al 2017a), we prefer Klass’s (1999) alternative concept of ‘responses to death’.

⁴ Ruth, the principal investigator, had previously worked in Senegal, but Jane and Sophie had not previously conducted research in Africa. Some of the ‘surprises’ were thus more notable to Jane and Sophie than to Ruth.

⁵ The notion of ‘the West’, is problematic, risking designating the rest of the world as a residual category of ‘non-Western’. We use this term here for brevity, but with this caveat.

⁶ The terms minority and majority worlds have become widely used in cross-cultural work, signifying that the majority of the world’s peoples live in economically poor regions while a minority of the global population live in affluent societies in the ‘global North’ or ‘West’.

⁷ This is not to underestimate important contributions from some qualitative studies of culturally variable responses to death, e.g. Japanese research underpinning new Western theories of continuing bonds eg Klass and Steffen (2018).

We do not have the cross-cultural evidence to ‘define the characteristics of normal bereavement’ (Kleinman, 2007 p. 819), nor to identify the most valid way to deal with death (Rosenblatt, 2015). Our theoretical sociological approach views people as seeking to ‘make sense’ of their experiences as best they can in the circumstances of their lives, drawing on the resources available to them – personally, locally, culturally, materially, spiritually, politically, historically. In urban Senegal, key aspects of these circumstances include: a French colonial history intertwined with ethnically diverse indigenous historical cultures; contemporary global and neo-colonial politics; widespread poverty; a predominantly Sufi Muslim religious framework; and extensive family networks. People’s circumstances also encompass a collective way of life in which relationships are central and ‘Western’ ideas of individuality less evident, with a view of personhood as bound up with others. This view has often been encapsulated by the complex African philosophical notion of ‘ubuntu’, describing a sense of deeply relational personhood – ‘I am because we are one’ (Nel, 2008, p. 141). Furthermore, indigenous African languages do not necessarily map onto English words such as ‘grief’ or ‘loss’ that may mistakenly be assumed to be directly translatable (Evans et al., 2017a).

In what follows, we journey to encounter family deaths in Senegal, before considering how the experiences of this journey compare with expectations of ‘bereavement’ in contemporary UK. In the final section, we consider the implications for bereavement support, shaped by dominant Western perspectives.

Family deaths: Unexpected (missing) features

The households we contacted via community facilitators were based in two key cities in localities of variable levels of resource. We interviewed two members of different generations from each of these urban, ‘non-traditional’ households, as well as conducting focus groups, key informant interviews and feedback workshops (Evans et al., 2016).

The life history is a tried and tested method for exploring people’s family lives, making intuitive sense to interviewees in the UK. But in Senegal this approach just did not work. Despite prompting, people told us almost nothing about their childhoods or life stories apart from a few key events. Further, people often gave very brief responses, particularly in relation to their feelings, with terse phrases such as ‘it’s hard’, or ‘I feel alone’, often being all they said (discussed further below). Such brevity is in stark contrast with the therapeutic cultures and widespread familiarity with narratives of the emotional ‘self’ in the ‘West’. Nevertheless, a few words could convey a great deal, as when Oumy (33, widow) commented: ‘*Ah! What pain, loneliness, sadness!*’ But there was almost a complete absence of accounts of

an ‘inner’ experience of ‘grief’, with little discussion of ‘grieving’ as a psychological process experienced over time.

Also notable by their marginality were accounts of medical causes of death. Medical issues are fundamental to Western explanations of death but here they were either very low-key or absent altogether. Just over one third of interviewees used any medical term at all in their accounts, while another third referred to general physical symptoms. By contrast, there were often extensive accounts of circumstances surrounding the death, sometimes with intimations of mystical illnesses, or some sort of premonition: *‘Maybe she had death sickness... she knew she was going to die’* (Samba, 51, speaking of his grandmother). In investigating this different way of accounting for the death, we have found it important to consider how ‘causal’ explanations – which are taken-for-granted in the UK – may not be understood in the same way in Senegal or Africa more generally (Eisenbruch & Handelman, 1990; Sogolo, 2003). Interviewees instead tried to make sense of the death, especially unexpected or untimely deaths, by thinking about events and circumstances in the days leading up to the death, perhaps evoking a sense of fate, often aligned with dominant religious understandings.

Family and household challenges

We encountered further challenges in trying to identify individuals’ relationships and household membership. People’s living arrangements were a source of bafflement, involving complex and sometimes tenuous relationships with people, some living in the same house, others coming and going, contributing and being supported in various ways, and others again living in far distant villages. Yet these relationships were clearly central to everyday living and survival:

‘... you should be considerate towards the family, rich or poor, family is family. Because when you’re rich today, tomorrow you can be poor! Even if you’re rich you consider your family. You’re behind your family. Everything they have, you take part in. The day when you have nothing left, they’ll help you. But when you have no regard for your family, you won’t see them, whether you’re happy or having troubles. And that’s dangerous. That’s part of African family life.’ (Simone, 39, widow)

Furthermore, despite the complexity of household membership, ‘family’ was centrally understood as a (fluid and complex) ‘entity’ to which they ‘belonged’, experienced as more than a set of disparate relationships:

‘The family is important because it’s a source of union. There’s strength in unity.’ (Samba)

While not everyone’s experiences corresponded with these ideals, for these interviewees these expectations of family

were widespread. Failure to live up to such expectations could engender significant practical difficulties (discussed further below).

Family and neighbours were crucial in the early days after the death, with people gathering immediately and staying until after the burial, providing resources and support. After the gathering dispersed, family members and others might continue to provide support when they were able. Yet the crucial significance of ‘family’ could also be constraining, for example limiting people’s willingness to voice disagreements about inheritance.⁸ Additionally, though, family was also a key source of motivation, sharing projects, and working towards the ‘success’ of ‘the family’.

‘It encourages me to be more involved... Even if it isn’t financial or something else, at least the moral aspect, the support... so the day I should go, others can say I’d supported the family.’ (Boubacar, 44, death of brother)

Nevertheless, despite being embedded in family networks, our interviewees spoke of being ‘alone’, ‘empty’, in a ‘void’ [French, *un vide*] (Evans et al., 2017a):

‘I feel alone today.’ (N’daye, 17, death of mother)

‘My mother was my confidante... You feel that there’s really a void there.’ (Ibrahima, 44, death of mother)

We have found it difficult to fully grasp this deep sense of loneliness despite the presence of others (Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Bowlby, & Wouango, 2019). While others have noted a sense of isolation among many bereaved people in the UK (McLaren, 1998), Jacquemin (2010) suggests solitude and isolation in Africa (more than elsewhere) is seen as a sign of loss of social status.

Another surprise was that people very rarely talked about the deceased in terms of their personality, or their individual relationship with them. Rather, they spoke of the role their relative held as part of the family unit, including their position in the generational hierarchy, and their position in the birth order hierarchy.

‘... for us Africans, the eldest [brother] is the father, that’s all. When he dies he also leaves a void.’ (Boubacar)

Older family members held positions of authority, with responsibility for support and ‘advice’. Thus, the nature of the family fabric was rent by the death, often leaving others exposed and vulnerable. For some, the household might be broken up by the death, with children being sent to live with other relatives, under accepted African customs of kinship fosterage. In other cases the remaining relatives, who could not survive alone, joined another household made up of family members.

⁸ Among Muslim families, none of the deceased made formal wills.

The unexpected (regulatory) power of religion as community

Contrasting strongly with ‘our own’ Westernised expectations of death and bereavement as individualised experiences (Harris, 2016; Jakoby, 2012), death in Africa is generally understood as a community event (Nwoye, 2000, 2005 discussed by Njue et al., 2015), including religious groupings as well as families. The significance of religion for our interviewees thus lay as much in social networks as in individual belief systems, the latter of course being bound up with religious contexts more broadly, whether Roman Catholic or Sufi Muslim. Indeed, Islam itself is a central organising feature of communal life (Bass and Snow, 2006; Creevey, 1996).

Responses to the death were thus strongly framed in religious terms, whether through beliefs or religious practices, with religion the primary, socially approved, source of consolation. Islam is based on: ‘... submission to the Will of Allah’ (Alladin, 2015 p. 112), an emphasis potentially providing a strong framework for making sense of the death as ‘God’s will’, which for many interviewees enabled (or required) acceptance of the death. Additionally, this belief resonated strongly with the Wolof concept ‘*Mounieul*’, translatable as ‘endurance’, often used to emphasise the need to accept death:

‘Like they say in Wolof, “Mounieul” [you must persevere]; that is, you must be aware that everything perishes so it’s not worth creating a drama. You must remain strong...’ (N’dioug, 63, widower)

Acceptance of the death was thus strongly underpinned by both religious belief and also cultural expectations around the need to accept suffering.

The requirement to accept God’s will was mentioned spontaneously by a quarter of participants, both Catholics and Muslims, particularly the older generation (discussed further in Evans et al., 2018).

‘It’s very hard but I left everything in God’s hands... It’s God that brought her onto earth and God who took her back, and nobody will escape that day.’ (Abdoulaye, 30, Muslim, death of mother).

Additionally, acceptance of the death as ‘God’s will’ was an expectation woven into socially approved ways of mourning. Consequently, shedding ‘too many tears’, or prolonged grieving, were subject to disapproval:

‘Of course religion allows us to cry but if you persist, it’s like calling into question d’ivine will.’ (Head of district, Guédiawaye, Dakar)

Ibrahima (44) expressed shame at being unable to accept his mother’s death after two years:

‘Sorrow; I’m even ashamed to think of her to tell you the truth, because I still haven’t accepted this death. I pretend that she’s still here.’

Religious expectations thus enabled both solace and emotional regulation. Additionally, there were very clear (often strongly gendered) religious practices enabling people to respond to the death in material ways (Evans et al., 2016). Such practices encompassed caring for the deceased’s body, and conducting funerals, as well as continuing practices in months to come, including stringent widowhood practices, offerings to the poor, or praying for the deceased.

‘After each daily prayer, I pray for her. And every fortnight we recite the Q’ran for her, the family together.’ (Allassane, 36, death of mother)

The emotional dimensions of material deprivation

Such mourning practices raise a further significant concern for us as UK researchers: how to understand the unexpressed emotional significance of material and embodied responses to death, when Western culture generally understands emotions as ‘feelings’ and individualised ‘inner’ experience. Such ‘cultural blinkers’ risk obscuring how emotions and material practices may be closely intertwined, a situation heightened when people are living in material deprivation and insecurity. Indeed, Demmer (2007) suggests that ‘grief’ might be a ‘luxury’ in such difficult situations. However, we have sought to understand how emotion may be bound up with materiality in ways that are hard for Westerners to recognise.

Some Western researchers have recognised the embodied nature of responses to death, among people from many cultures (including Western societies), through the somatisation of grief (Horowitz & Wakefield, 2007; Rosenblatt, 2008), challenging Western notions of the (objective) ‘body’ as separate from (subjective, interior) ‘emotions’ (Hallam & Hockey, 2001). Such somatisation was apparent in some of our interviews:

‘The [children] all got sick. Even her over there, if she has a headache and thinks of her father, she starts crying.’ (Athia, 56, widow)

The precariousness of many African households means a death can have significant material consequences, the emotional significance of such material insecurity being hard for Westerners living in affluent societies to grasp.

'I have a heavy heart when I experience an unhappy event like bereavement. I even ask myself what I'm doing in this life. I cry when I sometimes don't have anything to give my children to eat; and my brothers' and sisters' children who are in my care.' (Anthiou, 57, death of niece)

The emotional pain and material consequences of the death compound one another; indeed, the Wolof word for loss – *'niak'* – cannot be fully captured by English or French words for loss, since as an adjective it can also mean lacking, nothing to lose or poor. Such an *'economic void... has another dimension, and that is felt even more painfully'* (Roman Catholic priest).

The complexity of this intertwining of emotional pain with material and practical struggles could also be seen in the widespread and repeated use of the Wolof phrase, *dafa meti* and French equivalent *c'est dur*, (*it's hard*). Recognising the emotional dimensions of material issues, that can be encapsulated in such brief phrases, shed fresh light on interviewees' comments. It challenged what, to Western ears, might otherwise seem 'purely instrumental' – giving us considerable pause for thought about the emotions involved:

When he used to come home, he usually brought bread, local yogurt, and since the start of Ramadan, I still haven't seen the bread that he used to bring home. (Selbe, 13, death of father)

Comparing 'bereavement' in Senegal and the UK

'Getting to know others requires avoiding the twin dangers of overestimating either how much we have in common or how much divides us... differences in ways of thinking can be both deep and subtle. If we assume too readily that we can see things from others' points of view, we end up seeing them from merely a variation of our own...' (Baggini, 2018, xix)

In line with the notion of reverse innovation (Zaman et al., 2018), what is there to be learned by Western researchers and practitioners from listening closely to these interviews from a contemporary urban west African context? If we agree that there 'are no worldwide standards for determining whose view of how to deal with death is most valid...' (Rosenblatt, 2015, p. 28), does this mean we have to fall back into a 'lazy' cultural relativism (Jullien, 2008/2014)? We suggest one way of provoking food for thought is to consider what may apparently be gained or lost from these differing expectations about how to respond to death.

At the same time, it is important not to overlook what is shared across differing contexts. The Senegalese

interviewees were undoubtedly feeling the pain of the death, despite using few words to describe it. But beyond this, what might we interpret as gains and losses in the divergent responses to death apparent in the Senegal interviews, when compared with the UK? How might such comparison shed light on expectations and assumptions concerning grief in Western contexts?

Strengths

- Senegalese customs often (but not always) provide for immediate and localised social support after a death, burials and funerals generally being very visible communal affairs, while religious beliefs also provide a framework for many for the acceptance of a death, along with socially approved and embodied material practices that may also constitute expressions of emotion. These customs and beliefs may provide a very significant source of consolation, while family networks can provide crucial emotional support and a source of motivation for 'carrying on' and achieving 'success'.
- Western responses to death⁹ generally provide a framework for attending to individual emotional responses to a death, with an expectation that these may be severe and may (arguably) continue for some time, disrupting normal family and work lives, while 'working through' the loss in terms of grieving 'tasks' to be undertaken (Worden, 2009). Some formal support mechanisms are in place, including paid compassionate leave, some state-provided minimal level of financial support, and some individualised bereavement support services through such organisations as Cruse.

Weaknesses

- In Senegal, there may be little longer term recognition of the emotional impact of a family death, which may be minimised by religious expectations. Specific policies and provisions are generally unavailable, with only a very small minority who work in the formal sector having access to pensions or bereavement leave. Longer term community support is also often unavailable, while reliance on personal ties for material support, and the absence of a mixed welfare state alongside poor processes of governance, means that more organised formal support, such as cash transfers to the most impoverished families following the death of a head of household (see Evans et al., 2016), fails to reach those who need it, even where it is meant to be available. For poorer families, where social ties provide access to fewer

⁹ Indicative evidence for this brief sketch includes: Breen & O'Connor, 2007, 2011; Jakoby, 2012; Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Shapiro, 1996; Stroebe, 2010; Thompson et al 2016; Valentine, 2008; Walter, 1996, 2017; Wambach, 1986.

resources in the first place, households may become even more marginalised and disrupted by a family death.

- In the UK, responses to a family death are understood in terms of the individualised personal pathway of grieving emotions; so much is this the case there is very little empirical evidence about how deaths are generally experienced in ‘ordinary’ family contexts (Stroebe, 2010). Evidence suggests people coping with a death may receive little social support¹⁰, while bereaved individuals may feel isolated from other family members with much mutual protection between them (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006, 2007), and personal experiences of death still being treated more generally as more or less taboo (Green, 2017). In a secularised society, there are few belief frameworks available to help with acceptance of a death as anything other than a random and perhaps cruel act of fate. The UK, and Western societies more generally, also pay very little research attention to the material consequences of a death (though there has been some material/policy attention in recent years). Furthermore, since emotions and material resources are quite sharply differentiated, the emotional significance of material hardship is generally unrecognised; indeed, any concern with material resources may be judged as a heartless, self-serving and instrumental response to death.

The above factors suggest there may be much to be learned by highlighting the strengths of these Senegalese accounts of family deaths, eg informal support, death as a communal event, a framework for acceptance of death. By contrast, in many Western societies it is the *absence* of such informal familial and community support that may sometimes be explicitly missed (Granek, 2016; Thompson, 2016), while bereaved individuals struggle to find ‘meaning’ in death (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Implications for bereavement support and professional practice

Such attention to diverse cultural responses to death is essential for recognising social (in)justice, including privilege and social inequalities shaping experiences of death (Harris, 2010). It is also vital for effective support, to develop culturally conscientious practice that can take account of cultural mistrust (Bordere, 2016a). Indeed, the ‘luxury of obliviousness’¹¹ (Johnson, 2006 quoted by Bordere, 2016b), so often enjoyed by the privileged, must not be allowed to extend to an ignorance of how international power relationships shape knowledge production (Bhambra

& Santos, 2017; Connell, 2014), with the pervasive risk that Western understandings of ‘bereavement’ become standardised through a form of ‘facile universalism’ (Jullien, 2008/2014). Focusing on reverse innovation, uncovering the assumptions of dominant Western theoretical frameworks and professional practices through attention to the challenges in understanding family deaths in Senegal, may introduce fresh perspectives on the limitations of Western knowledge shaped through ‘our own’ cultural blinkers.

Finally, what are the implications for bereavement practitioners, trained in dominant Western perspectives? One central thought is that *all* forms of ‘bereavement’ intervention carry risks of being experienced as a regulation of grief, with people worrying about grieving ‘the right way’. Yet seeking to provide support across ‘cultural divides’ entails *particular* forms of risk and misunderstanding, with no magic guarantees things will go well, leading to a need for ‘cultural humility’ (Rosenblatt, 2016), while also recognising the risks for the practitioner of the apparent loss of certainty and ‘expertise’. The hope may be to recognise people both as *members* of diverse and dynamic cultural groups and as *individuals* who create their own understandings of the world and of life and death (Shapiro, 1996). Furthermore, it is important to recognise the balance between these is itself likely to vary dynamically in culturally patterned ways. But some key questions for practitioners and researchers may be raised through the Senegalese research.¹²

Key questions to ask, in terms of the meanings and understandings at play, include:

- **what** is it that is felt to be lost through this death?
- what expectations are apparent about **how** to respond to the death?
- in **what form** is the experience expressed?

These questions understand the significance of death in terms of its **social contexts**, including cultural, familial and personal understandings of relationships.

Such questions may be tentatively expressed more concretely¹² as:

1. What are the cultural frames of reference people draw on in making sense of a death? How do these help/hinder?
2. Who do children and adults turn to for emotional and spiritual support and advice? How do they share their grief with others? How far do different family

¹⁰ Although there is some provision for family based bereavement therapy based on family systems theory in the US, this is not widespread in the UK.

¹¹ Indicating how inequalities may not be recognised by those on the privileged side of such social dynamics, while being all too apparent to those on the oppressive side .

¹² These questions are primarily based on our Senegal research findings, but also reflect some insights from Shapiro (1996, 2008).

members of different generations identify with longstanding traditional customs?

3. What role did the deceased play in the lives of different family members? What material effects, household mobility, changes to familial roles and caring responsibilities, has the death brought about? How can negative impacts of these changes be alleviated?
4. How can children's and adults' informal support networks be strengthened? Which other family members, neighbours, friends or community groups need to be involved in supporting bereaved children and adults?
5. What policy and practice changes are needed to adopt a more holistic, family-focused approach and take account of cultural diversity in responses to death?

For practitioners seeking to develop culturally conscientious practice, Harris and Bordere (2016) sum up key principles, including, above all, a respectful and engaged compassion. Yet, as Zaman et al. (2018) point out, there may be structural, economic and political barriers to free-flowing compassion in Western societies. Such barriers require us to educate ourselves (while avoiding stereotypes) on the varieties of human ways of being in the world, letting go of our own cultural certainties and the arrogance and taken-for-granted privilege of Western thinking, being and living. Such endeavours may be personally very demanding (Shapiro, 1996), while cultural humility requires us to search our own responses, to identify and understand our personal defences, when we are puzzled, uncomfortable, or taken aback by others' responses to death (Rosenblatt, 2016). We hope that, by sharing our own responses and puzzles in listening to Senegalese interviewees, we have been able to convey what may be gained in taking up such challenges. ■

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