

# Responses to family deaths in urban Senegal: making sense of death in a West African context

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DDD 12 Alba Iulia 2-6 September 2016



# Outline

- \* Background

- \* Part 1: 'Responses to death' (Klass, 1999) in Senegal

  - Death stories and explanations: religious versus medical framings

  - Family and neighbourhood context and ethic of solidarité

  - Understanding emotional responses and the significance of the material

- \* Part 2: Points of difference and similarity

- \* Interim conclusions



# Background

- \* 'What is needed... is the willingness to replace sweeping generalizations about grief with its careful and delimited depiction.' (Lofland, 1985:181)
- \* '... emotions cannot be understood outside of the cultures that produce them' (Scheper-Hughes, 1992)
- \* Death as a rupture of personal and social bonds
- \* Death as a threat to the survival of the group
- \* How do people experience death and what meanings do they draw on and create to make sense of it?

# The study

- \* Investigate material and emotional significance of an adult relative's death in diverse sample of families in two cities in Senegal
- \* In-depth interviews with 59 individuals from 30 families
- \* Key informant interviews: 20 policy makers and local leaders
- \* 4 local focus groups
- \* Language and interpretation



# Medical framing? 'Explanations' of the death

'Explanation' of death	
General description of symptoms	26
Medical term used eg brain tumour, hypertension, cancer	24
Religious explanation	18
Accident or assault	6

- \* Being 'tired' - *Maybe she had 'death sickness'*. (Samba, woman aged 51, grandmother had died in her 90s)

# Religious framing

- \* 47 identified as Muslim, 12 identified as Roman Catholic
- \* *I thank the good Lord because it was Him that gave me my mother. Now that he needs her, there's nothing I can do. (Saer, young Muslim man aged 22, mother died 4 months previously)*
- \* *God does it to measure your faith; to see how far your faith goes; the depth of your faith. That's it. God allows you to be tested and in this test He will observe you to see how far your faith goes; the depth of your faith. (Roman Catholic priest)*

# Religious framing in caring for the dead

- \* Caring for the body – washing – undertaken by relatives and others under supervision of Imam
- \* Burial of the body - gendered nature of Muslim burials; prohibitions against crying for both Muslim and RC
- \* Funerals – before (RC) or after (Muslim) burial – key elements include religious aspects + food – often over several days
- \* Mourning practices – widowhood amongst Muslim and RC
- \* Prayers (mutual caring) and offerings (remembrance) – becoming part of ‘the dead’ – and fulfilling their wishes
- \* Visiting the cemetery + religious special occasions and anniversaries

# Family relationships and meanings

- \* Extent and fluidity of households
  - \* 7 out of 10 households larger than 6 people
- \* Children and the intergenerational contract +importance of sibling ties
- \* Interdependence and solidarité
- \* Family as core moral value - *[Family] is very important; it's sacred for us... that's what we're living here for... we're together and cohesion reigns amongst us... Without the family, we're nothing. Without friends we're nothing; without neighbours, we're nothing... So that's how we are and that's even what our religion recommends. (Boubabacar, aged 44)*
- \* *The relative is part of the family. Whatever their age if you lose a relative it's as if you've lost a part of your own body. (F3)*
- \* Ideals and realities



# Family and neighbourhood support

- \* *You have to like your neighbour because the neighbour is the first relative. That day, it was the neighbours who came first. [Relatives live far away]... when you have good neighbours they're great. (N'diaw, 55 year old widower, wife died a year ago )*
- \* *Yaram spoke of relatives, neighbours, and friends who attended the funeral - They came and everybody brought something. (Yaram, 70 year old woman, son-in-law died a year ago)*
- \* *Diodio felt they had less support than others might receive - no..people often said we were a rich family because all the family worked (Diodio, 22 year old woman, grandfather died two years previously)*

# Understanding responses to death: material and emotional

- \* *'It's hard' – It's very hard, I almost went mad. (Nogaye, 46 year old widow, husband died a year previously) - I felt bad; It hurt; I was sad; I was grief-stricken (younger interviewees)*
- \* *Pain and shock – Ah! What pain, loneliness, sadness. (Simone, 39 year old widow, husband died 10 months previously) - I kept crying and people tried to console me but they couldn't. (N'della, young woman aged 19, father died 6 months previously)*
- \* *Being 'alone' in the 'void' – I felt really alone. Even at the time that you're talking you feel that there's a complete void there. (N'diogou, aged 22, mother died 5 months previously,*
- \* *What's been lost – particular role, friendship, companionship, particular personality, advice + **support** - They don't know how they'll be able to organize now and live without this person who often was in charge. (Priest)*

# Socially regulated emotions

- \* *I also encourage my children, especially my eldest, because crying and beating yourself up doesn't do any good. [Her mother] had gone, so all she could do was to pray for her soul to rest in peace. (N'diouga, 63 year old widower, wife died a year previously)*
- \* *There are people that cry inside and there are others that prefer to get it out. There are others that go to pieces; they pass out and keep crying. I'll tell you one case; my maman's case. Before she died she asked me not to shout to call people, or something like that. I should be strong... When the moment came, I couldn't cry. (Focus group participant)*
- \* *You shouldn't exaggerate because everything has a limit...religion doesn't tolerate a person crying for so long [during the funeral period]... Of course religion allows us to cry, but if you persist, it's like calling into question Divine Will. (Chef du quartier, Dakar)*

# Differences?

- \* The absence of professionals or formal support systems
- \* Absence of medicalisation
- \* The absence of therapeutic discourse, no accounts of grief as a process, or as an inner journey
- \* The language of emotional pain/presence of cultural and religious scripts i.e. very much shared, not individualised
- \* The meaning and experience of the family relationship that has been lost
- \* The context of *solidarité*
- \* Material deprivation and the threat to survival and the future – the intrinsic connectedness of emotional and material experiences.

# Similarities?

- \* Pressure towards acceptance of the death
- \* Continuing bonds and remembrance
- \* Social regulation, sequestration and taboos
  
- \* Highlights crucial need for stepping outside 'Western' assumptions
  
- \* But also highlights need for more attention to family & social & material contexts of responses to death in the global North

# Interim conclusions/issues

- \* Challenges of seeking to understand responses to deaths in global South
- \* Particular styles of interviews and 'narratives' of death – very different from those of global North
- \* Central importance of seeking to understand relationships and family practices and meanings
- \* Implications for personhood? Responses to death embedded in relationality (as more than 'relational individuals/selves')
- \* Significance of religious framings and acceptance
- \* Understanding emotions across cultures and their material dimensions