

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