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

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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
‘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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Explanation’ of death</th>
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<tr>
<td>General description of symptoms</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical term used eg brain tumour, hypertension, cancer</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious explanation</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Accident or assault</td>
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* Being ‘tired’ - *Maybe she had ‘death sickness’. (Samba, woman aged 51, grandmother had died in her 90s)*
* 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)
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
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)
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