

Exploring responses to death in varying cultural contexts: adopting a reflexive approach



Ruth Evans, Jane Ribbens McCarthy, Sophie Bowlby,
Joséphine Wouango and Fatou Kébé

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Introduction

- Cross-cultural research: process of translation
- Much of death and bereavement studies to date rooted in medicalised and individualised frameworks developed in global North
- Reflexive approach:
 - language and translation issues
 - multiple positionings of the research team
 - emotionality of the research process
 - interpretation of the data

Death in the family in urban Senegal research project

- Aim to investigate material and emotional significance of an adult death in diverse sample of families of varying socio-economic status and ethnicities in two cities in Senegal
- In-depth interviews with 60 ‘bereaved’ adults, children and young people (aged 12-30), 20 local leaders and professionals, focus groups , observations

Death in the family in urban Senegal research project

- Developing approach to data analysis:
 - cultural norms around death and grief in the UK, Burkina Faso and Senegal
 - Interviewed each other about own experiences of the death of a relative
 - Adopt a reflexive and multi-layered interpretive approach to knowing 'narrated subjects' (Mauthner and Doucet, 2008).

Complexities of the research

- Time constraints
- Heat & the need for privacy and confidentiality
- Approach of Ramadan and fitting interviews around participants' work, schooling and fasting periods.

Translation issues

- Linguistic usage reflects structural and historical power relationships in Senegal
- Working with three languages (English, French, Wolof)

Translation issues

- Interview schedules: English to French:
 - care within households, caring for the body
 - Bereavement, mourning: *deuil, deudji*
 - Grief: *chagrin* and *peine, peiner*

Multiple positionings of the research team

- Multiple and diverse ways each of us understood as ‘outsiders’ or ‘insiders’, ‘strange’ or ‘familiar’ to participants and each other:
- Age, gender, ethnicity and class, but also our own experiences of death, our academic expertise, family experience, our presence or not ‘in the field’.
- Interviews with each other: deaths involved varied set of family or family-like relationships, and connected in variable ways with our life course and our biographical narratives

Emotionality of the research process

- Hubbard et al (2001):
 - the emotional labour of the researcher
 - the possibilities for emotionally sensed knowledge
 - Issues concerning the sociology of emotions
- Interviews with each other: how project connects to emotional lives of team members
- Cumulative effects on the research team, feelings of empathy, compassion and helplessness in listening to participants' accounts
- Death of one or more family members or colleague during research led to further personal and shared reflections on death and loss

Producing ‘emotionally sensed knowledge’

- Challenge of reflecting on emotional responses: conflicts with field researchers’ prior training and experience
- Interview profiles to accompany transcriptions
- Aim to make visible:
 - translation of emotions, ideas and socio-cultural norms and practices from Wolof-French-English
 - individual and shared embodied experiences
 - reflections and interpretations following fieldwork.

Interpretation of the data

- Shared and differing positionings of the research team, experience of the death of a relative and our presence in the 'field' shape our interpretations of the data
- Need to understand the meanings and experiences of marriage, family and relationships amongst our interviewees in urban Senegal to understand their experiences of death of a relative

Interpretation of the data

- Religious beliefs and practices are very apparent: potential meaning of a death (*“it's God's will”*), how to respond - mourning practices and managing emotions (*“Your tears are like pouring hot water on the body”*).
- Differing perspectives in team: socially accepted way of framing a death that might also offer some comfort, accepting the death? (Fatou and Ruth)
- Personal experience of the extreme disruptiveness of grief and the difficulties of containing emotions: religious refrain could create an additional burden? (Jane)

Conclusion

- Complex process filtered by multiple positionings, languages and emotions of research team
- Benefits of a reflexive approach:
 - understand our own positions
 - to ask questions of the data and develop our approach to interpretation
 - develop our understandings of the social, material and emotional dimensions of the death of a relative
 - understand each other as emotional beings.
- Multiple professional, research-based, emotional and personal selves as resources

Further information...

- Updates on our blog:
<http://www.blogs.reading.ac.uk/deathinthefamilyinsenegal>
- Symposium on 'Family Troubles: Care and change in diverse contexts', University of Reading, September 2015.
- Contact: r.evans@reading.ac.uk

