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Producing emotionally sensed knowledge? Reflexivity and emotions in researching responses to death

Article

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Title: Producing emotionally sensed knowledge? Reflexivity, emotions and cross-cultural translation of responses to death

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

Corresponding author:
Dr. Ruth Evans
Associate Professor in Human Geography
Department of Geography & Environmental Science
University of Reading
Whiteknights PO Box 227
Reading RG6 6AB
UK
Email: r.evans@reading.ac.uk

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Title page

Producing emotionally sensed knowledge? Reflexivity and emotions in researching responses to death

Abstract

This paper reflects on the methodological complexities of producing emotionally-sensed knowledge about responses to family deaths in urban Senegal. Through engaging in 'uncomfortable reflexivity', we critically explore the multiple positionings of the research team comprised of UK, Senegalese and Burkinabé researchers and those of participants in Senegal and interrogate our own cultural assumptions. We explore the emotional labour of the research process from an ethic of care perspective and reflect on how our multiple positionings and emotions influence the production and interpretation of the data, particularly exemplified through our differing responses to diverse meanings of 'family' and religious refrains. We show how our approach of 'uncomfortable reflexivity' helps to reveal the work of emotions in research, thereby producing 'emotionally sensed knowledge' about responses to death and contributing to the cross-cultural study of emotions.

Key words

Bereavement and responses to death

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Emotions in research

Reflexivity and positionality

Feminist ethic of care

Meanings of 'family'

Senegal, West Africa

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Introduction

In this paper[1], we reflect on the methodological complexities of producing 'emotionally-sensed knowledge' (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001) about responses to death, care and family relations in urban Senegal, West Africa. After discussing the literature on reflexivity and emotions in research, we give a brief overview of the research methodology. We explore the multiple positionings of the research team and participants and interrogate our cultural assumptions. We examine the emotional labour of the research process from an ethic of care perspective. We reflect on our efforts to draw on our emotions as resources in producing and interpreting the data, including analysing our differing responses to diverse meanings of 'family' and religious refrains. In so doing, we show how an 'uncomfortable reflexivity' helps to reveal the work of emotions in research, thereby producing 'emotionally sensed knowledge' about responses to death in varying cultural contexts.

Emotionality and reflexivity

As part of the 'reflexive turn' in the social sciences in recent decades, a growing literature has explored the emotional dynamics of qualitative research (Bondi, 2005; Holland, 2007; Watts, 2008; Widdowfield, 2000). Authors emphasise the potential relevance of researchers' emotional responses to fieldwork experiences as analytic resources and their importance to the production of knowledge. Hubbard et al. (2001)

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identify three inter-related components of the emotionality of the research process: the emotional labour of the researcher; the role of 'emotionally-sensed knowledge'; and contributing to the sociology of emotion. The authors argue that unless emotion in research is acknowledged, 'not only will researchers be left vulnerable, but also our understandings of the social world will remain impoverished' (ibid, p.119). In this article, we focus on the first two of these components.

Death and bereavement are often considered 'sensitive' research topics due to the deep emotions that may be evoked among both participants and researchers, and the potential disclosure of highly personal information (Brannen, 1988, p.552). The challenges qualitative researchers may face in 'sensitive research' include rapport development, researcher self-disclosure, listening to untold stories, feelings of guilt and vulnerability, leaving the research relationship, and researcher exhaustion (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007). While many suggest that emotional risks to researchers should be anticipated and planned for as much as possible (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Hubbard et al., 2001), Sampson, Bloor, & Fincham (2008, p.930) highlight the unpredictability of emotional 'turmoils and dilemmas'.

In research on death and bereavement, Rowling (1999) argues that there is a particular likelihood of loss experiences resonating with a researcher's own anticipated and real

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life events because of the many personal losses we all experience during the lifecourse, compared to experiences of other sensitive issues which may not be as prevalent. Watts (2008, p.9) suggests, however, that empathy is not based only on shared experience, but is relational and based on an 'intuitive connectedness to others that, without words, communicates interest in and care about others'.

In this article, emotions are understood as embodied and relational, existing in-between people, things and places, rather than viewing emotions as only individual (Ansell & Van Blerk, 2005; Evans and Thomas, 2009; Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Emotions involve both thinking and feeling, an understanding which goes beyond the Cartesian mind-body split (Henry, 2012). Indeed, Solomon (1997) argues that emotions are 'judgements', that is, 'modes of construal, ways of viewing and engaging in the world, including sometimes, ways of construing a self' (p.297). The study of emotions[2] is therefore 'inextricably bound up with ethics' (ibid, p.292).

In the research reported here, we adopted a contextual feminist ethics of care, which emphasises relationality and fundamental human issues of interdependence, vulnerability and potential for suffering (Tronto, 1993; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012).

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From this perspective, emotionality and caring are central to ethical or '*care*ful' judgement (Edwards and Mauthner, 2012, p.25; Sevenhuisjen, 1998).

Ethnographers have long reflected on how far they are 'outside' of the culture they are studying, how far they are seeking 'insider' cultural knowledge and insight (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990; Powdermaker, 1966, cited by Aull Davies, 1999), and how they may be positioned as outsiders, insiders, or occupying a privileged/ marginal space (or something more multi-faceted), in relation to the lives of the people they are studying and re-presenting. While risking reifying culture as a more-or-less stable and bounded entity if used crudely, such questions point to significant issues of how far all researchers are positioned by their identities, and experiences/constructions of self, in multiple ways in relation to their research participants.

Reflexive methods have been increasingly adopted as part of social research methodologies and discussions often focus on 'practices of self-reflexivity' which 'attempt to account for how the self is involved in the research process' (Pillow, 2003, p.182); researchers consider how race, nationality, language proficiency, gender or age may shape interactions with participants and influence how they are positioned in the 'field'. Furthermore, reflexivity as a feature of humanistic ethnography may lead to the view that 'use of self' as an ethnographic resource is unavoidable, leading in varying

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methodological directions, including a focus on ‘auto-ethnography’ (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner Ellis, 2011; Henry, 2012).

Reflexivity thus raises dilemmas and potential dangers, with no simple answers. Pillow (2003) among others critiques practices of self-reflexivity that result in a simple identification of the writer’s positionality with respect to ‘her subjects’. Pillow (2003, p.184) argues that self-reflexivity, predicated upon the ability of the researcher to know her/his own subjectivity and to make this known to the reader, is limited because such practices are 'dependent on a knowable subject' and 'often collapse into linear tellings that render the researcher and the research subject as familiar to each other (and thus to the reader)'. Such practices may also be problematic if they equate the 'knowing researcher' as somehow having 'better', more 'valid' data (ibid). We acknowledge such limits and dilemmas of self-reflexivity, but we also explicitly recognise the inevitability of the power dynamics of research relationships (Ribbens, 1989) and the relevance of self to the production of knowledge, whether acknowledged explicitly or not. We thus seek to engage in what Pillow (2003, p.188) terms 'uncomfortable reflexivity'; a critical use of reflexivity that 'seeks to know while at the same time situating this knowing as tenuous'.

Research methodology

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156 This article draws on our experiences of conducting cross-cultural qualitative research
157 on responses to death, care and family relations in urban Senegal[3]. The study aimed to
158 investigate the material and emotional significance of a death of a close adult relative
159 for family members of different genders and generations, focusing predominantly on the
160 three largest ethnic groups (see Evans et al., 2016).

161

162 Given the sensitivity of the topic, a qualitative methodology was considered most
163 appropriate to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of different family
164 members who have lost a significant other. Our approach was informed by a feminist
165 ethic of care (Tronto, 1993), which prioritises listening to the voices of participants,
166 although we recognise the complexity of this (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008), particularly
167 in cross-cultural work. This approach guided the care and ethical approach with which
168 we sought to interact with participants and interpret their experiences.

169

170 We identified a purposive sample of 30 families[4] who had experienced an adult
171 relative's death in the previous five years, drawn from two contrasting urban areas in
172 Dakar and Kaolack. In total, we conducted in-depth interviews[5] with 59 family
173 members including 30 children and youth (aged 12-30) who had experienced the death
174 of a relative and with 23 key informants, in addition to four focus groups.

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All the audio-recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed and translated from Wolof (widely spoken in urban Senegal) into French by Fatou and translated into English by a translator. We developed a thematic coding framework through reflexive conversations among the research team. All the family transcripts were coded by Joséphine using Nvivo software and individual and generationally interlinked analyses were developed by the first four authors, using an analytic summary template for each family.

Our reflexive conversations included recorded and transcribed discussions between team members (comprising British, Burkinabé and Senegalese researchers) on the cultural norms surrounding death and grief in the UK, Burkina-Faso and in Senegal using Walter's (2010) checklist of questions. We also interviewed each other about our experiences of the death of a relative using our interview schedules to understand more about our own and each others' emotional responses to the death of a relative, as well as the feelings aroused by being interviewed on this topic.

Our fieldwork does not aim to provide a 'full' ethnography, yet does want to step beyond current theorising and research in order to increase understanding of responses to deaths (Klass, 1999) experienced outside the contexts of the Minority World[6]. Thus, we sought

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to develop a reflexive and multi-layered interpretive approach to understanding participants' accounts when reading, analysing and coding each transcript, although the forms and extent of narration at times presented significant challenges for interpretation, particularly regarding emotional responses.

Following data analysis and writing the preliminary report, a series of participatory workshops were held in the selected neighbourhoods with 45 participants who had participated in family interviews or focus groups a year and a half previously. Two policy workshops were facilitated in Dakar and Kaolack with 29 government and non-governmental representatives and Muslim religious and local leaders, to gain feedback on our preliminary findings and policy implications. In line with our feminist methodological approach and ethical concerns, we aim to balance the multiple, sometimes conflicting, voices of our participants, the researchers and the perspectives represented within theories and frameworks which researchers bring to the study (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008).

The multiple positionings of the research team

Our conversations about grief and culture in our countries of origin and readings of each others' interview transcripts have revealed the multiple, diverse and intersectional ways we may be positioned and understood as 'outsiders' or 'insiders', or as 'strange' or

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'familiar' not only to research participants but also to each other. Our emotional responses to death are enmeshed in such differing personal, social, cultural and religious identities and experiences.

While we are all women researchers, we occupy different positions in terms of our age and lifecourse, generational and family positioning, stage of career and current occupational status, nationality, race, religious affiliation, class backgrounds, affluence, experiences of death, areas of academic expertise and research experience, and our presence or not in the 'field'. In terms of age and lifecourse Ruth, Joséphine and Fatou are all in their thirties, while Jane and Sophie are mothers and further along in their lifecourse and careers, but are both new to cross-cultural empirical work. In terms of nationality, race, religious affiliations and stage of career, Ruth, Jane and Sophie are white British women academics based in the UK, who identify respectively as being of Church of England heritage, as a Quaker or as having no religious affiliation; Joséphine is a black Burkinabé postdoctoral researcher of Roman Catholic religious affiliation, a Belgian resident temporarily based in the UK for this research project; and Fatou is a black Senegalese researcher of Muslim faith, belonging to the *Mouride* brotherhood and based in Dakar, Senegal. Our French-English translator is a white, Irish woman of Roman Catholic heritage who has lived in Dakar for many years. Not only do such features of our personal positioning and experience help to shape field researchers'

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235 interactions with participants, they also inevitably shape the power dynamics within the
236 team itself and the ways we interpret the interviewees' responses, and thus processes of
237 knowledge production (Gillies & Lucey, 2007).
238
239 In our interviews with each other, we all chose to talk about deceased relatives who
240 played different roles in our lives and in those of family members. These included an
241 uncle, husband, and mother (Ruth, Jane and Sophie, respectively), as well as a friend
242 considered a member of the family and a grandmother's cousin who was considered a
243 mother (Joséphine and Fatou). We thus all had different relationships with these
244 significant others, which varied by age, generational position, nature of the death,
245 different kinds of intimacies and levels of familiarity with the deceased person, and
246 length of time since their death. These deaths also connected in different ways to our
247 own lifecourse; from the '*devastating'* biographical disruption that Jane experienced
248 when her husband died, to the upsetting, but more expected loss of Sophie's mother and
249 Fatou's grandmother in old age, or the previously only self-acknowledged and difficult
250 to articulate changes in ideas, spirituality and outlook on life that Ruth associated with
251 her uncle's death, which had been reawakened by a recent colleague's death and
252 experiences of illness. Through reflecting on how our own personal experiences of the
253 death of a significant relative connect with our emotions, relationships and lifecourse,
254 we endeavoured to become more alert to responses to a death that challenge our

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otherwise taken-for-granted expectations of how a family death may link with interviewees' lifecourse and future outlook.

We sought to acknowledge and make visible to each other our cultural world views and personal experiences, while disrupting our sense of familiarity and distance from participants' and each others' experiences and highlighting the inevitable situatedness and tenuousness of our interpretations. In so doing, we aim to use reflexivity critically to push ‘toward an unfamiliar, towards the uncomfortable' (Pillow 2003, p.192).

Multiple positionings of participants

Throughout the research process, we have sought to reflect on how our own positionings and emotional responses relate to participants' multiple positionings. The heterogeneous sample enabled us to explore the range of experiences and viewpoints found amongst people living in diverse circumstances. The largest proportions of the sample had lost a husband (15 interviewees), a mother (15 interviewees) or a father (10 interviewees), representing a greater preponderance of close kinship ties than in our own interviews.

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The majority of family interviewees were Muslim (46), reflecting the religious affiliation of the vast majority of the population in Senegal, and were from the three largest ethnic groups (Wolof, Toucouleur/Hal Pulaar, Serer), while 12 were Roman Catholic of Serer and minority ethnicities. We sought to specifically recruit a small number of Christian families to give insight into religious differences. In our interpretations of the data, we sought to draw out religious and cultural differences linked to ethnicity where relevant, while acknowledging the syncreticism between such religious and cultural differences. Jane, Sophie and Joséphine were less familiar than Ruth and Fatou with interpreting how burial, funeral or widowhood-mourning practices varied according to ethnicity and religion in the Senegalese context. On the other hand, Jane was more inclined than Ruth and Sophie to seek some spiritual insights through the family death discussed in our own interviews. Time needed to be taken to develop greater cross-cultural understanding about the responses of some participants about particular cultural practices and religious affiliations to Muslim brotherhoods.

In terms of material circumstances, many participants' everyday struggles for survival contrasted sharply with Ruth's, Jane's, Sophie's and Joséphine's affluence and the security of the our situations, living in Western Europe with access to basic services, education, healthcare and welfare systems. A further stark difference was evident between the research team and participants regarding gender disparities in access to

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education. Many of the women interviewed had very little formal education and needed Wolof-French interpretation, which constrained to some extent the rapport that Ruth and Joséphine (non-Wolof speakers) could build with participants (see Evans et al., 2017 for further discussion of language issues).

Recognising emotional labour in the 'field'

Working with emotions and an ethic of care involves recognition of the emotional labour of both interviewing (Hubbard et al., 2001; Dickson-Swift et al, 2007) and being interviewed for the research. Rowling (1999) argues that self-reflexivity is vital in research on loss and grief. Our interviews with each other provided valuable insights into the emotionality of being interviewed and the production of data. For example, Ruth found herself talking about her uncle's death and her family in ways she had not anticipated and experienced the interview as quite an *'emotional ordeal'*, reflected in her body language and tone of voice, while Jane narrated some very difficult life experiences using an emotional language, but otherwise without any explicit embodied indications of emotion. Thus, the expression of emotion in the interview setting is not straightforward. The interviews also showed that the research connects with the emotional lives of all team members and highlighted how personal experiences may translate into 'public' debate and research (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). Indeed, four members of the team experienced the death of one or more family members or a

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313 colleague during the course of the project, which has led to further personal and shared
314 reflections.
315
316 Concerns about the emotionality of 'sensitive' research topics and the ethical
317 requirement not to cause 'harm' or 'distress' may alter the research methodology and
318 ethical protocols. In the research discussed here, we decided to set age 12 as the lower
319 age limit for research participants, due to a concern not to evoke too much distress for
320 young children when talking about the death of a relative. We recognise however that
321 this concern may be influenced more by our feelings of being uncomfortable talking
322 about this topic with young children. When conducting research on death and other
323 'sensitive' or upsetting topics, Ansell & van Blerk (2005, p.72) observe that researchers
324 may not be causing the distress, but 'merely provoking it into the open'. While this may
325 be 'uncomfortable for the researcher, the interviewee is not necessarily "harmed" by the
326 experience' and it can be cathartic (ibid). In our research, many of the interviewees
327 thanked the researchers and appeared to appreciate the opportunity to talk about their
328 deceased relative during the interview.
329
330 Perhaps unsurprisingly, several participants (all women/girls) also became tearful
331 during interviews. The researchers asked participants if they wished to stop or take a
332 break, but also acknowledged the emotions they were expressing and often resumed

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after a short break. Ruth, Joséphine and Fatou recognised how in such moments, researchers are often moved to respond to interviewees simply as fellow human beings (see also Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Rowling, 1999), showing empathy, compassion and care about the pain and difficult experiences they have recounted. This can cause a conflict of roles, as we all felt to some extent that we had to manage our emotions during interview settings, in accordance with our perceptions of the 'feeling rules' governing such encounters (Hochschild, 1987). For example, Fatou acknowledged that one may sometimes want to cry when interviewees recounted difficult, upsetting experiences, but she felt that, as a professional researcher, she should not show her emotions to the participant.

Researchers may feel unsure about whether self-disclosure about one's own experiences is helpful or appropriate in interview settings (Ribbens, 1989). Fatou often sought to console young people who were upset, by talking in Wolof, sometimes directly about her own personal experiences, and sometimes indirectly. As Dickson-Swift et al. (2007, p.333) observe, although self-disclosure is often cited as a way of 'levelling the field' between researchers and the researched, it can sometimes make researchers feel vulnerable. It is therefore important to consider the level of self-disclosure researchers are willing to express.Fatou also often referred to her Muslim faith, shared with the majority of interviewees. She saw her responses as strategies to calm the interviewee and help them feel that they were not alone in their suffering. Joséphine found herself in

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354 an uncomfortable position at such moments, as language distanced her to some extent
355 from participants. She sought to acknowledge the participant's pain and suffering
356 through quietly 'being with' them until they were ready to resume or end the interview
357 (Rowling, 1999) and added words in French, where appropriate, to indicate that she
358 understood that talking about this subject could bring feelings of sadness.
359
360 Goodrum and Keys (2007) experienced a detachment, which they felt was needed to
361 preserve their mental health when repeatedly carrying out harrowing interviews. While
362 managing emotions and feeling detached from participants' experiences may facilitate
363 data collection, listening to numerous stories of death and suffering may nevertheless
364 have a significant emotional impact on researchers, as Ruth, Joséphine and Fatou have
365 found. Joséphine found it difficult and painful to conduct successive, tearful interviews,
366 sometimes on a daily basis. While managing her emotions in interview settings, inside,
367 Fatou felt dispirited and was afraid, because although she was aware of death, she had
368 never thought much about it previously. Her fears of death were particularly acute
369 during the data collection period when she often heard people's stories of the death of
370 their parents. While this fear has diminished by the end of the project, it returns when
371 she hears news of the death of someone she knows, because she now takes time to think
372 about it. Ruth has found the shift of her research focus to responses to death more
373 difficult than she anticipated and has valued the opportunity to work in a team on this

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project, which contrasted to the previous projects, when she was the sole researcher and lacked others with whom to share her experiences. Overall, though, we feel that listening to participants' life stories and relating this to wider literature helps researchers to understand more about life, death and suffering, which in turn helps to recognise, name and dispel our own fears.

Ruth, Joséphine and Fatou were used to feeling a sense of helplessness when listening to participants' accounts of poverty and other problems due to previous research in Africa. Nevertheless they found it particularly difficult when asked directly for help with school fees and other expenses during or after the interview. Joséphine and Fatou discussed with each other whether they could provide any personal assistance but realised it was beyond their means to assist all the interviewees in need of support[7]. Few NGO or government services were available to assist families in need in Senegal, due to the limited formal welfare system. This demonstrates the difficulty of implementing ethical guidelines recommended by institutional research ethics committees based in the Minority World[6] which often expect 'professionals' providing support services to be available for referral if participants become distressed. Such ethical recommendations fail to take adequate account of the very real material constraints and ethical dilemmas facing researchers working in the Majority World (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014).

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Fatou has found it difficult to conduct the interviews and transcribe the audio-recordings during the illness and death of her grandmother, as well as the death of her aunt whom she cared for in hospital. The interviews resulted in her thinking about 'death' much more in the context of her family and being more aware that her aunt was going to die. She found the graphic account, given in a focus group by one woman who had helped to prepare the bodies of her deceased mother and aunt, particularly difficult. In listening to people's accounts, 'we are effectively opening up in an embodied and personal way to the suffering of that other person that may give us a heightened sense of our own mortality and vulnerability' (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, p.342). The focus group was the first time that Fatou had heard details of how dead bodies are prepared for burial. For days after this discussion, she became more pious and was more afraid of death. We sought to provide space for discussion of such emotions within the team and this led to various reflections about how (dead) bodies may be experienced differently in ways that may be culturally patterned, arousing varying emotions – a question that guided our interpretation of the transcripts.

As Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) note, transcribing an interview on a sensitive topic can be an emotional experience in itself, yet transcribers are often overlooked with regard to ethical issues the research may raise. Fatou has found hearing people's narratives on the

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audio-recordings and transcribing the interviews just as emotionally difficult as when hearing their stories for the first time when interpreting in the field. Similarly, Ruth has often found it more emotionally demanding to read and make sense of the written transcripts once back in the more comfortable surroundings of her home in the UK.

Such cumulative impact also relates to our sense of what the world is like and how we respond to suffering, which, for Jane, is both a spiritual question - connected to values of hope and love – as well as a profound challenge to cross-cultural academic work addressing issues of suffering (Ribbens McCarthy, 2013) and seeking to make a positive contribution to the world. Through de-briefing meetings, telephone and skype calls and some face-to-face meetings, we have sought to create space for discussion of these emotional impacts on researchers in the field, during the transcription and translation of audio-recordings and in the data analysis phase, so that researchers, interpreters and translators feel supported in their work (Hubbard et al., 2001).

Participants' questions about the practical implications of our research, alongside our feelings of privilege in being allowed to listen to such personal stories (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007), added to our desire for the research to make a difference towards positive social change, in line with our feminist ethic of care. This reinforced our sense of responsibility to ensure the research findings help improve the situation of families

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experiencing similar difficulties in future. We revised our original dissemination plans to include more opportunity to discuss the preliminary findings with participants, rank policy and practice recommendations and engage further with policymakers and practitioners, which fed into the final report (Evans et al, 2016). We hope this dissemination process may in turn lead to beneficial social 'impacts' (Evans, 2016).

Emotions as resources in producing data

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing researchers is how to use the recognition that emotions have epistemological significance, as argued by feminist and interpretive research paradigms, in producing ‘emotionally-sensed knowledge' (Hubbard et al. 2001). In this regard, we asked the field researchers to write a research journal, including reflections on their emotional responses to participants' narratives. Field researchers sometimes found this conflicted with their earlier research training and experience. Joséphine and Fatou were trained to be neutral in interview settings and were unused to writing about their emotions in a research journal. They were concerned about bias and were uncomfortable/ unwilling to write about, and on occasion, to talk about, their emotions, viewing emotions as 'private'; writing a fieldwork journal was regarded as an additional task during intensive periods of fieldwork. Similarly, while they sometimes shared experiences of conducting the interviews, at other times, they chose not to talk about it and preferred instead to acknowledge the emotional labour and

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pain of the interview alone. This contrasted with Ruth's epistemological and ontological stance, who found writing a research journal both therapeutic and helpful in understanding her own emotional responses to interviewees and in reflecting further on methodological questions and how best to support and manage the team. This difference resonates with wider cultural differences between the Minority and Majority Worlds[6], whereby greater attention is generally paid to emotional analysis and introspection in the former (Demmer, 2007), a difference which has also been evident in our analysis of the Senegal interviews.

The research project developed from Ruth's pilot research during two months of fieldwork in Senegal (Evans, 2014; 2015) and although she led the initial stages of the fieldwork, she was, alongside Jane and Sophie, very reliant on Joséphine and Fatou to convey the emotional interactions of the family interviews themselves. Jane and Sophie were not present for any of the fieldwork, as is common in research teams in which more established academics have little or no involvement in the data collection process[8]. We have encouraged a greater focus on the emotions and embodied knowledge shared in interviews by talking with the field researchers about their emotional responses and asking them to write profiles of each interview. Profiles include a description of the interview setting, how interviewees responded during the interview, and researchers' feelings and reflections on the interview. This process helped to develop more

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474 understanding of the multiple layers of meaning and interactions that produce and
475 construct the final interview transcript. These include making visible the translation – in
476 the broadest sense - of emotions, ideas and socio-cultural norms and practices from
477 local languages to French and then to English, of embodied experiences and the
478 emotions experienced in interview settings, and of reflections following fieldwork and
479 during analysis, which all help to produce 'emotionally-sensed knowledge'.
480
481 Fatou preferred to talk about particular interview contexts and her responses to
482 interviewees' experiences, rather than provide a written account. Our continued
483 conversations with her, while based in Senegal, throughout the data analysis and writing
484 phases (not originally built into the project design) and during dissemination, were
485 crucial in furthering our understandings of emotional interactions in the field.
486
487 Recognising and conveying the emotionality of the interview setting to others requires
488 trust and understanding, and may pose particular challenges if researchers do not feel
489 comfortable with adopting this approach or are unused to attending to and interpreting
490 emotion[9]. As Hubbard et al comment, 'The challenge therefore is how we can construct
491 meaning and develop understanding and knowledge in an academic environment that,
492 on the whole, trains researchers to be objective and 'extract out' emotion' (2001, p.135).
493 When asked to write about her emotional responses to interviewees' accounts in

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interview profiles, Joséphine's response has sometimes been to say to herself, *"but I'm not a psychologist or have not received training in such issues, so how can I interpret people's emotions?".* She feels that writing about her own emotional reactions could lead to a misinterpretation of the data, which points to the variable significance of reflexivity across the differing ontological and epistemological stances of team members.

By attending to and openly discussing emotions within the research team, we sought to improve the possibilities for understanding emotions across cultural contexts, build the confidence of team members in working with emotions and reduce the risk of imposing particular cultural frameworks of emotional understanding. Creating an ongoing open dialogue about emotions nevertheless also depends on researchers' personalities, team power dynamics, levels of trust and differing communication preferences. Our contextual ethic of care sought to accommodate conflict, disagreement and ambivalence rather than attempting to eliminate it (Edwards & Mauthner, 2012).

Emotions as resources in interpreting the data

While social differences influence our interactions in the field, less attention is generally given to the ways in which emotions may influence interpretation of the data. Yet researchers' sometimes similar and sometimes differing cultural worldviews,

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514 experiences and understandings of socio-cultural norms and expectations around death,
515 and the emotionality of the research process, inevitably shape interpretations of the
516 research data. We have tried to attend to our emotional responses, even if this is
517 uncomfortable at times, risking exposure of our own assumptions and associated
518 emotions. Our overall goal is to understand interviewees' own understandings of their
519 experiences of the death of a relative and its significance for their lives, 'as an evocation
520 of close experience that stands for itself' (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1991, p.293), which
521 contrasts significantly with much existing theorising on death and loss emanating from
522 the Minority World (Klass, 1999).
523
524 Throughout the analysis phase, we sought to reflect on our analytic approach, explore
525 queries with Fatou, and further refine the coding framework and our interpretations of
526 transcripts in order to develop a level of shared cross-cultural understanding amongst
527 ourselves as team members. The pressures of completing the research project within a
528 short timeframe inevitably led to compromises in terms of the time available for
529 discussion about our emotional responses and interpretations. A consequence of the
530 nature of fixed-term research contracts was that, although Joséphine was solely
531 responsible for coding the family interview transcripts in Nvivo (which helped to ensure
532 consistency), her contract finished before the main data analysis, report writing and

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dissemination phases and so she was unable to contribute substantially to the interpretation and written account of the findings.

Emotions bound up with our individual biographies and experience in the 'field' formed an integral part of our interpretation of the interviews, as we sought to understand participants' lives, and the ways in which key concepts underpinning our research questions (including generation, age and so on) played out in these contexts. Differing expectations and meanings associated with 'family' and household composition were evident in our emotional responses to participants' transcripts, including being puzzled by marital and family living arrangements.

In African contexts, Oheneba-Sakyi & Takyi (2006, p.2) define 'family' as 'a dynamic social institution with members coming and going', rather than being defined primarily by 'biological ties that household members may have with each other'. The majority of families interviewed in Senegal lived in relatively large households of 6-10 or 11-20 people. The UK team (Ruth, Jane and Sophie) were much more familiar with living in households with a relatively identifiable and stable membership of fewer than six people, primarily connected by close kinship ties, rather than such large, often multi-generational, fluid, and sometimes polygamous, households shared with a variety of kin

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552 that Fatou and interviewees were used to in Senegal, and Joséphine to a lesser extent in
553 Burkina Faso.

554

555 The tremendous complexity of family relationships and household composition and low
556 significance placed on chronological age in Senegal were apparent when seeking to
557 compare the information about the number of adults and children of different ages
558 living in each household that we gained from family profiles and the interview
559 transcripts with two different family members. We found it was impossible to reconcile
560 what was said in these different accounts, which was initially confusing. After
561 analysing a number of transcripts and struggling to gain a consistent account, we
562 recognised instead the mobility of participants and the fluid, constantly changing nature
563 of households, in which, for example, a relative might be part of the household during
564 the daytime and share meals, but go elsewhere to sleep at night (Bass & Sow, 2006).

565

566 Furthermore, the UK team were puzzled by some participants' living arrangements in
567 which married women (both those in monogamous and polygamous unions) continued
568 to live with their parents rather than with their husband, although non-cohabiting
569 marriage practices are relatively common in Senegal (20 percent of women in their first

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570 marital union do not reside with their husband: Bass & Sow, 2006). Jane and Sophie
571 also experienced a somewhat uncomfortable emotional reaction to the use of the word
572 'give/ given' [French: *donner/ donné*] to refer to a child being fostered/brought up by a
573 relative as if they were their own, as part of traditional child fosterage practices (Beck et
574 al, 2015). These reactions led to further discussions about the nuances of translation and
575 when this language was used rather than the other commonly used term, 'entrust/ foster'
576 [French: *confier*] to refer to such practices. Without sharing such emotional responses
577 among differently positioned research team members and developing cross-cultural
578 understanding of the meanings of marriage and family amongst the interviewees, there
579 can be little insight into the significance of particular family deaths.

580

581 Frequent references to Islam and *"it is God's will"* to explain the inevitability and
582 acceptance of death in the participants' narratives have also posed challenges for the
583 non-Muslim team members to interpret. Ruth's interpretation of one participant's words
584 - as an 'outsider', in terms of religious affiliation, but as an 'insider' in terms of having
585 interviewed the participant - was that people were perhaps expected to say this, but that
586 such religious refrains could also offer people some comfort and help them to accept the
587 death. Fatou as a fellow Senegalese Muslim, shared this interpretation.Jane's response,
588 however, differed, as an 'outsider' in terms of religious affiliation but as an 'insider' in
589 terms of her personal experiences of the death of her husband. Her response helped to

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highlight the fact that such prescriptions and religious refrains may place individuals under considerable pressure to contain their tears and emotional responses to death in public spaces and within the family, which she had found difficult to do in the months following her husband's death, given the common experience of the unpredictability of deep grief.

These different vantage points gave us further cause for reflection on the containment of emotions and segregation of Senegalese widows during a specific mourning period. While we acknowledge here that we are drawing similarities between our experiences and the research subject that Pillow (2003) suggests can be problematic, we do so in order to make visible the 'filters' through which we are working and to continue to question and disrupt our analyses, as part of our efforts to develop an 'uncomfortable reflexivity'. The team's valuing of these differing 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives helped to throw light on such differing norms and expectations and the ways in which these shape responses to death.

In our interviews with each other, both Ruth and Sophie found it difficult to express deeply embodied emotions in words, even though we like to think of ourselves as being reasonably articulate. This has made us even more aware of the partiality of insight that can be gained through a one-off interview and the difficulty of knowing what it feels

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like to experience what another recounts. This reveals the limits of empathic understanding and the challenge of producing 'emotionally sensed knowledge' (Hubbard et al., 2001). Frank's (2001) and Watts' (2008) question of whether we can research the lived reality of suffering, which resists articulation, represents a tension and source of on-going reflection for us and for social scientists more generally.

Thus, we have recognised the need to attend to the 'untold within interviews' (Ghorashi, 2007) and other embodied means of communication, such as tears, facial expressions, change of tone, silences, hesitations, reluctance to talk or 'open up' and abrupt changes in the narrative and form of responses in each interview. Gal (1991) notes how the power relations of the ethnographic encounter determine who is able to talk and what it is possible or strategic to say. As Lewis (2010) observes, listening better includes hearing silence, which is not neutral or empty. We have tried to capture and understand embodied meanings shared through body language and other forms of non-verbal communication between interviewees and field researchers through the use of the interview profile and through our reflexive conversations.

Furthermore, participatory dissemination workshops with family and community members enabled us to explore some of the emotional responses we found particularly challenging to interpret, especially recurrent phrases used such as *'it's hard'* as well as

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experiences of religious and cultural widowhood-mourning practices. When tracing interviewees for the workshops a year and a half later, we were saddened and shocked to hear that two interviewees (an older father, and a sister in her twenties) from poor households had died since the original interview, leading to further disruptions and the risk of increased poverty for the young people left behind. The dissemination phase thus provided further insights into how the emotional and material dimensions of a family death were inextricably bound up together and could lead to a series of upheavals (Evans et al, 2016), deepening our understanding, while also highlighting the complexities of the cross-cultural interpretation of grief (Henry 2012; Scheper-Hughes, 2004).

Conclusion

This article has explored the highly complex process of conducting cross-cultural research on responses to death and family relations from a feminist ethic of care perspective. Recognition of the emotional labour of the research process is of vital importance in research on 'sensitive topics'. Our experiences highlight the value of encouraging openness within research teams in talking about emotional responses and reflecting on how our own biographies and experiences relate to those of participants. Interpretations of the data are filtered by our multiple positionings and emotions in relation to participants and each other. By acknowledging our own cultural

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expectations of death and family life, our emotional responses, and what we find 'strange' and 'familiar' in reading the interview transcripts, we aim to develop a sometimes uncomfortable understanding of our own positions, including what we take for granted. In so doing, we hope to understand research team members better as emotional beings who respond in similar and different ways to meanings of 'death' in our own lives and to interviewees' experiences. We have found this useful in asking questions of the data and in exploring how and why emotions are expressed or not in different places, as well as in supporting each other.

Thus, by engaging in the methodological approach of 'uncomfortable reflexivity' (Pillow, 2003) and adopting a contextual ethic of care, we have sought to explore the work of emotions in constructing and analysing interview transcripts. A crucial part of this process involved extended dialogue and an emergent trust within the research team itself, although this is always inevitably limited and contingent. This approach helps to disrupt and question researchers' cross-cultural analyses and interpretation of the data, thereby providing insight into the production of knowledge. By continuing to work with our emotions and regarding our multiple, differently positioned, professional, research-based, emotional and personal selves as resources, we endeavour to attend to ethical aspects of researching sensitive topics, to produce 'emotionally-sensed knowledge' and

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669 offer a tenuous interpretation of responses to death in urban Senegal, thereby
670 contributing to the cross-cultural study of emotions.
671
672 **Endnotes**
673 1. A shorter version of this paper was originally presented at the Making Sense of
674 Suffering, Death and Dying Interdisciplinary.net Conference, Prague, Czech Republic,
675 1-3 November 2014.
676 2. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in more depth the concept of 'emotion'
677 theoretically or philosophically.
678 3. The research was funded by a Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant (2014-16).
679 See http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/deathinthefamilyinsenegal and Evans et al. (2016) for
680 more information.
681 4. We recognise that understandings of 'family' are culturally variable and highly
682 contested (Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards, 2010; Oheneba-Sakyi and Takyi, 2006).
683 5. See our blog for interview topic guide:
684 http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/deathinthefamilyinsenegal/files/2014/02/Interview-topic-
685 guide-for-adults.pdf
686 6. We use the terms Majority and Minority Worlds to refer to the global South and
687 global North respectively in order to acknowledge that the 'majority' of the world's
688 population, poverty, land mass and so on are located in the global South. As Punch

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(2003) argues, we need to shift the balance of worldviews that frequently privilege 'western' and 'northern' perspectives.

7. This difficult question raises broader issues about research ethics that are beyond the scope of our present discussion. In this research, we adopted a contextual ethic of care.

8. Our original plans for Jane and Sophie to participate in the dissemination phase in Senegal were not possible.

9. While we recognise Bondi's (2014) argument that psychoanalytical ideas about unconscious communication can help to make sense of emotional dimensions of research interviews and the narratives they generate, we have not adopted this approach to interpretation of the data.

Author biographical notes:

Ruth Evans is an Associate Professor in Human Geography in the Department of Geography and Environmental Science at the University of Reading, UK. Her research interests focus on young people's psychosocial wellbeing, care and family relations, particularly in relation to bereavement, chronic illness and forced migration. She was the Principal Investigator of the research project, *Death in the Family in Urban Senegal: bereavement, care and family relations*, funded by The Leverhulme Trust (2014-2016).

Jane Ribbens McCarthy is a Reader in Family Studies in the Department of Social Policy and Criminology, at the Open University, UK and co-investigator for the *Death in the Family in Urban Senegal* research project. Her research interests focus on people's family lives and relationships, experiences and forms of relationality as these are shaped across global and local contexts, and by gender and generation, including aspects of emotions and embodiment.

Sophia Bowlby is a Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of Geography and Environmental Science at the University of Reading and a Visiting Professor at

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Loughborough University, UK. She was a consultant on the *Death in the Family in Urban Senegal* research project. Her research has focused on feminist analysis of the social and economic geography of urban areas in the UK, in particular, issues of access, mobility and the analysis of social relationships of informal care in time-space.

Joséphine Wouango was a Research Fellow working on the *Death in the Family in Urban Senegal* research project, based in the Department of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading, UK. Her research interests focus on public policies on child labour, social protection, education and children's rights in francophone West Africa.

Fatou Kébé is a Researcher based at the Laboratoire de Recherches sur les Transformations Economiques and Sociales, Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar and worked on the *Death in the Family in Urban Senegal* research project. Her research interests focus on street children, poverty, education, health, migration in Senegal.

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