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**The aftermath of death in the continuing lives of the living: extending ‘bereavement’ paradigms through family and relational perspectives**

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**Abstract**

While there is a significant interdisciplinary and international literature available on death, dying and bereavement, literature addressing responses to death is dominated by assumptions about individuality, framing ‘bereavement’ and ‘grief’ in terms of the inner psychic life of the individual. Scholarly literature tells us little about how the continuing aftermath of death is experienced in the everyday, relational lives of the living. Inspired by research from Majority Worlds, we consider literature that might enable a more ‘relational’ sociological approach, and explore what that might involve. We set out the potential for family sociology to provide an intrinsically (if variable) relational lens on the aftermath of death, along with examples of radical relational theorising more generally. We argue for a reframing and broadening of the dominant ‘bereavement studies’ of Minority Worlds towards a much-needed paradigm shift in understanding the continuing aftermath of death in the lives of the living.

Keywords: bereavement; continuing aftermath of death; decolonisation; family; grief; individuality; Karen Barad; loss; relationality; Ubuntu

**Introduction**

‘Death, dying and bereavement’ is the phrase within which ‘bereavement’, as a topic for sustained study, is often subsumed. Within this phrasing, ‘bereavement’ and ‘grief’ are typically considered within the context of the dying process/event and its ending in the

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disposal of the remains through funeral rituals. There is a rich interdisciplinary literature available on these topics, but, as the funeral ends the mourners leave to resume their lives without the living presence of the deceased. Yet very little is known about this continuing 'aftermath' beyond the clinical pathologisation of grief that goes on 'too long'. Academic attention - including from sociologists - has generally been sparse towards on-going everyday experiences after a death, embedded as they are in familial and relational contexts across time and space.

Instead, 'bereavement', as understood in affluent Minority Worlds<sup>i</sup>, has come to be seen as the domain for psychiatry, psychology and related therapeutic practices, which have each taken an interventionist approach to the identification and alleviation of 'grief' as an internalised and individualised experience (Granek, 2017). Within these individualised bereavement paradigms, the socially patterned diversity of 'bereavement' experiences has received very little attention (Mayland, 2021), further limiting the lenses through which the aftermath of death is understood.

Bereavement studies as a field is thus heavily shaped by the individualised medicalised perspectives of affluent, predominantly White, countries. Yet the experience of death and its aftermath in Majority Worlds illuminates significant omissions and assumptions from these Minority World perspectives, exemplified in recent research in Senegal (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2019). Notably, death throughout Africa is largely seen as a communal event (Njue et al., 2015) rooted in extensive 'family' and community networks (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2020). This is not unique to Africa, as evidenced in contemporary studies of indigenous peoples around the world (e.g. Dennis and Washington, 2018; Kroik et al, 2020), as well as black Americans in the contemporary US (Moore et al, 2020).

Such a relational perspective is largely absent in the individualised 'bereavement' research framed by current dominant interventionist perspectives (Klass, 2017), which offer little understanding of how death is experienced in the continuing lives of the living through configurations of personal, 'family' and community relationships, as well as other settings. Of what research does exist on the relational experience of death, the focus has been on commemoration and ritual creation, where 'What happens after death, specifically the expression of loss and the associated funerary ritual, is ... shaped by social, political, cultural, and economic contexts' (Woodthorpe, 2017:6).

In addressing this gap in current perspectives, we consider the rich potential for considering the aftermath of death through a critical theoretical sociological focus on 'families' and 'relationships', perhaps – we suggest - contributing to a (much needed) paradigm shift that might include a radical theorising of 'relationality'. Such sociologically informed variable relational approaches might also potentially enhance the decolonisation of bereavement studies more broadly (Hamilton, Golding and Ribbens McCarthy, 2022).

Over recent decades family sociology has flourished, addressing distinctly sociological questions and analyses of families and relationships (Ribbens McCarthy, 2022). Yet, the significance of death as a 'family' event (Morgan, 1985) continues to be neglected. This became particularly apparent during the COVID-related disruptions of 2020-21, when normally taken-for-granted family interactions were significantly impeded. In this paper, then, we consider how 'individual' responses to death might be re-framed through the contextualised lens of family sociology and radical relational theorising.

We set such sociological possibilities alongside the 'interventionist' focus of dominant contemporary 'bereavement' paradigms, in which the overwhelming orientation concerns the (worthy) key purpose of how to define and mitigate problematic grief 'outcomes' for individuals. Consequently, we know *almost nothing* about people's experiences of 'bereavement' in their everyday relational lives. Likewise family sociology, in turn, has failed to address these profound aspects of the life course and the 'family project'. This is despite the challenge of Stanley and Wise more than a decade ago to recognise that, despite sequestration of deaths, people continue to respond to dying and death, not as unconnected individuals, but as members of networks of interpersonal relationships centring on and expanding out from the domestic context' (2011: 948).

Here, we consider how differently the 'bereavement' research agenda would look if rooted in family and relational sociology. 'Relationality' has received increasing theoretical attention over recent years, both within and beyond 'family' sociology, entailing varying frameworks for theorising 'relationality' alongside 'individuality' (discussed later in this article). But within contemporary affluent Anglophone contexts, we argue that the powerful language of 'family' is key to variable everyday experiences and understandings of 'relationality', whether as 'relational individuals' (individuals-in-relationships), or more radically (within affluent Anglophone contexts), as deeply connected 'social persons'

embedded in a collective 'family unit' (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). In this paper we ask what new questions and insights might be gained from building on such 'family' and 'relational' perspectives in considering the continuing aftermath of death in the lives of the living, perhaps amounting to a paradigm shift.

We commence by briefly reviewing what family and relational approaches are available from within current interventionist approaches to 'bereavement', before moving on to consider the potential of sociological perspectives. In this, we draw particularly from contemporary family sociology that has flourished in affluent Minority Worlds in recent decades, including considerations of what sort of 'relationality' is at stake in 'family' lives. This then leads into discussion of more radical theorising of relationality, beyond 'family' as generally understood in Anglophone contexts. Here we consider the possibilities of drawing on the theoretical work of Karen Barad for emerging relational approaches in family sociology, alongside insights from more collective understandings of social personhood from Majority Worlds, exemplified through the African *philopraxis* of Ubuntu. 'Family', and 'relationality', in the continuing aftermath of death, are thus interwoven themes that run throughout, with 'family' more to the forefront in the earlier sections, and 'relationality' towards the end.

But, first, a note on language and concepts, since 'bereavement' and 'grief' require examination as English words rooted in the particular contexts of affluent Anglophone countries (Klass, 2017), such that neither of these terms 'translate' easily in other languages (Evans et al., 2017). Within Minority World cultures, these terms carry connotations of the (psychologised) 'inner world of the individual', raising questions about the cultural embeddedness of 'emotions' and whether - and how - they are 'speaking'. In contrast, the more 'outer' focused term, 'mourning', typically focuses on public behaviour and customs, creating a contrast between the 'internal' world of 'grief' and 'external' collective processes of 'mourning' - itself an overly simplistic dichotomy critiqued by Jackoby (2012).

Alternative terms for creating more open frameworks are not readily available. Klass (1999) has suggested 'responses to death' to reflect diverse cultural contexts. In this paper we use the longer but perhaps more encompassing phrase, 'the continuing aftermath of death in the lives of the living, over space and time' ('the continuing aftermath' for short), seeking to

create conceptual space to include issues of relationality and also material resources and power inequalities.

### **Thinking relationally in 'bereavement' interventions**

The central purpose of current dominant bereavement approaches is to assess psychic suffering and associated 'risks', and develop interventions to alleviate it, primarily working with 'individuals' and, sometimes, with 'families'. A sustained emphasis on internal psychic processes and outcomes has been reflected, for example, in the on-going popularity of Kubler-Ross and Kessler's five stage model of grief, widely adopted by the general public and still taught in professional education, despite considerable criticism (Corr, 2019). Yet, even in Corr's critique, there is scant reference to the social in terms of 'family' and relationships. Rather, as commonly happens, reference to social and relational contexts is framed – reduced even - through the identification of 'risk factors' for grief, such as gender, mental health and so on (Walter, 2006).

Some seeds of change are apparent, however, with neglect of 'family' contexts noted by Stroebe and Schut (2015), who have included 'family processes' as an additional 'level' within their influential Dual Process Model of bereavement. While this is encouraging, 'individuals' are still positioned as independent entities rather than intrinsically relational beings. Drawing on Worden's four 'tasks' of grieving, Stroebe and Schut's focus is instead upon identifying and predicting which individuals and families, at their different 'levels', will be more 'at risk' of undesirable mental or physical health 'outcomes' and thus requiring intervention. At the same time, even while seeking to bring 'families' into focus, they observe the dominant orientation towards outcomes centred on 'individuals' rather than considering the implications for 'family' lives.

More broadly within interventionist approaches, the most significant body of work that directly centres families and relationships is based in general family systems theory (Breen et al., 2018), a theoretical approach sometimes critiqued for reifying 'family' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990). The associated drawbacks are discussed by Breen et al (2017) in relation to bereavement, yet 'individuals' continue to be treated as unproblematic entities: 'families do

not grieve; instead individuals within families grieve, and they do so in the context of family' (Breen et al., 2018: 2).

Such approaches occlude an understanding of people as intrinsically social and relational beings, and fail to problematise the meanings of such terms as 'the individual' or 'the whole family' (Breen et al., 2018). Indeed, such therapeutic approaches themselves serve to (re)construct and (re)produce particular versions of 'the individual' and what it means to be a human being. As Arnarson (2007) points out, such psychological theorising, and clinical practice and bereavement support services, continually serve to re/invent and perpetuate the 'autonomous individual' who is at the heart of the contemporary neo-liberal political order.

In seeking to identify those in need of intervention, these perspectives also necessitate and result in (the normalisation of) evaluations of behaviour, including 'healthy and unhealthy' 'family functioning profiles' (Kissane and Bloch, 1994; Kissane et al., 2007-8). This model thus pathologises 'family functioning', framing any failure to reach certain outcomes as an indication of something 'wrong', rather than an indication of the complexity of human experience: 'We need, instead, to be open to people's realities (which are often changing, ambiguous, hard for them to articulate, hard for us to understand, complex, and contradictory)' (Rosenblatt, 2017: 627).

Some recent studies (prior to COVID-19) have asked people in Minority Worlds about their bereavement experiences, with most managing their grief 'with the support of family, friends and neighbours' (Aoun et al., 2014:474) and in 'the community' (Breen et al., 2017). But in family systems work, besides the issues around who or what is included as 'family' (Galbally, 2021), it is the observer's therapeutic or medical perspective that is brought into play.

Such medicalising discourses obscure their underpinning assumptions and evaluations of 'normal' behaviour, based inevitably in value judgements (Granek, 2017), and firmly rooted in cultural variabilities. Questions of moral standing thus become bound up with what constitutes a 'troubling family' death, invoking values of un/desirable forms of behaviour,

issues of (personal) responsibility, and care in relationships. These issues are all the more significant in a globalised world where international migration and global neo-colonial systems of power and resources are in play. The need to decolonise bereavement studies is particularly apparent in regard to such questions (Hamilton, Golding and Ribbens McCarthy, 2022).

From these considerations we argue that, while interventionist approaches may have much to offer at times, we also need to recognise their limitations and the possibilities of alternative perspectives.

### **‘Family’ sociology and the aftermath of death**

Sociologists have arguably been slow to address these limitations and provide alternative approaches. Indeed, sociological perspectives have typically been marginalised within death, dying and bereavement studies, despite calls to the contrary (Thompson et al., 2016). At the same time, sociological approaches themselves have largely neglected the relevance of ‘family’ in the aftermath of death. Recent research has however shown the significance of ‘doing’ and ‘being’ ‘family’ at the end of life, in regard to the dying process itself (Almack, 2022; Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010; Ellis, 2018; Borgstrom, Ellis and Woodthorpe, 2019; Hilário and Rafael, 2021) and the arranging and conducting of the funeral (Woodthorpe, 2017; Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016). Beyond the funeral, Pearce and Komaromy consider how family life is ‘done’ and made meaningful after a parental death; such issues may include the reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities, the construction or silencing of narratives of collective ‘family’ memories, or loss of the very concept of ‘family’ (2021:16-17).

Perhaps the most notable sociological research, concerning the aftermath of family death, has been the work of Finch and Mason (2000), in their ground-breaking study on inheritance practices in the context of English law. This important work demonstrated the flexibility and variability, over time and generations, of people’s understandings of kinship and ‘family’, and how versions of ‘my family’ are re/constituted through relational inheritance practices (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016). Other sociological contributions have focused on children’s experiences of family deaths (Davies, 2019), including accounts of biographical disruption (Jamieson and Highet, 2014). Overall, though, the limited attention from family

sociologists to the aftermath of death has mirrored the neglect by 'bereavement studies' of relationships and 'family'.

Given this paucity of attention, what developments in family sociology might be helpful in understanding everyday relational experiences in the continuing aftermath of death? In considering this question we focus, firstly, on 'family' as a significant social construct, including death as a key 'family' event, and secondly, on family members' experiences of changes/continuities in everyday 'family' lives, relationships, and practices in the absence of the deceased. A key baseline involves vigorous critiques of the term 'family' itself which have developed since the 1980s (reviewed by Ribbens McCarthy, Gillies and Hooper, 2019), questioning whether it should be used as a sociological term at all. Morgan (2003) notably suggests that 'family' might be more useful as an adjective or potentially a verb, rather than a noun indicating a categorical object, and his introduction of the term 'family practices' (1996, 2011) has been extensively taken up (Almack, 2022; Ribbens McCarthy, 2022).

At the same time, the term 'family' is arguably too important to be abandoned or even sidelined in the study of social life, constituting as it does a key reference point for people's everyday relational lives (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012), for social policy (Doolittle, 2012; Author Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016), and political discourses (Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Gilding, 2010). Indeed, for those living outside of 'the family' as normatively imagined in *Minority Worlds*, the power of 'family' can be an unavoidable feature of social life with which people have to grapple (e.g. Almack, 2008; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2003). A pervasive consensus is that, while 'family' analysis is crucial, any notion of 'the family' as a clearly identifiable 'natural' object reifies it and is untenable in light of the complexities of people's experiences. This perspective opens important sociological doors, about how 'family' itself (as an intrinsically relational concept) comes into being as a meaningful entity (Bourdieu, 1996) with implications for almost all areas of social life (Morgan, 1996). Consequently, the subtleties of 'family' meaning and relevance always have to be approached as *problematic* within particular socio-linguistic contexts (Ribbens McCarthy and Evans, 2020). Given this, in the continuing aftermath of death 'family' needs to be understood as a powerful but problematic, very fluid, and co-constructed term in ways that may be obscured by the everyday language of 'a family bereavement'.

### **The potential disruptions of a ‘family death’**

Part of the power of the language of ‘family’ lies in its taken-for-grantedness in everyday lives. Consequently, the effort entailed in the production of ‘family’ as a meaningful social unit is unremarkable, almost invisible. This is powerfully exemplified in UK research concerning teenagers’ everyday ‘family’ lives, asking what ‘family’ means to interviewees: *‘I mean, you just take it for granted really don’t you, that you’re in a family’* (Pat Burrows, mother) (Langford et al., 2001:13).

In everyday circumstances, this quality obscures the diverse ways in which ‘family’ is understood and actively created, with variable tensions between ‘being an individual’ and ‘being a family’, but the disruption of death potentially brings such tensions into explicit focus (Turner and Almack, 2019). Even within the contexts of Anglophone, majority White countries, such variabilities may centre, for example, on how far ‘family’ is understood as a ‘unit’ that people may ‘belong’ to, or more loosely as a set of related but unique ‘individuals’ (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). Further, such variabilities may themselves relate to systematic social patterns such as class, ethnicity and gender.

Within the English language, ‘family’ arguably also has a unique power to voice a deep sense of connection and belonging, as when applied to a church congregation, a football team, or ‘friends as family’. Yet the idealisation of such ‘belonging’ may obscure power inequalities between family members, which may be experienced as controlling and constraining, sometimes dangerous, as well as positive and supportive (Morgan, 1996).

Further issues of power and contestation may arise, since, if family is understood as a collective ‘unit’ which people can be ‘part of’, ‘boundaries’ become visible and important – who counts as a ‘member’ of this ‘family’, especially in times of change, raising further questions about the grounds on which that judgement is made, for example via blood relationships, living arrangements, partnerships and so on, or through the quality of the relationships themselves. In writing this paper, Kathryn reflected on the death of her daughter’s Uncle, someone who Kathryn could not ‘claim’ as a ‘brother’ or ‘brother-in-law’

and yet an important member of her daughter's family configuration. Such issues are exemplified in policy determining which family member is 'responsible' for making funeral arrangements (Woodthorpe and Almack, 2016).

In her autobiographical work, Almack (2021) discusses the 'doing' of 'family' and its potentially meaningful re-construction after parental death. She identifies shifting family relationships and roles, including gendered dynamics at play, but over time she recounts the cementing of 'family' sibling relationships through a new shared online communication channel. Elsewhere, Almack (2022) highlights how a family practices perspective also reveals her experiences of separate – yet still relational - sets of practices for individual family members to navigate within family configurations after a death.

Further questions arise: how does a 'proper' family behave and look like, in the continuing aftermath of death? After such a significant 'family' event, how can 'our family' be 'displayed' to, and confirmed by, others (Finch, 2007)? There may even be a strong desire to feel 'normal' by forming a new 'family' unit, which can be displayed to others. One such example concerns the death of Jane's husband when their daughter was aged five. During her father's illness, their daughter expressed concern that, without a daddy, she would be different from other children. So when visiting the seaside with Jane and a male friend, some months after her father's death, she remarked with satisfaction that other people, seeing them together, would think they were 'a family'.

These examples reveal the assumptions, expectations, feelings, and power dynamics that may be implicated after a 'family' death, raising questions hitherto largely unexplored by sociologists. Death thus constitutes a potentially significant source of disruption for the 'family project' (Morgan, 1985), bringing 'family' as a meaningful social entity potentially into doubt. But the nature of such disruption will vary according to how 'family', personhood, and relationality are understood, how far that understanding is shared by those involved, and the social, economic and political contexts and implications, raising critical questions about autonomy and choice, power, equity and social justice. After all, everyday family practices not only enact 'family' but also affirm and construct 'family' in the process (Almack, 2022; Morgan, 2011).

### **The continuing aftermath of death as a 'normal' family trouble?**

It is remarkable how silent family sociologists have been in regard to all the above questions. But perhaps this neglect itself exemplifies the tendency for 'family troubles' to fall between different bodies of work, with family sociologists primarily focused on 'the ordinary', while more 'problem' oriented research is framed by policy and professional agendas, 'with the result that the 'normal' troubles that all families experience have been neglected, even though such troubles may reflect the inevitably changing patterns of life' (Ribbens McCarthy, Gillies and Hooper, 2019:2210).

In these terms, death and its aftermath hold an ambiguous position: while it is undoubtedly a 'normal' family experience and part of the 'natural order' of things, it can also be highly disruptive, a significant source of 'family trouble'. Thus, while death may be an inevitable source of 'family' change, at what point - and how - does it become disruptive for the 'family' project and troubling for 'family' meanings and practices? In what ways is a 'family' death managed as a 'normal' transition? In Morgan's terms (2019), to understand death as a 'family' trouble would suggest that it is relational, and embedded in particular expectations of dependency, mutuality and obligation, played out through a range of 'family practices'. Furthermore, 'family' lives generally involve powerful implications for moral identities (Almack, Clegg and Murphy; 2009; Finch and Mason, 1993, 2000; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2003; Turner and Almack, 2019), which may be all the more apparent, and vulnerable, during the normal trouble of a family death, particularly when (complex) emotions are heightened and material consequences may be significant. To what extent, therefore, do major family rifts arise after a family death (Rosenblatt, 2017)? While there is anecdotal evidence available concerning such issues, empirical investigations into families and death are unavailable to answer such questions.

Moreover, beyond moral evaluations between 'family members' themselves, there may be moral judgements also between different agencies involved after a death: police, coroners, funeral directors and so on (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016). In such 'public' institutional contexts, further contestations and tensions between 'family members' may raise questions of hierarchical ordering, such as: which family member was 'closest' to the deceased, whose

grief may be regarded as ‘most significant’, and who has the moral ‘right’ to be involved in key decisions or formal processes, such as registering the death? Very little is known about how, in response, agencies and authorities such as funeral directors, or formal investigators such as the police, ‘place’ and identify family members in these respects, such that some ‘family deaths’ may be considered particularly ‘troubling’ (Walter et al., 2017). Bureaucratic standards about disposition of the deceased in the US may also impose implicit judgements privileging and stratifying particular notions of ‘family’ (Timmermans and Prickett, 2022). Such issues are heightened for family members where the death itself is questionable in terms of public services and corporate actions (Snell and Tombs, 2011), as highlighted in the UK by organisations such as ‘COVID Families for Justice’ [<https://covidfamiliesforjustice.org/>] and ‘Inquest’ [<https://www.inquest.org.uk>][both sites accessed 28.07.22]. In such circumstances, issues of inequality, racism and deprivation may be writ particularly large (Angiolini, 2017; Moore et al. 2020).

Such questions concerning family troubles and troubling families have particular significance for agencies and professionals seeking to intervene (helpfully) after a death towards preventing ‘undesirable’ outcomes. In considering ‘family deaths’ then, it is also important to recognise that some ‘families’ may be viewed as particularly ‘troubling’, for example, by being considered to put children ‘at risk’, either before or after a death. Such issues are likely to be shaped by systematic patterns relating to the level of resources available both prior to and after a death, and point to structural inequalities and issues of social justice (Harris and Bordere, 2016).

Having set out aspects of the potential contributions of theorising, concepts and questions deriving from family sociology, we next bring to the fore broader relational theorising that may offer further lenses concerning the continuing aftermath of death in the on-going relational lives of the living.

### **Beyond ‘the (embodied) individual’: thinking relationally**

Ideas of unique and autonomous embodied individuality are very strong in affluent Anglophone countries, deeply embedded in legal institutions, religious traditions, economic

systems, political discourse, and social policies of many kinds. In English history, the identification of individual personhood with the body has long been established through the legal requirement for habeus corpus (Venn, 2010). Indeed, in the English language, as we noted earlier, 'family' may have unique significance for expressing an alternative experience, of 'belonging' to a collective social unit, and being 'bound up' with others (for better or worse), as exemplified here from another study of the 'family' lives of young people:

*shared values, shared things like humour that you have just in your family... shared memories, the real sense of belonging is the strongest I know. (Hugh, White, working class father).*

*Family means to me speaking with one voice. You know, if you see one, the other will represent the same thing. And to me that's family. (Otis, African Caribbean, middle class father). (Author P et al., 2001:26-7)*

A focus on 'family meanings' and 'family practices' in understanding the continuing aftermath of death thus provides an intrinsically relational lens, but the extent of this may vary depending on how ideas of 'individuality' are prioritised by family members, and may be in tension with 'family' as a collective unit (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012).

In affluent, Anglophone contexts, then, there may be little understanding that, for many people, 'the "I" does not end with the boundaries of skin' (Eyetsemitan, 2021), and that bodies are themselves a social construction that requires theorising (Barad, 2007; Blackman and Venn, 2010). Such tensions between (bodily bounded) individuality and connectedness can vary significantly across all sorts of contexts within and across societies, shaped as these are by socio-linguistic, spatio-temporal, economic, political and cultural patterns and power dynamics, and manifest in mundane everyday family practices, such as the naming of children to express 'family' connections *or* to express their unique individuality (Almack, 2005; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). These variabilities and tensions are rooted in core assumptions about what it means to be a human being, living alongside other human beings. And while 'the family' has been heavily deconstructed and debated, 'the (autonomous) individual' (as we saw earlier) is often taken as an entirely unproblematic

term across many - but not all - academic disciplines and literatures rooted in affluent Minority Worlds.

Nevertheless, in terms of the potential for future sociological work on the relational aftermath of death, gendered and cultural perspectives have informed various disciplinary debates analysing 'the individual' and theorising 'relationality'. This includes anthropological writing on 'dividuals' (Davies, 2020), feminist work on relationality and the ethics of care (Donchin, 2000), and cross-cultural psychological notions of 'relational autonomy' where relationality may lead to 'close-knit selves' (Kağitçibaşı, 2005:411). The social psychologist Kenneth Gergen (2009) offers the concept of 'relational being', with 'the individual' being produced through relationships rather than preceding them, while Venn (2010) similarly theorises 'the individual' as an emergent property, a co-production of reciprocity. Overall, however, much academic work has uncritically reproduced everyday assumptions about individuality in Anglophone contexts, such that even the concept of 'relationality' is still implicitly based on a view of individuals-in-relationships, or 'relational individuals', rather than 'social persons' (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). Constituting a 'weak' version of relationality (Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016), individuals-in-relationships falls short in exploring and re-thinking ideas of 'relationships', continuing to treat relationality instead as an "an "interaction effect" between pre-existing entities' (Blackman and Venn, 2010:10). Yet, as we discuss below, in many part of the world, "people think of the self as a component of an in-group, rather than as an independent entity" (Triandis, 1987: 81). In such a context, the personal is not something that can be clearly separated out from the collectivity' (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012:78).

Recent sociological theoretical discussions have sought to move beyond such limitations as 'individuals-in-relationships', to greater or lesser degrees. How connectedness and 'relationality' is understood in death and its aftermath, in diverse cultural settings and within differing disciplinary discussions, may have much to contribute here. In this paper we only have space to indicate possibilities, offering brief introductions in turn to the complex ideas of two approaches to relationality that might be considered radical alongside the individualistic thinking of affluent Anglophone countries: the African philosophy of 'Ubuntu' and the 'relational materialism' of Barad's work from the USA, which draws on quantum physics. Both these approaches offer the potential for expanding our sociological

imaginings of what relationality might mean, by questioning the boundedness of people and 'things' – a radical prospect that calls into doubt 'the imposition of a [white] way of classifying, measuring and quantifying the world' and instead 'to understand our lives as a dynamic flowing of position' (Dabiri, 2021:138 and 142).

Rooted in a sophisticated African philopraxis (Ramose, 2003), ubuntu is embedded as an everyday basis for living in relational lives as a child and an adult (Mpfungu-Coles, 2020, personal communication), as well as a foundation for political action. Indicating the 'unthought of individualism' (Ramose, 2003), approaching ubuntu as simply a linguistic term or concept is insufficient, because in translation something of its meaning always 'slips away' (Praeg, 2008). Originating as a Nguni Bantu word (Ramose, 2003), ubuntu has many ramifications in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Part of what it conveys, though, is a view of human being-ness as bound up with others - as in the proverb, 'I am because we are one' (Nel, 2008: 141) - an intrinsic quality of 'humanness' in which 'the individual owes his or her existence to the existence of others' (Kamwangamalu, 1999: 29).

Within this perspective, personhood *depends* on collective relationality, not individuality, such that 'the interest of the individual is subordinate to that of the group... [and] the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all' (Kamwangamalu, 1999:27). This understanding of humanness or human be-ingness can be seen to underpin, for example, the meaning of 'family' in Senegal (Ribbens McCarthy and Evans, 2020), which in turn frames the aftermath of death in profoundly relational terms. To understand death from such a starting point – recognising the end of life and the aftermath as a profoundly collective *relational* experience - enables a major shift of perspective, since

from one perspective death may be understood as an ending of the self, but from another cultural viewpoint it may be seen as a threat to the survival of the unit (Nordanger, 2007). Bereavement, also, may be viewed as the loss of a unique relationship, while another cultural perspective may frame it in terms of continuity with ancestors who are significant for the group's survival and well-being over generations (Klass, 2001). (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012:83)

The current bereavement paradigms of affluent Minority Worlds - based as they are in disciplines committed to 'individuals' and rooted in colonial histories (Hamilton, Golding and Ribbens

McCarthy, 2022) - have much to gain by radically expanding notions of relationality, and recognising the individualistic assumptions about death and its continuing aftermath that dominate current approaches to bereavement studies.

Building on the philosophy and science of quantum physics, Barad's work in the USA theorises relationality in more abstract terms, as the result of *intra-actions* through which the world is performed into being. Resonating with, but extending, our earlier discussions of the significance of language, Barad argues (2003) that the very distinction between 'nature' and 'language' is a major limitation that needs to be rethought, since the material and the discursive are always mutually implicated. Boundaries and categories (including the bounded nature of 'the individual' and, indeed, 'the human') are thus *produced*, they do not *pre-exist*. At the same time, however, Barad continues to assert a realist ontology, since matter cannot be reduced to the discursive. Consequently, processes of material-discursive practices occur through *intra-actions* - since 'the relation of the social and the scientific is a relation of "exteriority within"' (2003: 803) - and it is these intra-actions that produce *phenomena* (2007). Barad argues that post-humanist discursive practices and materiality have *real* effects and implications, but they cannot be separated out as one is not superior to the other. This is the basis for her epistemological-ontological-ethical framework which she terms 'agential realism' (2007).

More recently, Mauthner has considered Barad's work in re-theorising relationality as a contribution to family sociology. Drawing on her research on technologies in domestic settings, Mauthner examines 'the specific ways in which these practices perform "technology", "work" and "family" into being, rather than take these entities as pre-existing starting points for an investigation' (2021:11). Barad's theoretical approach would thus lead us to regard not only 'the family' and 'the individual' as problematic terms that are performed into being, but all material-discursive processes and concepts which, through their intra-actions, produce the intrinsically relational phenomena of 'family deaths'.

While these different perspectives, ubuntu and relational materialism, share a view of ethics as inevitably bound up with an ontology of relationality, Seeley (2017) argues that ubuntu has an aspirational political dimension that is absent from Barad's work. Despite this, Barad's theorisation of the material-discursive perhaps offers a path out of the constrictions

of Anglophone ways of thinking that have led to the problematic focus on 'grief' as distinguishable from social and everyday practices, in which emotions/inner life are seen as distinct from material /outer life (Barad, 2003, 2007). This step may itself open Anglophone imaginations to experiences closer to those living in contemporary West Africa (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2020). Further, Barad's central question, 'how does matter come to matter', is particularly pertinent to death, which crucially centralises those discursive-material practices that construct the boundaries between the life and death of embodied matter (Ribbens McCarthy and Prokhovnik, 2014).

Our purpose in this brief discussion of radical relationality has not been to critique these two approaches, or weigh up their relative merits. Rather, we seek to exemplify how these diverse perspectives help to illuminate the constraints of Anglophone assumptions of individuality, and the potential for re-imagining the continuing aftermath of death in (variable) relational worlds.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have considered some of the limitations of current 'bereavement' studies and the important potential for extending knowledge and relational understanding of the continuing aftermath of death in the lives of the living, across time and space. We have highlighted concepts and questions drawn from the perspective of (empirically grounded) family sociology (primarily from affluent Minority Worlds), issues that family sociology has so far overlooked. 'Family' is a concept that is intrinsically relational, albeit this may be understood in variable ways, associated with diverse – stronger or weaker - understandings of connectedness. In particular, there may be tensions between (autonomous) 'individuality', 'family' as a set of individuals-in-relationships, and 'family' as a close-knit collective unit with a shared sense of identity and social personhood that goes beyond the 'relational individual' (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). Our discussion has therefore also extended to theoretical and philosophical possibilities for thinking relationally, about the continuing aftermath of death in the lives of the living, in radical ways that take us beyond Anglophone assumptions of 'the individual' that dominate existing bereavement studies in affluent Minority Worlds.

Whatever version of 'family' and 'relationality' is being drawn upon, recognising death and its aftermath as a relational experience thus requires a paradigm shift, away from understanding death as an issue of/for the 'individual' and towards recognition that death is experienced relationally, typically within the context of 'family', and in many parts of the world, embedded in a sense of relationality that frames death as a collective experience, as a 'family' and 'community' event stretching backwards and forwards across time. Crucially, such a paradigm shift will necessitate working outside the current normative and medicalised language concerning health, interventions and outcomes in the aftermath of death.

There is huge scope to develop such a paradigm shift, but there are also some caveats perhaps. Work on family troubles and troubling families (Ribbens McCarthy, Hooper and Gillies, 2014) has sought to enable dialogue and mutual insights between the more mainstream family sociology and the more problem-oriented approaches of social policy and professional practices. And yet, for such a dialogue to be effective, it is also important to recognise that each body of work has different purposes and consequently distinct frames of reference (Ribbens McCarty, Gillies and Hooper, 2019). A sociological approach oriented, for example, to understanding how people behave and 'make sense' of their experience of death in the context of their everyday lives, will not seek to determine what is functional/dysfunctional behaviour, or a healthy/pathological emotional response. Such a sociological approach will be underpinned by particular epistemologies and methodologies, including grounded theory, ethnomethodology, or phenomenology, prioritising how actors themselves make sense of their lives and their experiences. Moreover, family sociology also has a strong history of considering patterns of inequality that may be mutually imbricated with everyday family practices and meanings, sometimes theorising these patterns as structural issues that need attention in their own right (Bourdieu, 1996; Morgan, 1996). Such issues of inequality and social patterning have been largely ignored by existing bereavement approaches, and require a sociological theoretical framing to address them.

As this paper has shown, using a lens of family sociology (albeit as developed in affluent Minority Worlds), brings into focus how death disrupts what 'family' means after a death of someone (potentially or actually) identified as a 'family member'. It raises questions as to

how the boundaries may be (re)drawn, how the power dimensions shift, how care and other family and relational practices will be (re)defined, whose moral standing might be challenged, who may be concerned to continue the 'family' project over time and make efforts towards its accomplishment, and the togetherness and stability necessary for that to happen. To date, such issues have hardly begun to be raised by sociologists and will provide a much needed challenge to the dominant emphasis on what is understood to be the 'inner world' of the 'individual' post-death. Such a move opens up new perspectives, on how the aftermath of death will be played out through a whole variety of everyday practices and interactions, which in turn reshape the meaning and construction of 'family' in the continuing lives of the living.

In doing this, it is critical to problematise the Anglophone cultural construction of 'the individual', which may be in tension with expectations of ('family') connectedness. Beyond notions of 'the relational individual', or 'the individual-in-relationships', such Anglophone individualistic assumptions may be re-imagined more radically through the ethical philopraxis of Ubuntu, offering a perspective in which death emerges as intrinsically relational, underpinned by particular understandings of what it is to be a human being bound up in collective relationships. Further, relational and 'family' approaches may also be recast through Barad's work on relational materialism, to consider how the phenomena of 'family' and 'death' are performed into being *through* material-discursive intra-actions, framed by an ontology of agential realism.

Such questions and possibilities - even while primarily drawn from, and limited to, a family sociology rooted in affluent Minority World contexts (Ribbens McCarthy, 2022) - have the potential for new understandings of personhood and how 'family' and 'family' relationships feature in people's imaginations and everyday relational lives and practices after the death of a significant other, alongside attention to the social patterns and structures of inequality of power and resources that are interwoven with death and its continuing aftermath. Further key questions remain to be considered concerning how the continuing aftermath of death in the lives of the living may be theorised, and how it may be experienced, in the full diversity of radical human and post-human relationality, inevitably embroiled with historic and contemporary issues of global power and inequality.

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<sup>i</sup> We use the terms 'Majority Worlds' and 'Minority Worlds', following Punch (2016), to refer to what is sometimes termed the 'Global South' and the 'Global North', acknowledging that the 'majority' of population, poverty and land mass is located in Africa, Asia and Latin America, while drawing attention to the unequal global power relations in which 'western' issues tend to be privileged despite being the 'minority'.

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