

*Parental death as a vital conjuncture?  
Intergenerational care and responsibility  
following bereavement in Senegal*

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# **Parental death as a vital conjuncture? Intergenerational care and responsibility following bereavement in Senegal**

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## **Abstract:**

This article explores the ways that parental death represents a 'vital conjuncture' for Serer young people that reconfigures and potentially transforms intergenerational caring responsibilities in different spatial and temporal contexts. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with young people (aged 15-27), family members, religious and community leaders and professionals in rural and urban Senegal, I explore young people's responses to parental death. 'Continuing bonds' with the deceased were expressed through memories evoked in homespace, shared family practices and gendered responsibilities to 'take care of' bereaved family members, to cultivate inherited farmland and to fulfil the wishes of the deceased. Parental death could reconfigure intergenerational care and lead to shifts in power dynamics, as eldest sons asserted their position of authority. While care-giving roles were associated with agency, the low social status accorded to young women's paid and unpaid domestic work undermined their efforts. The research contributes to understandings of gendered nuances in the experience of bereavement and continuing bonds and provides insight into intra-household decision-making processes, ownership and control of assets. Analysis of the culturally specific meanings of relationships and a young person's social location within hierarchies of gender, age, sibling birth order and wider socio-cultural norms and practices is needed.

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**Key words:**

Care and responsibility

Intergenerational relations

Death and bereavement

Youth transitions

Family practices

West Africa

**Introduction: Youth, life transitions and parental death**

The loss of a close adult relative is a significant transition that almost everyone experiences at some point in the lifecourse. In the global South, the death of a parent or other adult relative may have a range of significant material, social and emotional impacts on young people's lives. This article seeks to contribute to theoretical and empirical understandings of young people's responses to parental death and geographies of bereavement, care and intergenerational relations in a West African context. By exploring the ways that kinship is lived, remade and displayed through gendered 'family practices', the article also contributes to geographies of intimacy and family relations, which have been somewhat neglected to date (Valentine, 2008).

Recent literature has explored the historically and geographically contingent nature of the social categories of 'childhood', 'youth' and 'adulthood' and the diverse ways that young people 'navigate their social becoming' (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, 2006; Jeffrey and

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McDowell, 2004; Honwana and De Boeck, 2005). Studies recognise the fluidity as well as the socially structured nature of youth and lifecourse transitions that are shaped by social differences of gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability and sexuality among others (Hopkins and Pain, 2007; Chant and Jones, 2005). While studies explore young people's experiences of significant life transitions (Valentine and Skelton, 2007; Worth, 2009), 'critical moments' (Thompson et al., 2002) and family change (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013), much of the literature focuses on young people in the global North.

Research from the global South has demonstrated the highly relational, rather than 'individualised' nature of young people's transitions, which are embedded in their social relations with family members, peers and others in the community (Punch, 2002; Langevang, 2008; Evans, 2011). The limited literature that explicitly addresses youth and 'bereavement'<sup>1</sup> in Africa tends to focus on orphanhood in the context of the HIV epidemic in Eastern and Southern Africa. The vulnerability of orphaned children compared to non-orphaned children in Africa has been increasingly questioned (Meintjes and Giese, 2006). For example, while parental death impacted on children's educational outcomes and psychosocial wellbeing in Ethiopia, the quality of children's care relationships with family members and their economic security were more significant factors (Crivello and Chuta, 2012). Hewlett's (2005) study among Aka and Nganda adolescents in the Central African Republic emphasises the need to understand the socio-cultural meanings of age, gender and family relations in young people's responses to death. Indeed, the death of parents may not be included in those losses which young people cite as causing most grief (Ribbens McCarthy, 2009).

Ribbens McCarthy (2007: 286) argues that both the situation of 'youth' and the experience of bereavement in the global North are often associated with transitions and 'a time of change and uncertainty' (Ribbens McCarthy, 2007: 286). Isolation and loneliness within and outside family relationships may be commonly reported by bereaved young people, while their agency is revealed through their engagement with informal family and friendship relationships and the ways that they search for meaning in response to bereavement experiences (ibid). The situation of bereaved young people in the global South differs considerably to that of bereaved young people in the global North, in terms of the wider welfare context; very little formal welfare support, health and social care is available to 'vulnerable groups', including widows and orphaned young people, despite the recent policy emphasis on developing social protection mechanisms for poverty alleviation in many African countries, including Senegal (UNICEF, 2009).

According to African socio-cultural concepts of childhood and care, children, families and communities have reciprocal rights and responsibilities as part of an 'intergenerational contract' to provide care and support during sickness, young and old age (Evans and Becker, 2009). Collard (2000) argues that the most economically active 'middle generation' makes transfers to the young with the expectation that resources will be reciprocated to them in old age when they require care and support, while also fulfilling their obligations to support their elderly parents. Research from Eastern and Southern Africa, which have been severely affected by the global HIV epidemic, has shown that parental ill health, disability or death, combined with very limited formal safety nets and a lack of alternative support, may result in children being called on to care for family members and fulfil familial responsibilities as part of the intergenerational contract at a much younger age than would usually be expected (van Blerk and Ansell, 2007; Evans, 2011).

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Few studies to date investigate young people's caring relations and familial responsibilities following parental death in African countries with lower HIV prevalence, such as Senegal<sup>2</sup>. Senegal was chosen as the focus of this study in part for this reason, in addition to the fact that inheritance practices appear to be more favourable for women in Senegal than in many other Sub-Saharan African countries (Peterman, 2012). The 'triple heritage' of African, Islamic and colonial influences (Bass and Sow, 2006) is evidenced in household composition, kinship relations and wider religious and cultural practices in Senegal. The vast majority of the population (95%) identify as Muslim and practise Sufi Islam, with 4 per cent identifying as Christian (ANSD, 2011; Diouf and Leichtman, 2009). Despite this, the major ethnic groups (Wolof, Hal Pulaaren, Serer, Diola) remain culturally distinctive, speaking different languages and adhering to different practices and rules regulating lineage, kinship and inheritance (Bass and Sow, 2006). The majority of households (57%) comprise more than one core family unit, with half of all households made up of five to nine members and a quarter consisting of ten to 14 people (Fall et al., 2011).

Senegal has experienced rapid environmental, economic and social changes in recent decades, including urbanisation, population growth, climate-related shocks and other environmental pressures, and the recent financial, fuel and food crises (Toulmin, 2009; Kielland with Gaye, 2010; UNICEF, 2009). Research shows that 60% of households are considered poor or vulnerable in Senegal: 40% are currently poor, while 20% are vulnerable to an external shock (economic, health-related or environmental) that can rapidly force them into poverty (Fall et al., 2011). The majority (67%) of poor households are located in rural areas and of these, 75% are considered chronically poor; that is, they experience poverty for five years or more, often throughout the lifecourse (Hulme and Shepherd, 2003). Young

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people who had lost one or both parents (aged 10-14) appeared slightly less likely to attend school (90%) than non-orphans the same age (94%) in 2011 (UNAIDS, 2012). Limited investments in children's education and health may constrain their potential human capital in adulthood and increase the risk that the next generation will also experience poverty (Quisumbing, 2007).

This research focuses on the Serer ethnic group, who comprise 15 per cent of the Senegalese population and live predominantly in the country's main groundnut growing rural areas, in addition to in urban areas. Studies of family and household relations in Senegal to date have tended to focus on the Wolof, the largest ethnic group (Diop, 1985; Bass and Sow, 2006). In general, people of Serer ethnicity are significantly more likely to experience poverty (83% greater risk of living in poverty) than the Wolof (Fall et al., 2011). The Serer adopted Islam and Catholicism during the 20th century, later than most other ethnic groups in Senegal (Bass and Sow, 2006). Polygamy is slightly less common among the Serer than other ethnic groups (38% of marriages are polygamous compared to 44-50% among other ethnicities) (Bass and Sow, 2006). Levirate marriage, whereby a younger brother or other paternal relative may remarry the widow of his deceased brother, is commonly practiced.

Traditionally, the Serer observe aspects of both patrilineal and matrilineal inheritance systems for the transfer of wealth, values and knowledge between generations (Galvan, 2004). In Serer rural areas, agricultural land, cattle, the family home and other assets are usually passed down, according to patrilineal inheritance systems, from father to son and the eldest family head is regarded as the '*kilifa*' (patriarch, head of the household and moral authority) (Gning, 2013), responsible for decision-making and managing inherited assets. As Gning (2013)

observes, the *kilifa* has certain power over all other members of the household, who consider  
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him the reference point for the family; as the moral authority, he is usually consulted on all affairs, he arbitrates, takes decisions and resolves conflicts. In general, brothers tend to live together in multi-generational households with their wives and children and hence when the eldest son and head of the household dies, another brother would usually become head of the household. In such an instance, assets may not be divided among family members according to Islamic law (for Muslims) and local practices for several years, until the deceased's sons have matured and are able to manage their inherited assets. Widows do not usually inherit land, but if they have children and enjoy good relations with their in-laws, they generally continue to live with their deceased husband's family (unless they wish to remarry outside of their husband's family) and have continued use rights to their husband's land. According to Islamic law, daughters are expected to receive half of the share of inherited assets that their brothers receive, but the research found that this did not usually include land. Furthermore, in one of the research locations, some agricultural land and rice paddies were regarded as belonging to the maternal lineage (Evans, 2012).

### **Theoretical perspectives**

In this article, I draw on feminist understandings of care (Tronto, 1993) which recognise the 'embodied relationality' (Ribbens McCarthy and Prokhovnik, in press) and gendered power imbalances that often characterise caring relations and practices. Recent geographical literature has revealed the highly embodied nature of such practices that vary in different socio-spatial and temporal contexts (Milligan, 2005; Bondi, 2008). Research suggests that the emotions experienced by care-givers and care-receivers need to be understood within the broader context of existing socio-cultural relations, gender and age inequalities, stigma and poverty (Evans and Thomas, 2009).

Tronto (1993) emphasises the interdependence and interconnectedness of human relations, responsibilities and practices of care. She argues that care, as a process, can be conceptualised as four analytically separate, but interconnected, phases. *Caring about* involves 'the recognition in the first place that care is necessary' and that this need for care should be met. The second phase, *taking care of*, involves 'assuming some responsibility for the identified need and determining how to respond to it' (ibid:106). The third phase, *care-giving*, involves the 'direct meeting of needs for care', involving physical work and 'almost always requires that care-givers come in contact with the objects of care' (ibid:107). Proximity is therefore often regarded as necessary in order for care-giving to take place, although geographers have been critical of this assumption (Barnett and Land, 2007; Massey, 2004). Tronto also draws a distinction between providing money for care, which is considered more a form of 'taking care of' than it is a form of 'care-giving', since this form of giving usually enables someone else to do the necessary care work. The final phase, *care-receiving* recognises that 'the object of care will respond to the care it receives', which is important in providing the means of ensuring that caring needs have actually been met and in assessing how adequately care is provided. In this article, I explore whether and how young people's and other family members' experiences relate to Tronto's four phase conceptualisation of care and analyse the gendered power dynamics of caring relations and practices in bereaved families.

Family relations and practices within the 'private' domestic space of 'home' often form part of the backdrop of geographies of care, yet few studies explore how intergenerational care and familial responsibilities may change in homespace following the death of a family member.

As Vanderbeck (2007) has observed, research on age has been a tended to be compartmentalised into a focus on the 'bookend' generations of children/youth and old age, ©Ruth Evans 21/02/14. Please cite as: Evans, R. (2014) 'Parental death as a vital conjuncture? Intergenerational care and responsibility following bereavement in Senegal', *Social and Cultural Geography*, DOI:[10.1080/14649365.2014.908234](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2014.908234).

rather than on intergenerationality. In diverse contexts in Africa, the everyday lives of different generations are often integrated within families and communities, based on a generational bargain (Collard, 2000) and generational hierarchies (Reynolds Whyte et al., 2008). While changes may be occurring in response to different pressures, such as the HIV epidemic, my research from Tanzania, Uganda and Senegal suggests that generational hierarchies, intergenerational caring relations and respect for elders are also enduring features of many African societies (Evans, in press).

Morgan's (1996; 2011) concept of 'family practices' is useful in emphasising the fluidity of family relations and the ways that families are constituted through 'doing' rather than 'being'; that is, by engaging in everyday practices, activities and routines. Issues of time and space are necessarily implicated in the notion of 'family practices', which incorporate multiple timeframes including 'the past (memories, nostalgia), the future (projects, hopes) and the present (the meeting of pasts and futures' (Morgan, 2011: 79). Building on the concept of family practices, Finch (2007: 66, italics in original) argues that "*families need to be 'displayed' as well as 'done'*". She explains that the notion of 'displaying' emphasises "the fundamentally social nature of family practices, where the meaning of one's actions has to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others if those actions are to be effective as constituting 'family' practices" (ibid: 66). In a similar light to recent sociological approaches to family relations, Carsten (2004) rethinks the anthropology of kinship and relatedness, emphasising the fluidity of kinship relations which are 'made' and reproduced through everyday practices in specific spatial and temporal contexts, such as in 'houses of memory'. In this article, I draw on these understandings of kinship, 'family practices' and 'family displays' to explore how young people and relatives define kinship and family relations and how these are reconfigured and potentially transformed within homespace following parental death.

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Few studies to date have explored the relationships between space/place and death, bereavement and mourning in the global South and recent literature has called for more attention to be paid to the material dimensions of death and absence (Hockey et al., 2010; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010; Klass, 1999). Relationships between the living and dead have been theorised in terms of 'continuing bonds' (Klass et al., 1996) which are shaped by relationships in life, by the nature of the death itself and by other social factors such as economic status, ethnicity, religion, age, gender and sexuality among others (Howarth, 2007; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). Maddrell (2013: 505) develops the notion of 'absence-presence' to emphasise 'the dynamic relationality of the two intersecting, but apparently oppositional, terms'. She argues that the absent deceased has continuity of presence through the experiential and relational tension between the physical absence (not being there) and emotional presence (a sense of still being there) (ibid). In the context of the UK, Maddrell (2009) has explored how this paradoxical absence-presence is expressed through representational and more-than-representational forms and practices and argues that the bereaved draw on "*multiple* sites and practices for expressing remembrance and continuing bonds with the deceased", ranging from those centring on the body, home, virtual space, formal memorial and vernacular memorials in public places (2013: 511, emphasis in original).

Furthermore, Ribbens McCarthy and Prokhovnik (in press) argue that relational bonds of care after death can retain a material dimension, as well as being deeply felt in the bodies of the living. They develop the notion of 'embodied relationality' to conceptualise the ways that the embodied relationship with the dead person does not die with the person, but rather continues through caring about and for the deceased, which is expressed through a variety of material

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forms, including, "the 'stuff' in the field of intensity between 'us', such as the clothes 'you' chose to wear and the shape they give you, and beyond that to the 'things' associated with you (Barraitser, 2009), such as your watch, your wallet or your green glass vase" (Ribbens McCarthy and Prokhovnik, in press). In addition to this understanding of embodied materiality and a sense of the agency of the dead, they argue that deep grief can be experienced as a felt, physical experience in the living body. As the authors summarise, continuing materiality with the deceased thus refers to "the lived experience and perceived reality of embodiment understood in the light of relations with others and social norms" (ibid).

Alongside these understandings of care, family relations, embodiment and continuing bonds, I draw on Johnson-Hanks' (2002) notion of 'vital conjunctures' to conceptualise the liminal period of transition that young people may experience following the death of a parent. 'Vital conjunctures' are defined as: 'a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential' (ibid: 871). The concept brings together Bourdieu's notion of conjuncture - "the context of action, the site in which habitus is made and its consequences are enacted" - and the demographic term, 'vital event'. Johnson-Hanks (2002) argues that while events are often discrete, instantaneous and may be considered outcomes in themselves, the notion of 'conjunctures' offers the possibility of multiple outcomes operating over different timeframes. Such 'conjunctures' are 'vital' in that they are considered to play a critical role or turning point in an individual's lifecourse trajectory (ibid). Johnson-Hanks (2002) emphasises the multiple temporalities of life transitions through the focus on institutions and aspirations. The approach underplays

however spatial dynamics. This article uses the concept of vital conjunctures to analyse how

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responses to parental death, caring relations and practices vary in different spaces as well as according to different timeframes. I explore how young people's emotional responses and present caring relations and practices are shaped by memories of the deceased person within the home and other spatial contexts, and how parental death may reconfigure or reaffirm present relations and practices of care within the household.

## **Research methods**

Given the sensitivity of the topic, a qualitative methodology informed by feminist understandings of care and the lifecourse (Bowlby et al., 2010) was considered most appropriate in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of different family members who have lost a significant other. A range of rural and urban research locations were selected to explore location-based differences: the rural communities of Tocky Gare, Diourbel region and Fimela, Fatick region and working class districts and suburbs of Dakar, the capital city (Médina, Guédiawaye, Keur Massar and Yeumbeul). Using key gatekeepers and snowballing techniques, a purposive sample of 20 Serer families who had experienced an adult relative's death in recent years was identified. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 51 participants from October to December 2011. This comprised: 12 women and 6 men whose spouse had died; 5 young women and 5 young men (aged 15-27) whose mother/father or both had died; 6 relatives; 7 religious and community leaders and 11 professionals working on poverty alleviation, women's and children's rights.

Research has revealed the importance of exploring multiple perspectives within families in order to analyse intergenerational dynamics (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland and Gillies, 2003; Evans and Becker, 2009). In the majority (16/20) of families, therefore, two family members of different generations were interviewed, usually the spouse and offspring of the deceased

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person. The majority of families (17/20) were Muslim; three Roman Catholic families also participated. Of the ten young people interviewed, six had lost their father, three had lost both parents and one had lost his mother. A range of explanations were given for the deaths, from biomedical chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cancer, mystical illnesses and road or fishing accidents. This article focuses primarily on young people's perspectives and experiences.

I conducted most of the interviews in French with interpretation to/from Serer or Wolof provided by a Serer interpreter. Some interviews with professionals and family members were conducted in French without an interpreter. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into French with research assistance. I translated quotations from the French transcripts used in this article into English. Analytic summaries of each interview were written to assist in reading across the data. Following preliminary analysis, key findings were presented in participatory feedback workshops with participants in the three research locations in May 2012. The project was granted ethical clearance by the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee and the safety and security of the participants and researcher in the collection and storage of the data and dissemination of the findings were of paramount importance throughout the study. All participants' accounts have been anonymised. This small-scale study does not aim to be representative of orphaned young people's experiences in Senegal, but rather provides initial insights into responses to parental death and intergenerational care and responsibility among a diverse group of Serer young people living in rural and urban areas.

### **Vital conjunctures: emotional responses to parental death**

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Almost all the young people interviewed regarded the death of one or both of their parents as significant events, or 'critical moments' (Thompson et al., 2002), which had marked their lives. Moreover, young people's narratives appear to suggest that for many, the death of a parent represented a 'vital conjuncture' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) that was associated with a temporary period of change and emotional disruption in their lives.

Young people revealed the emotional significance of the loss of their parent through accounts of their embodied experiences in different temporal and spatial contexts. In the immediate aftermath of parental death, most of the young women interviewed had not attended their parent's funeral, often staying at home with their mother or other female relatives, while most of the young men had attended their parent's funeral. This reflects conventional gendered practices among Muslim families of Serer ethnicity in Senegal. However, in one young woman's account, non-attendance at her father's funeral was also considered to be best to protect her from emotional upset, because she had been particularly close to her father:

*they said when you are very close to a person, you shouldn't go to their burial, it's a custom. And I was very friendly with my papa, I did everything for him and my mother used to say that I treated my father like my grandfather<sup>3</sup> and that's why the day of the burial, they requested that I stay at home. Also, I was very fragile and there was a neighbour who came to keep me company because they all left, my brothers and sisters and my mother (Anna, aged 27, Muslim).*

Although Anna wanted to attend the funeral at first, she accepted her mother's explanation that it was best for her to stay at home because of her strong emotional attachment to her father.

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As Maddrell and Sidaway (2010) note, the domestic space of the home may be a key site of dying and death and a locus for remembrance. Memories of the deceased father or mother were evoked and felt most keenly by young people in domestic spaces in the months and years following their parent's death and homespace was changed as a result of the absence of the deceased. Fama, a young woman (aged 15, Muslim) commented that following her father's death, she and her mother argued frequently in their two-roomed home. Her younger sister had struggled to cope with dreams and memories of her father, who had died in a fishing accident, which were evoked at home. The sister decided to move to live with relatives in another village in an attempt to cope with her grief and concentrate better on her studies: *"[Talking of her younger sister] She said that if she stays here, she will not really be able to learn because if she stays here, she only dreams of my father, that's why she left to go there"*.

As theorists of 'continuing bonds' have argued (Silverman and Nickman, 1996; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Maddrell, 2013), mourning may involve living with the 'paradox of presence/ absence of presence' of the deceased person in homespace. Furthermore, young people's emotional responses to death were often closely linked to changes in the family's material circumstances following a parent's death. For example, Abdoulaye, a young man (aged 19, Muslim), who had lost both parents in recent years, now lived alone in the one-roomed house where he used to live with his mother. His older brother had migrated to Ziguinchor, Casamance region, to work in fisheries and his older sister lived with her husband in the village. Although the room was situated in a large compound with his paternal relatives and he usually ate with his guardian's family in the village, Abdoulaye associated

'home' with loneliness: *"I was alone in our home. In our corner, it's just me on my own. I had*

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*problems because being alone, it's hard. It's difficult*". He experienced the loss of his parents in deeply embodied ways, not only emotionally, but also in terms of the lack of care and meals which his mother used to provide within homespace. He found that he now experienced food shortages and missed meal times at his guardian's house, which was located across the village: *"Things have changed, because I find that I miss the evening meal and I only have lunch. Often our millet stores finish, while when she [his mother] was there, we ate when we wanted"*. Although Abdoulaye felt that he could confide in his guardian, his thoughts were filled with memories of his parents which he did not talk about with anyone.

Carsten (2004) argues that the home is a locus for everyday understandings and practices of kinship, and that memories of homes occupied in childhood may be especially powerful. The narratives of Khady (aged 20, Muslim) and Yangoor, her grandmother reveal how emotional, spiritual, social and material aspects of the death of a significant other may be interwoven and explicitly identified with the inherited home and residential relocation. Khady first lost her father, who had been ill for several months with diabetes and then her mother died suddenly two weeks later. The death of her parents plunged the family into poverty: they were forced to sell her father's last remaining field, a vital livelihood asset, to support themselves; her older brother migrated to find work; and her grandmother moved into the inherited parental home to help care for her younger siblings. The shock of her parents' sudden deaths and the emotional impact of the bereavement negatively affected Khady's performance at school: *"At that time, I was doing the Troisième [third year of secondary school] and I failed [...] I was thinking about them when I was in class"*. Soon after the funeral, Khady's younger brother started to have similar pains in his feet as his parents had experienced before their death. Yangoor took him to different traditional healers in the area and everyone advised her to

leave with the children, since they believed the mysterious sickness was associated with the house in which the parents had died:

*In fact, as the Serer say, this illness can't be treated by doctors. Everywhere we called, we were told that the sickness was located in the house. [...] The circumstances of their death made people think that an evil spirit or something must be located in the house. Also, everywhere I went, people told me to leave that house [...] We treated him with traditional medicine and he started to recover.*

This example reveals how Serer cultural beliefs and practices about illness and death associated with the home where the deceased died may be intertwined with adherence to Islam. Due to these beliefs about an 'evil spirit' inhabiting the inherited parental home, the children moved to live with their grandmother in her two-roomed home in a relatives' compound in the village. Two of the younger brothers continued to sleep at the house at night, however, as they did not want to abandon the inherited home in which they had grown up. The home was also important to Khady and she expressed her preference to live there in future, despite her grandmother's fear that an 'evil spirit' troubled the house. Khady instead associated 'home' with an authentic sense of place, belonging and her own identity: *"I prefer living there because there, that's my real home"*.

While many young people reported that they felt the emotional impacts of the loss deeply, especially within the home, some young people living in extended families commented on the solidarity and emotional support that family members provided. Although they could not replace their deceased parents, Samba (aged 27, Muslim), a young man whose mother had

died, explained that according to Serer custom, female extended family members (such as  
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maternal aunts or co-wives of the deceased mother in polygamous households) were regarded as a '*representative of your mother*'. Indeed, interviews with adult relatives, religious and community leaders in rural areas suggested that young people who had lost their parents were rarely considered 'orphans', but rather were regarded as ordinary members of the extended family. Close, loving family relationships and continuity in living arrangements may help to reduce the potentially negative emotional and material impacts of parental death on young people, as research in other contexts has shown (Evans and Becker, 2009; Crivello and Chuta, 2012).

### **Vital conjunctures: reconfiguring intergenerational care and familial responsibilities in different spatial and temporal contexts**

Having explored young people's emotional responses to the death of a parent in different spatial and temporal contexts, this section considers the ways that parental death may represent a 'vital conjuncture' that reconfigures intergenerational caring relations and familial responsibilities over temporary or longer timeframes. Different spatial scales, such as the body, the home, agricultural land in rural areas, the neighbourhood/ community and the city, and family members' mobility between these localities, are analysed.

According to customary practices, Serer widows were expected to refrain from any domestic or paid work during the mourning period, which for Muslim women, lasted for a period of four months ten days. Widows were expected to wear a special *pagne* [printed cloth that women wear] given to her by her deceased husband's relatives and observe a range of embodied practices, such as not wearing jewellery, bathing rituals and prayers, during this period. Following a spiritually cleansing bath and ceremony to mark the end of her mourning, the widow could wear ordinary clothes, return to her usual activities and could remarry.

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Roman Catholic women wore a black veil and the mourning period usually lasted for six months to one year. Adherence to such cultural and religious practices during the 'liminal' period of mourning before a woman adopted a new social status as a 'widow' (Van Gennep [1909] cited in Hockey et al., 2010) was considered important by the widows interviewed and by other members of the Serer ethnic group in both rural and urban areas in order to show respect for, and to appease, the deceased husband. Such embodied practices, which are explicitly gendered, illustrate Ribbens McCarthy and Prokownik's (in press) notion of 'embodied relationality' in which care for the deceased continues after death and is experienced deeply in the bodies of the living.

Young people who had lost a father shared the domestic space with their mother during this liminal mourning period. Young women found that their unpaid social reproductive work and paid work outside the household increased substantially during this period. Diana (aged 27, Roman Catholic), who lived in Dakar and was 21 when her father died, commented that during her mother's six month period of mourning: *'There were lots of things that we did for her, because she sent us on errands more because she did not go out'*. The gendered embodied practices that enabled widows to express continuing bonds with the deceased during a specific time period, could inadvertently increase the risk of poverty, from which it could be difficult to exit. Women who lived alone with their children in urban areas found the mourning period particularly restrictive. One widow, who was Muslim and relied on an irregular income from selling fish at the market in a suburb of Dakar to support her five children, commented on the strain that this placed on her daughter: *"I was no longer selling, one of my daughters used to go to sell at the market, but after less than two months, she said that she could no longer tolerate the hard work, so we just stayed like that"*.

In contrast, some young people experienced reduced spatial mobility and shared the feeling of withdrawal from family and community life that the mourning period entailed for widows. Anna expressed her frustrations with the length of time (one year) that her mother had been observing widowhood practices, which was far longer than the usual mourning period for Muslim women. Anna explained how she tried to coax her mother to take up the activities in which she had formerly engaged, rather than continuing to devote herself to prayer and not leaving the house: *"Even me, I asked her to go out, but she refused and even her dress, she only wears veils. I said that this isn't the way, because it's God's will, we loved him too, but it's destiny and we can't do anything about it, but she persists with her prayers"*. As this and other examples suggest, young people may play important roles in providing emotional support and care for their bereaved mother, assisting her to readjust and re-engage with the family and community following the mourning period.

When asked about who was responsible for caring for family members, both young men and young women drew on 'masculinist' notions of 'care' as providing income to meet the family's needs. These responses equate to Tronto's notion of 'taking care of' those who were bereaved (the equivalent of *prendre en charge* [take responsibility for someone], the French phrase used in interviews), rather than more 'feminine', nurturing notions of 'care-giving'. Young women living in both rural and urban areas worked as domestic workers in the city on a seasonal or more permanent basis to provide financial support for their mother and siblings following their father's death. One widow, Mariama, who was Muslim and had lived with her husband, six children and co-wife in Dakar until his death, found that she and her children were plunged into chronic poverty, as they struggled to repay the debt she owed to her co-wife for her share of the house they had jointly inherited. She regretted the fact that she had to rely on her young daughters' income from domestic work to survive: *"[Following my*

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*husband's death] They started to work and help me. A child who works, it's too hard. You know, domestic work is hard, but they work to help me. One of them buys rice when they pay her, she also helps me pay the electricity bill".* Even when widows had been married in non-cohabiting polygamous unions with their husband, who had maintained separate households for different co-wives in the city and/or rural areas, the death of the husband/father was regarded by widows and young people as having major emotional and material impacts on the family.

As Delaunay and Enel (2009) have noted among the Serer, young women living in rural areas often engaged in seasonal migration to the city, working as domestic workers during the long vacation each year to earn money for their school expenses, uniform and other clothes. Following their father's death, however, they reported greater financial pressures. The young women were usually paid very low wages and were vulnerable to abuses of power, in common with domestic workers in other African countries (Klocker, 2007). Fama (aged 15) described how she had worked in Dakar as a domestic worker for the previous four years, leaving for the city with other young women who came to the village and requesting to live with them while she found work. She tried to negotiate higher wages (20,000 CFA, equivalent of £26.20 per month) with her employers, but was forced to accept the lower wages they offered (15,000 CFA, equivalent of £19.65 per month) and commented: *'It causes problems for me, but I can't do anything else, that's the only thing I can do to earn money'*. The potential vulnerability of young women to low wages, exploitation and sexual abuse by unscrupulous employers when they sought domestic work in Dakar to pay for their schooling costs was also highlighted by some professionals.

In contrast to paternal death, maternal death appeared to increase young women's unpaid 'caregiving' work within the household, which was not accorded as much status as paid work. Young women were expected to take on the deceased mother's responsibilities for domestic chores and childcare to support their bereaved father and younger siblings. Such responsibilities could be substantial and exhausting for young women if no step-mothers (in polygamous unions) or other female relatives were available to help. As one widower (Muslim) with seven young children commented of his eldest daughter's responsibilities: *"It's my daughter [aged 16] who makes every effort to do it [the domestic work] [...] She looks after everything, really, she's exhausted"*.

Following paternal death, young men living in rural areas reported a heightened sense of their responsibility to work hard to cultivate crops on the land that they had inherited and to manage other assets such as livestock, in addition to studying hard for those attending school or university. The inheritance of land and other assets was usually settled within the extended family after the intestate's death<sup>4</sup>. Gender, sibling birth order and age influenced the share of a father's land that young people would receive. None of the young women living in rural areas had inherited land following their father's or mother's death, reflecting gendered norms of inheritance among the Serer. According to imams, elders and a women's group in the rural locations, this was justified by patrilocal marriage practices; daughters would usually join her husband's home when she married and would be allocated land to cultivate there. In Fimela rural community, however, some farmland was regarded as belonging to the maternal lineage and was transferred from maternal uncles to nephews, while daughters usually inherited rice paddies from their mother, as was the case for Abdoulaye's sister. Rural elders, imams and women further commented that if a father's fields were divided among several older brothers, younger brothers could lose their share of the inheritance, which could be a source of conflict

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when they came of age and needed land to support their own families. Young men were considered to be able to manage inherited assets when they had reached puberty and were deemed mature and competent enough to maintain their assets.

The intergenerational transfer of patrilineal land from father to son and young men's desire to cultivate the land and use their inherited assets to the best of their ability can be regarded as a material expression of 'continuing bonds' (Klass et al., 1996; Howarth, 2007) that linked young men to their deceased father and previous generations of ancestors who had originally cleared the land and founded the village. Furthermore, young men's responsibilities to cultivate the land were closely bound up with their deceased father's identity and a sense of belonging. Abdoulaye (aged 19, Muslim) worried about how to make good use of his father's large fields, which he and his brother had inherited but were not currently able to cultivate since Abdoulaye lacked sufficient labour resources and the means to pay labourers to work on the land. He found instead that he was expected to work with his cousins on his guardian's land, but was concerned about leaving his father's land untended. Research from other African countries suggests that if land is left fallow or underused, it is at risk of being claimed by neighbours or relatives, or when local authorities are informed of the underuse of land, they may assign it to others (Rose, 2007). Although very few land or inheritance disputes were reported in this study, since the decentralisation of local administration in Senegal in 1996, the rural council has the right to confiscate any land that is the subject of a dispute (Hesseling, 2009).

The loss of the father and head of the household sometimes led to shifts in intergenerational power dynamics within the household, as young men assumed greater responsibility for decision-making and providing for the family. In such instances, the widowed mother or step-

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mother and younger siblings may be regarded as dependents of the eldest son. Issa (aged 25, Muslim) was the eldest male sibling and grew up with his father, step-mother, sister and three younger half-siblings (his parents divorced when he was young). When his father died five years previously, his paternal uncle inherited his father's material assets, which were held in trust for his children and married his brother's widow, in accordance with Levirate remarriage practices, in order to continue to provide for the family of his deceased older brother. Issa's uncle died a few months prior to the interview, leaving his step-mother widowed a second time. Before his death, Issa's father had entrusted the younger siblings to Issa's care. Issa's memories of his father's wishes for the upbringing of his younger siblings played a central role in his present motivations to care for the family. Following his uncle's death, he had become the '*Kilifa*', the head of the household and moral authority (Gning, 2013) who was responsible for decision-making and managing resources and household expenses. Issa grew millet and groundnuts on their land during the rainy season and undertook irrigated horticultural activities during the dry season on a plot of land he hired in a nearby town. He sought to manage the household according to the same daily routines as his father had:

*One day, I was leaving for the fields, it was nearly Tabaski [Wolof for Eid al-Adha, a Muslim festival], he called me and said: 'I am very tired, I know I am going to die, I want you to look after the children well, because they are vulnerable; I know you are still young, but I entrust them to you'. Since then, I observe these instructions very carefully. They also do everything I tell them to, they obey me. Their mother also looks after me more than my own mother would have done. She is very grateful.*

Issa's desire to fulfil his father's wishes regarding the care of his younger siblings can be seen as an expression of 'continuing bonds' with the deceased; past memories of his father's wishes

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in part motivated his present care of the family. He said that his younger siblings respected him greatly and looked up to him, perhaps more than they had to his father. Authoritative, paternalistic notions of 'care' and family relations are evident here; when asked if Issa got on well with his siblings and step-mother, he replied: "*Absolutely, thanks be to God, there is no problem between us. I have not yet given any orders which they have not followed*".

Sibling birth order, age and gender were significant factors in determining the position, authority and roles accorded to different siblings within the household following parental death, confirming research findings from other contexts in the global South (Punch, 2001; Evans, 2012). The eldest son was expected to inherit his father's and paternal uncles' land, livestock and other assets, to manage these, provide for the household and become responsible for all decisions about household expenses following the death of the male head of household, as seen here in the example of Issa. Issa's sister had migrated to the city for domestic work when she was 15 years old and sent remittances from her domestic work in Dakar each month which provided a vital source of income for the family. However, due to patriarchal gender norms, she did not inherit any of her father's or uncle's assets and did not occupy the same position of authority in the household as her brother when she returned to visit. While Seynabou, the widowed step-mother and her young daughters were responsible for the domestic chores needed to sustain the household, these were not accorded as much value as the eldest siblings' financial roles in 'taking care of' the family. Such unpaid work corresponds to Tronto's (1993) phase of 'caregiving' in the caring process, which is often associated with the private sphere of the home, accorded a low status and feminised as part of women's 'natural' nurturing roles. Seynabou occupied a weaker position in the household, since she was financially dependent on Issa and his sister, despite being older than her step-children, as she commented: "*It was his father who was concerned with the household, he*

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*was the one responsible for it, when he died, after considering carefully, I decided to not leave and stay here, so I will stay 'in his hands' [Serer expression meaning to be taken care of by someone] and we manage”<sup>5</sup>.*

The research suggests that the vital conjuncture of parental death could also lead to a reconfiguration of the caring responsibilities of extended family members. According to Serer customs, male maternal relatives were relied upon in times of difficulty in order to 'take care of' the material needs of family members, such as paying for medicines and hospital treatment. Female maternal relatives were often regarded as responsible for undertaking the more practical 'care-giving' activities, such as providing childcare, including traditional child fosterage practices for young children following the death of mother, and caring for the sick and dying. Maternal relatives also appeared to provide a safety net that would meet the needs of 'double' orphaned children (whose parents had both died) if little support was available from paternal relatives. For example, Abdoulaye's guardian (a distant maternal cousin, Muslim) commented on how their kinship relations had been transformed following the death of Abdoulaye's mother:

*He became a full member of the family after his mother disappeared. [...] He eats with us, he is considered a full member of the family in same image as the other members of the family and this relation is due to the fact that his mother was my older sister [aunt]...I took care of her when she was alive, when she no longer had any strength [...] When his mother died, I took full responsibility for Abdoulaye, so in the morning he comes to my house until late at night when he returns to his father's house.*

This suggests that kinship ties are fluid and can be re-made and reproduced (Carsten, 2004), depending on the significance of particular relationships in different contexts. As noted earlier, however, Abdoulaye associated home with feelings of loneliness, reduced food consumption and a lack of care. This suggests that while his guardian was fulfilling the first two of Tronto's phases of the caring process, 'caring about' and 'taking care of' Abdoulaye, the third phase of 'caregiving' was sometimes not met. Abdoulaye's response to the care, reflecting Tronto's fourth phase of 'care-receiving', suggests that the care received was not always adequate in meeting his emotional and material needs.

These differing accounts of their relationship reveal the contingent nature of kinship ties that are expressed in different ways to different audiences. While the guardian appeared keen to 'display' close family ties (Finch, 2007) and emphasise his relatedness to Abdoulaye in the interview with me, an outsider, Abdoulaye's own account portrays a sense of social and emotional distance from his guardian's family home. As Carsten (2004: 35; italics in original) argues, "kinship is *made* in houses through intimate sharing of space, food, and nurturance that goes on within domestic space". The 'care' provided by Abdoulaye's guardian can be seen as a form of 'displaying' family that involved taking responsibility for Abdoulaye's education and upbringing, which was associated with external recognition due to the financial contribution involved, and which it was anticipated would be compensated through Abdoulaye's work on the family's fields and in future, when Abdoulaye had completed his education and contributed to the family's income. The 'care' provided involved rather less of the practical 'care-giving' work within the home, such as engaging in shared everyday routines and 'family practices' (Morgan, 2011), which might have led to closer emotional ties between Abdoulaye and his guardian's family and a sense of belonging.

Another example of the situation of 'double' orphans reveals how kinship ties and living arrangements may be reconfigured within the home of extended family members following parental death. Paternal relatives appeared unwilling to provide care for Khady, her young daughter (aged 3) and her six siblings following the death of their parents. Yangoor, their maternal grandmother, expressed her anger and frustration that the children's paternal uncle, who lived in the village and according to Serer custom, was considered to '*represent their father*', had refused to provide '*even a kilogram of rice or a single franc*' for the orphaned children, despite having the means to support them. Yangoor explained that the children's uncle and his family faced no sanction from the community for not 'caring about' the orphaned children and recognising that their needs should be met. Rather, the maternal lineage accepted responsibility for the children and provided care:

*In fact, in Serer areas, if you are not worried about taking care of the children of your older brother, no one will remind you of this. Who else should look after them if not their father's younger brother? [...] So, if he refuses to take care of them, their maternal lineage will look after them. [...] That's why I brought them home [...] We, the members of their maternal lineage can put up with this but those who represent nothing for the children, I can say, now their father is dead, they are no longer linked to the children. But all these difficulties will disappear one day, by the grace of God, everything will cease one day.*

In contrast to the example of Abdoulaye above, who was older and would soon be able to take on his role in the intergenerational contract for his guardian's family, Khady's younger siblings were more numerous, younger and hence required more care and investment over a longer timeframe. These factors are likely to have influenced the paternal uncle's willingness

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to accept responsibility for the children. The continuing affective and material importance of the maternal lineage to Serer identity and sense of belonging, especially in rural areas (confirmed in interviews with village elders and imams), appears to provide recognition of maternal relatives' significant roles in providing a safety net and as in this example, caring for orphaned children. As Yangoor's account suggests, it also enables maternal relatives to re-define the significance of particular kinship ties in different contexts and de-emphasise links with paternal relatives who do not fulfil their conventional kinship responsibilities.

### **Continuities: reaffirming the intergenerational contract and family practices**

While the narratives of young people and relatives discussed thus far suggest that parental death represented a vital conjuncture that reconfigured intergenerational caring relations and familial responsibilities within homespace, some young people's experiences do not correspond to this interpretation. The accounts of young men who continued to live in large extended family households headed by a paternal uncle following their father's death, or of those who, following their mother's death, continued to live with their father who had remarried, suggest that a parent's death had not brought about any significant change in familial responsibilities or living arrangements. Parental death in these circumstances was associated more with continuities and a reaffirmation of existing family practices rather than with biographical disruptions.

For older youth (aged 25 and over), parental death appeared to consolidate their familial obligations to provide for older and younger family members as part of the 'generational bargain' (Collard, 2000). In the context of very limited social protection to support children and older people in many African countries, older youth and adult offspring were expected to support their bereaved mother and siblings following the death of a male head of household.

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Several young people articulated a heightened awareness of the mortality of close, surviving family members and were committed to fulfilling their familial obligations. Anna (aged 27, Muslim), for example, had completed teacher training and was about to start her first teaching post at the time of the interview. She commented: “[...] *even if I have brothers and sisters who do so already, I must also support her. Beside my father, I was a child, but now, I have set myself a goal: to help my mother because she’s the only one I have left, so I must do all I can for her*”.

Anthropological literature has highlighted the cultural significance of older siblings’ roles in caring for younger siblings and in socialisation and informal training in many African societies (Cicirelli, 1994; LeVine *et al*, 1996). Those who had lost both parents expressed a strong sense of familial responsibility and sought to act as a role model for their younger siblings. Badara, a young man (aged 26, Muslim) who had lost both parents in recent years and who was studying at university in Dakar commented:

*I can say that I became responsible, because I am the oldest child of my mother and I became responsible for my brother and sister, I have my aunts [father's co-wives and uncle's wives] there [in their rural home]. [...] I am their oldest sibling and I have to watch over them and set a good example to them.*

The loss of a parent thus appeared to reaffirm the conventional role that older siblings were expected to play in providing informal teaching and setting a good example to their younger siblings, even when older siblings usually lived in the city some distance away.



Following a parent's death, some young men appeared to reassert their privileged position of power and authority over their younger siblings, reinforcing hierarchies of gender, age and sibling birth order within the household. Samba, a young man (aged 27) who lived with his father, his father's new wife and his younger siblings in a rural area, considered that he was more responsible for his younger siblings' informal education since his mother had died. He saw his role specifically in teaching them about appropriate behaviour and discipline and ensuring they undertook domestic chores:

*I'm the one who looks after their education. It's enough to call me for them to do it.*

*But it's not enough to just use the cane to make them to respect you, education is not about corporal punishment, it is enough to use a certain language, they will respect you, there are words that if you address them to someone, they will grant you respect.*

*Here, I am the one who is responsible, because it's me who dictates what should be done, they carry it out, I order them to not do it, they don't do anything.*

As the eldest son, he commanded respect and occupied a position of authority within the household, although his father remained head of the household. This reveals how a parent's death may reinforce the eldest male sibling's position of authority through 'family practices' and everyday routines within the home.

Samba anticipated marrying and bringing his future wife to live in the family home, since he would be the eventual heir, as he explained: *"If I marry, I will bring her here to live together with the family because the house belongs to me, I am there with my father and the children, so, this house belongs to me"*. A wife and children would enhance Samba's status within the

household and eventually he would be expected to assume greater responsibility as head of  
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the household, as his father aged and became less able to sustain the household through physically demanding farm work. This demonstrates how parental death and subsequent life transitions may reaffirm young people's role in the intergenerational contract.

The research reveals that the significance of the death of a parent/spouse also depended on the strength of social relationships and co-residence. In some households maternal relatives, particularly adult brothers and sisters, appeared to play a key role in providing reciprocal care for women married in polygamous unions who had weak social ties with their husband's family and their children. The death of the husband, in this case, can be interpreted not as a vital conjuncture, but rather as reaffirming existing family practices and caring relations. Kangou, a disabled widow who was Muslim and whose deceased husband had lived with his first wife and her children, did not regard the death of her husband as having any significant impacts on her own or her children's emotional or material wellbeing. Kangou had always with lived her parents and her older brother and his family rather than with her deceased husband's family. She commented:

*It's my brother who is responsible for feeding us, he works, he copes<sup>5</sup> and the rest of us, we farm [...] They [the children] hardly suffered because they didn't live with their father, it's their maternal uncle who takes care of them. In fact, their father was old, so it's their maternal uncle who has always been responsible for them.*

The death of her brother's wife the previous year was regarded as much more significant than her husband's recent death, since she missed her sister-in-law's company and assistance with the domestic chores and Kangou was now responsible for caring for her sister-in-law's

children as well as her own. Thus, as Ribbens McCarthy (2009) highlights, the significance  
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of particular deaths depends on the culturally specific meanings of relationships in particular contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This article has provided an in-depth insight into responses to death among Serer young people in Senegal, contributing to geographical and cross-cultural studies of death and bereavement. As a period of change and transition that occurs across different spatial and temporal contexts, the research suggests that parental death represents a 'vital conjuncture' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) for the majority of the Serer young people interviewed. While the concept of 'vital conjunctures' has been illuminating in interpreting the empirical data from Senegal, the analysis here reveals the importance of a spatial, as well as a temporal lens. Young people's emotional responses to parental death were embodied through feelings of grief and loneliness evoked within the home. Young people expressed 'continuing bonds' after death (Klass et al., 1996) through memories of the deceased and through their heightened sense of responsibility to 'take care of' bereaved family members, to succeed in their studies, cultivate inherited farmland and fulfil the wishes of the deceased parent. In comparison to interview data from widows and widowers, young people were less articulate about the emotional significance of their loss, but feelings of grief, loneliness and memories of their deceased parent were closely entwined with changes in intergenerational caring relations and family practices that were manifested in a range of spaces.

As Carsten (2004) has observed, kinship is lived, made and reproduced in domestic spaces. Houses lived in during childhood were a key locus for memories of the deceased and the continuation of family practices that young people regarded as important to their sense of self and belonging. Parental death often reconfigured intergenerational caring relations within the

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home and led to changes in family practices, living arrangements and responsibilities. The death of a father was associated with poverty and young people's increased engagement in paid work outside the household to meet their educational costs. Young women often worked as domestic workers in the city to earn an income during the school vacations or for sustained periods when the family experienced situations of chronic poverty. The death of a mother was associated with an increase in young women's unpaid 'care-giving' responsibilities within the household. For 'double orphans', the death of both parents could result in a reconfiguration of kinship relations and a move to live with maternal relatives if paternal relatives were unwilling to accept their conventional responsibilities. This enabled family members to redefine kinship relations and to de-emphasise some familial ties, revealing the fluid, contingent nature of kinship that is lived and re-made through shared family practices and intergenerational care (Morgan, 2011; Carsten, 2004).

The young people interviewed saw their roles predominantly in terms of 'caring about' and 'taking care of' bereaved family members through assuming responsibility and providing financial support to meet their needs. This corresponds to the first two of Tronto's phases of the caring process. However, many were also involved in practical 'caregiving' activities within the home, such as childcare, informal teaching and disciplining of younger siblings, undertaking domestic chores and providing emotional support for a grieving parent and other family members. Young women's paid domestic work also reflects elements of the 'caregiving' phase; young women were engaged in practical caring and domestic activities for wealthier families to earn an income for their own families. This suggests that the 'taking care of' and 'care-giving' phases of the caring process may be interrelated in complex ways, but the more care-related activities are usually 'feminised' and accorded lower social status.

This study has thus revealed the highly gendered nature of mourning practices and caring relations following the death of an adult relative in Senegal, which may lead to transient or chronic poverty for widows and orphaned children, especially those living in urban areas. Young people's involvement in caring for family members was associated with agency (Tronto, 1993) and reaffirmed their position within the household, their sense of responsibility towards their younger siblings and their role in the intergenerational contract. However, the low social status accorded to social reproductive work due to its association with women's 'natural' roles, alongside the low wages and risk of exploitation and abuse that was involved with paid domestic work, undermined young women's efforts to assert agency. This led to frustration, exhaustion and, in some instances, a sense of hopelessness, which could impact on young women's educational and employment outcomes and perpetuate gendered inequalities and the conditions of chronic poverty for future generations.

Following parental death, eldest sons living in rural areas, in contrast, gained from intergenerational transfers of wealth, such as inherited land and livestock, and were able to re-assert their position within the home, reinforcing hierarchies of gender, age and sibling birth order. This sometimes led to shifts in power relations within the household and the fulfilment of the intergenerational contract, as the eldest son became the '*Kilifa*', or head of the household and was regarded as the moral authority, responsible for decision-making over household expenses and providing for younger siblings, step-mothers and their children and other relatives. Thus, although family practices of care for bereaved family members and the deceased were experienced in terms of agency and responsibility at an individual level, they were produced by and reproduce existing socio-cultural differences and inequalities that privilege eldest sons and subordinate women and girls. This demonstrates the 'socially

structured' nature of the zones of possibility afforded by 'vital conjunctures' (Johnson-Hanks, ©Ruth Evans 21/02/14. Please cite as: Evans, R. (2014) 'Parental death as a vital conjuncture? Intergenerational care and responsibility following bereavement in Senegal', *Social and Cultural Geography*, DOI:[10.1080/14649365.2014.908234](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2014.908234).

2002). The research thus makes an important contribution to understandings of gendered nuances in the experience of bereavement and continuing bonds, as called for by Maddrell (2013) and Howarth (2007) among others. It also provides insight into gendered and generational intra-household decision-making processes, ownership and control of assets.

Within national strategies to alleviate poverty in Senegal, widows and orphaned children were included within the category of the 'most vulnerable groups', although only orphaned children affected by HIV were specifically targeted for support through donor-funded social protection and sponsorship programmes. Several development professionals thought that a social protection system needed to be developed, whereby poor widows, orphaned children and other vulnerable groups could be targeted for social transfers to support children's education and healthcare, thereby providing a safety net which helped to reduce chronic poverty. This reflects a wider policy emphasis on developing social protection systems in many African countries in recent years (UNICEF, 2009). Many family and community members echoed the views of professionals; they thought that widows and orphaned children should be specifically targeted for assistance to pay for children's schooling and to meet their basic needs, such as food and healthcare. Some young people who had lost both parents also identified a need for emotional support.

While all the young people interviewed saw the death of their parent as a significant emotional turning point, the death of a male breadwinner appeared to directly affect many young people's material circumstances, leading in some cases, to situations of chronic poverty. However, the research has also revealed that parental death did not always lead to emotional or biographical disruption or increased poverty and vulnerability. Rather than

representing a vital conjuncture, for some older youth, parental death may be associated with

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continuities, reaffirming their role in the intergenerational contract and existing family practices and leading to few, if any, changes in material circumstances or living arrangements. This reveals the importance of understanding the culturally specific meanings of particular relationships (Hewlett, 2005; Ribbens McCarthy, 2009) and a young person's social location, access to resources and wider socio-cultural and religious norms and practices. A more nuanced approach is needed to understand the differentiated impacts of a death on different family members and to analyse how social inequalities and rural-urban differences intersect with hierarchies of gender, generation, age and sibling birth order to marginalise some, but not all, young people who have lost a parent.

## Notes

1. I recognise that the concept of 'bereavement' itself is problematic and difficult to translate in cross-cultural research, since it is strongly rooted within Western psychological and medical perspectives (Ribbens McCarthy, 2007; Klass, 1999).
2. Adult HIV prevalence rates are estimated to be 0.7% of the population (aged 15-49 years) in Senegal in 2011 (UNAIDS, 2012).
3. The relationship between a grandparent and grandchild is considered particularly close, affectionate and joking in nature among the Serer; grandparents may treat grandchildren and overlook behaviour that their parents would punish.
4. As in many other African countries and in common with other ethnic groups in Senegal, the Serer very rarely expressed their wishes for inheritance in a written or verbal will.
5. The French verb 'se débrouiller' [to manage, to cope with] was often used in interviews to refer to the way that people struggled, coped and managed despite the financial pressures they were under. This phrase has been noted in other francophone African contexts (Waage, ©Ruth Evans 21/02/14. Please cite as: Evans, R. (2014) 'Parental death as a vital conjuncture? Intergenerational care and responsibility following bereavement in Senegal', *Social and Cultural Geography*, DOI:[10.1080/14649365.2014.908234](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2014.908234)).

2006) , while the equivalent English phrase, 'managing', or 'getting by' is also common in anglophone African countries (Langevang, 2008; Evans, 2011). The phrase refers to 'having and using the skill to improvise from available resources and to adjust one's strategies in response to the opportunities and constraints that arise with time' (Langevang, 2008: 2045).

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