Interpreting family struggles in West Africa across Majority-Minority world boundaries: tensions and possibilities

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Abstract (250 words)
The 'family' is associated with powerful, often emotive discourses in both the Majority and Minority worlds. However, family geographies to date have been largely focused on research with children and families in the Minority world, reflecting the wider dominance of geographical knowledge and social science theories developed in affluent, Anglophone contexts. In this intervention, I reflect on the tensions in attempting to theorise family meanings, practices and struggles in West Africa without imposing Minority world framings and perspectives. In my research in urban Senegal, the team's approach of 'uncomfortable reflexivity' enabled us to have frank conversations about our own experiences of 'family' and the death of a significant person, about our differing emotional responses to participants' experiences and about the nuances of the language used. My collaborative research with Ghanaian academics highlights the importance of time and space to develop shared qualitative understandings of everyday family struggles for publication in international journals. Given global inequalities in social science knowledge production, an ethic of care is needed that seeks to collaborate reflexively with others across disciplinary, linguistic and Majority-Minority world boundaries. This endeavour will hopefully generate more nuanced insights into the plurality and diversity of everyday family lives globally, while recognising the commonalities we share, situating knowledge in place and approaching the 'global' from the Majority world.

Key words:
Everyday family lives
Cross-cultural research
North-South collaboration
Diversity and difference
Reflexivity
Ethic of care

Introduction

The 'family'[1] is associated with powerful, often emotive discourses in both the Majority and Minority worlds. Since Valentine's (2008) observation that geographies of intimacy and the 'family' have remained an 'absent presence' in geography, there has been significant work on family geographies, intergenerationality and place, as Harker and Martin's (2012) and Tarrant and Hall's (2018) special issues demonstrate. Analysis of the socio-spatial and gendered dynamics of parenting, childcare and grandparenting in everyday family lives and neighbourhoods have been central to this work (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Hall, 2016; Jupp and Gallagher, 2013; McKie et al, 2002; Tarrant, 2010). While this burgeoning work on family and intergenerational geographies is to be welcomed, research to date has largely focused on children and families in the Minority world, reflecting the wider dominance of geographical knowledge and social science theories developed in affluent, Anglophone contexts (Evans et al., 2017a; Punch, 2016; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2017). Notable exceptions include my own and other geographers' research in Africa (Ansell, 2001; Katz, 2004; Robson, 2004) and elsewhere in the Majority world (Brickell, 2014; Punch, 2002), in addition to edited collections which encompass Majority and Minority world contexts (Panelli et al, 2007; Vanderbeck and Worth, 2014; Horton and Pyer, 2017). Yet there is often little critical reflection on the extent to which the frameworks and concepts used to analyse geographies of children, youth and families in the Majority world reflect Minority world theorisations and perspectives, despite recent work in sociology that explicitly addresses this question (Korbin, 2013; Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2017).

As I write this, I realise that my cross-cultural interest in exploring diverse family lives in Africa has been driven, at least in part, by trying to make sense of my own traumatic childhood experiences, 'family troubles' (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2013) and the complex power dynamics involved in care closer to home. Having listened to many young people's experiences of young caregiving, loss, violence, mental illness and a lack of emotional support, and seeking to do justice to their accounts through my writing, I am only now aware of the commonalities I share with many of the participants I have interviewed and how the mind may protect us from the pain of these experiences until later in life. This serves as an important reminder that 'distant others', whose experiences we are drawn to investigate, may have more resonances with our own experiences than we may initially think. Thus, rather than reifying 'difference', I seek to trouble Majority-Minority world binaries about family struggles and recognise commonalities, while carefully situating the process of knowledge production and paying close attention to differing meanings of 'family' and the specificities of place.

In this intervention, I reflect on the tensions of producing knowledge about family lives in the Majority world, while working as an academic in an UK university. I use the terms Majority and Minority Worlds in this paper to refer to the global South and global North respectively, in order to acknowledge that the 'majority' of the world's population, poverty, land mass and so on are located in the global South. As Punch (2003) suggests, we need to shift the balance of worldviews that frequently privilege 'western' and 'northern' perspectives. In this intervention, I argue that attempting to theorise 'family' meanings and practices in diverse contexts in West Africa without imposing Minority world framings and perspectives often poses considerable challenges for feminist geographers and sociologists. In my research on responses to death, care and family relations in Senegal, the team found that adopting an approach of 'uncomfortable reflexivity' was particularly valuable in such cross-cultural contexts, where exploring 'difference' is often the unspoken object of enquiry underpinning a

particular research focus. Embracing reflexivity and seeking to work across sociological-geographical, linguistic and Majority-Minority boundaries is not an easy process, however. My research with Ghanaian academics highlights some of the possibilities and challenges of North-South collaboration in research on everyday family struggles over land. I identify the importance of time and space to develop shared qualitative understandings of family practices and intergenerational relations for publication in international journals. Before reflecting on my research in West Africa, I first highlight global structural inequalities in social science knowledge production. These inequalities have often resulted in ideas, conceptualisations and knowledge about everyday family lives developed primarily in the Minority world remaining un-situated, regarded as of universal significance (Connell, 2006) and used as the basis for understanding the lives of children and families in Majority world contexts.

Global inequalities in knowledge production about everyday family lives
The literature on family relations in Sub-Saharan Africa tends to be dominated by development, population or global health studies focused on gendered and intergenerational poverty dynamics, including the impacts of female-headed and other household structures, and studies of children and families affected by the HIV epidemic and other health crises (Beegle et al, 2010; Cooper and Bird, 2012; Cluver et al, 2007; Jones et al., 2010; Peterman, 2012; Shapiro and Tambashe, 2001). A growing body of anthropological and sociological studies conducted in Africa published in French and English explores gender, household and family dynamics, generations, kinship, marriage, widowhood practices and rituals (Adepoju, 1999; Alber et al, 2008; Dial, 2008; Diop, 2012; Fansoranti and Aruna, 2007; Gomz-Perez and LeBlanc, 2012; Gunga, 2009; LeVine et al, 1996; Pilon and Vignikin, 2006; Oheneba-Sakyi and Takyi, 2006; Perry, 2005; Vallin, 2009).

Alongside this body of work, I have found social studies of childhood and youth conducted in Africa and elsewhere in the Majority world most relevant to my analyses (Ansell, 2001; Christiansen et al., 2006; Honwana and de Boeck, 2005; Jacquemin, 2006; Katz, 2004; Langevang, 2008; Notermans, 2008; Panelli et al, 2007; Punch, 2002; Robson, 2004). Twum-Danso Imoh (2013) however calls for greater integration within childhood studies and for more attention to be paid to commonalities as well as diversities within and across contexts. As Punch (2016) demonstrates with examples from sociology, geography and anthropology, childhood studies are generally multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary and would benefit from greater Majority-Minority world dialogue. Indeed, Twum-Danso Imoh and colleagues' (2019) edited collection explicitly seeks to challenge Majority-Minority world binaries. As we argue (Evans and Becker, 2019), within an increasingly interdependent globalised world, comparative research that investigates children's lives in contrasting socio-economic, political and welfare contexts and dialogue across binaries seems ever more important.

I would add to these arguments that social studies of childhood and youth often draw on theoretical constructs developed in the Minority world and published in English, even if the research is conducted in other languages and reflects the experiences of children and families in the Majority world. I include my own work in this criticism. For example, in my research on young people caring for their siblings in Tanzania and Uganda, I theorised time-space practices of care by drawing on McKie et al's (2002) concept of caringscapes, life course transitions and Lefebvre's (2004) rhythmanalytical approach (Evans, 2012). I sought to be led by young people's experiences and developed the research report using thematic analysis

of the interview and focus group transcripts, in addition to discussing my initial analyses in participatory workshops with the young people, NGO staff and community members.

Nevertheless, our approach to researching family lives is almost inevitably influenced by our (often partial) understanding of the available literature, alongside our personal biography and social location. The limited accessibility of qualitative understandings of family lives in Sub-Saharan Africa is due in part to limited linguistic proficiencies of Anglophone Minority world academics (including myself) to engage with work published in languages other than English; different disciplinary and linguistic traditions of publishing; in addition to technological and infrastructural factors that restrict online access to social science theses and research outputs. For me, for good or ill, the fine-grained work of conceptualising the findings in relation to existing social science theories often comes after I have completed a research report and shared this with participants, as part of the process of writing journal articles.

Editors and peer reviewers of journal articles understandably expect a higher level of engagement with existing academic research and theoretical approaches than practitioners. Yet it is at this stage in the publication process that the dominance of Anglophone, Minority world theorising about family lives globally often becomes most apparent. Reviewers often expect geographers working in the Majority world to include the country where the research was conducted in the article title; to cite academics working on related topics in the Minority world as well as those working in Majority world contexts; and for the arguments to be informed by dominant geographical debates and interests derived largely from those contexts and published in Anglophone geography journals. The same expectations to engage with research and understandings about family lives in Majority world contexts (Punch, 2016), and to situate the geographical context of the research within the article title, are rarely placed on academics who work primarily in the Minority world. Furthermore, as Punch (2016) observes, each sub-discipline has a tendency to cross-reference work within its own sub-discipline rather than drawing on the broader literature from other disciplines within childhood (or family) studies.

An uneasy compromise I have often come to when drawing on theoretical concepts such as 'social resilience', which was originally developed on the basis of research conducted with children primarily in the US and Europe, is to reflect on the concepts in the light of the data produced in African settings and highlight the limitations of such theorising from a cross-cultural perspective (see Evans, 2005). In a more recent article (Evans, 2014), I sought to integrate multiple theoretical and disciplinary perspectives when conceptualising young people's caring relations and experiences of parental death rather than adopting a single theoretical framing. These included concepts and ideas discussed in anthropological, sociological, geographical and death studies and in Francophone and Anglophone development and African studies literature. Such approaches to writing are limited, however, in redressing the balance towards developing theory and knowledge from Majority world perspectives.

The potential contribution of academics and researchers based in the Majority world (not to mention children, families and communities) to framing the research questions and methodologies for exploring everyday family lives globally, as well as contributing to analysis, conceptualisation and theory-building through publication, is often overlooked, or

constrained by time pressures and resources. As the World Social Science report comments of Sociology (this could equally be applied to Geography):

> the global South's intellectual dependency on Northern production is reinforced by an unequal division of labour in international collaborations whereby Southern researchers gather empirical data and leave the discussion of the theoretical implications to their Northern colleagues (UNESCO and ISSC, 2010, p.13).

The authors' criticism goes further, 'Local issues with potential global relevance often fail to receive global recognition unless they have been appropriated by Northern/Western academics' (ibid, p.13). The result of such structural inequalities is that little space is left for subaltern voices to be heard (Spivak, 1988) and theoretical perspectives about the diverse ways of 'doing family' globally articulated by Southern academics and researchers grounded in Majority world contexts are marginalised.

Critical debates about the 'crisis of representation' and the potential of postcolonial approaches (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Connell, 2006; Philipps, 2018), are pertinent here. Yet it is only relatively recently that *family lives* have become a focus of cross-cultural discussion in relation to the Majority world, largely among sociologists, who have a longer tradition of researching 'family' meanings and practices than geographers (Korbin, 2013; Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2017; see Punch, Vanderbeck and Skelton, 2016; Evans et al, 2017a; Ribbens McCarthy et al in press, for work in geography). My recent research in the Francophone African context of Senegal sought to set aside Minority world theorising on death, bereavement and family relations. Instead, we adopted a reflexive approach to explore the meanings that differently positioned family members and the research team placed on 'family' and the significance of a family death and sought to understand the nuances of translation, as I discuss in the next section.

Boundary crossings in researching death and family relations in Senegal
Our research project explored responses to death, care and family relations in urban Senegal. The international research team comprised British, Senegalese and Burkinabé/ Belgian sociologists and geographers with a range of linguistic proficiencies in French and English; [colleague], the Senegalese researcher, was the sole speaker of Wolof, the main language widely spoken in urban Senegal. Particular challenges have arisen in working with multiple languages among the research team and in interpretation in the research locations. As we developed our approach to analysis, we increasingly sought to tease out the particular nuances of recurring Wolof and French words and phrases with [colleague] and with family members. I give one example here of linguistic tensions between French and English[2].

The multiple meanings and flexible use of the English word 'care', a key concept in our research, are difficult to convey in French (and Wolof). Francophone academics have noted this difficulty and often retain the English word 'care' in their discussions (Garrau and Le Goff, 2010). Worms (2010, p.250) argues that the notion of *soin* (like care) does have multiple meanings, and is based on relational subjectivity, comprising the vulnerability of the cared for and the activity of the caregiver. We found, however, that we needed to use a range of French verbs and nouns to provide more nuanced understandings which could then be interpreted into Wolof. These included: *prendre en charge* (take responsibility for), *s'occuper* (look after), *soigner* (usually implies medical/ nursing care), *assumer des responsabilités familiales* (take on familial responsibilities), *'soin'* (care provision, healthcare), *soutien*

(support, can be material or emotional). Furthermore, when seeking to translate 'caring for' a dead body or for the grave of the deceased relative, [colleagues] (the researchers who conducted the majority of the fieldwork) suggested the verb *soigner* was not appropriate, since this usually refers to living, animate beings and implies medical/ nursing care. They proposed instead the verb, *entretenir,* which refers more to 'maintaining', 'looking after' or 'tending' and *preparer le corps* (to prepare the body, eg. for burial).

These cultural nuances of language and the range of possible meanings of researchers' and participants' words may pose considerable challenges of interpretation, particularly during the transcription/ translation, analysis and writing phases of research projects and perhaps especially when working with more than one field assistant/interpreter or translator.

While our research methodology could be considered a rather conventional qualitative design, based primarily on in-depth interviews and focus groups, we sought to engage in what Pillow (2003, p.188) terms 'uncomfortable reflexivity'; a critical use of reflexivity that 'seeks to know while at the same time situating this knowing as tenuous'. At the outset of the fieldwork, we interviewed each other (in French or English) about our own experiences of 'family' and the death of a significant person, using our interview schedules, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview process and reviewing each others' transcripts helped us to understand more about our own and each others' emotional responses to a family death, as well as the feelings aroused by being interviewed on this topic.

Grappling with the complex dynamics of large multi-generational households which often had a fluid composition, differing meanings of 'family' and religious framings in a Majority Muslim context have been underlying challenges throughout our project. In order to make more visible our own cultural worldviews and assumptions at the start of the fieldwork, we held recorded and transcribed reflexive discussions between team members on our perceptions of socio-cultural norms surrounding death and grief in our countries of origin (UK, Burkina-Faso and Senegal), using Walter's (2010) checklist of questions when undertaking cross-cultural research on death.

To develop our analyses, we sought to set aside Minority world theorising about death, bereavement and 'family', although we recognise this is inevitably problematic. When starting to analyse the interview transcripts, we reflected on our interviews with each other and our own emotional and socio-cultural responses to participants' experiences, using a series of questions to prompt further cross-cultural discussions (see Box 1). Researchers may wish to adapt these questions to their particular research focus.

Through this reflexive process, we were sometimes able to consider how far our understandings are emotionally-based, rather than (or as well as) cognitively shaped by our academic knowledge, value stances and experience in the 'field'. I give two examples here of how our different positionings shaped our emotional responses to the interview transcripts and provided cross-cultural insights.

Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Sophie Bowlby (academics who have worked primarily in the UK) and I were puzzled by some participants' living arrangements in which married women continued to live with their parents rather than with their husband. It was assumed at first this was because women were married in polygamous unions and co-wives continued to live with their kin. However, Joséphine Wouango, the team's postdoctoral researcher, pointed out that

some participants living with their parents were married in monogamous unions. The available literature confirmed that non-cohabiting marriage practices are commonly found in Senegal in both monogamous and polygamous unions (Bass and Sow, 2006). These observations helped to challenge our initial assumptions and Minority world views about marriage practices.

In another example, Jane and Sophie were somewhat surprised about the use of the word 'give/ given' [French: *donner/ donné*] to refer to a child being fostered/brought up by a relative as if they were their own and raised queries about the translation. Although I also felt somewhat uncomfortable about this expression, I was accustomed to hearing it in Senegal as part of the everyday language used to describe child fosterage practices, which have a long history in West Africa (Beck et al, 2015). Jane, Sophie and I felt more comfortable with the other commonly used term, 'entrust/ foster' [French: *confier*] to refer to such practices, perhaps because this seems to convey a greater sense of a child's emotional worth and the importance of their care, as part of wider kinship networks. When we discussed this with Fatou Kébé, our Senegalese colleague, she explained the diversity of child fosterage practices in Senegal, which may be temporary, for example, to enable a young person to access educational opportunities by staying with an extended family member, or more permanent. We relied on [Senegalese colleague] to translate cultural meanings and puzzles in the interviews, giving us insight into the nuances of translation and why one phrase may be used over another in different contexts.

The team's valuing of these emotional responses and differing perspectives helped to throw light on the centrality of relational notions of personhood, *solidarité* and reciprocity to everyday family lives in Senegal (Evans et al, 2017b; Ribbens McCarthy et al, in press). Alongside such approaches, sustained collaboration with Southern academic partners offers the potential to produce knowledge about everyday family lives that is grounded in Majority world experiences. My collaboration with geography academics in Ghana on an exploratory project investigating gendered and generational struggles over family farms highlighted some of the possibilities and challenges of North-South collaborative research, as I discuss in the next section.

North-South collaboration on everyday family struggles over land in Ghana
I was fortunate to be funded to visit a PhD student commencing his fieldwork in Ghana. My visit provided an opportunity to meet academics at [colleague's institution], in order to discuss shared research interests. [My colleagues'] concept note on changes in agricultural land use towards cashew cultivation in Brong-Ahafo region, Ghana and the implications for land tenure, women's rights and food security, clearly related to my research interests in gendered inequalities in land inheritance practices. In the coming months, we developed these ideas for an internal funding application. Alongside changing land use and inheritance practices on family farms, I was interested to explore intergenerational dynamics, intra-household relations and responsibilities for domestic and care work and unpaid agricultural labour, which my colleagues welcomed. Rather than interviewing only 'household heads', we modified the proposed methodology to include interviews with two family members of different generations and/or genders, including young people, from a small, diverse sample of households in the rural location, alongside stakeholder interviews and community mapping focus groups with young and middle generation men and women. This enabled us to develop a gendered and generational analysis of inequalities in labour and access to family land in the context of greater integration into the global capitalist economy.

Thus, in this collaborative project, the research idea clearly came from Southern academics based on their in-depth understanding of socio-ecological change in rural communities in their country of origin and the need for research to understand these dynamics. My interest in exploring family practices and intergenerational dynamics helped to shape the methodological approach. While the research design, fieldwork and analysis were shared among myself and my Ghanaian colleagues, I found the writing stage most challenging in terms of collaboration. I was unsure how to collaborate on the analytic process of reading across the dataset of interviews with young people and adult family members and stakeholders and focus group discussions, and how to share drafting the different sections of the report. I also found it difficult to know how to respond to my colleagues' request for guidance and support in writing for publication in high-quality journals.

As the World Social Science report highlights, 'disparities in the volume, quality and visibility of social science research, and the continued supremacy of American-European social sciences, result in large part from disparities in research capacity' (UNESCO and ISSC, 2010, p.9). In hindsight, providing time and space for the research team to reflect on our approach to analysing qualitative interview transcripts with differently positioned family members and how to approach writing for publication may have been beneficial. Alongside such workshop discussions and/or capacity-building activities, however, it seems crucial for Northern academics to provide sustained mentorship and constructive feedback on draft manuscripts led by Southern academics and researchers. This would help to build researchers' 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) to produce qualitative understandings of family lives in the Majority world and enable them to navigate the pitfalls and problems of academic writing and publishing within geography and other social sciences.

Concluding reflections
Attempting to theorise 'family' meanings and practices in diverse Majority world contexts without imposing Minority world framings and perspectives poses considerable challenges for feminist geographers and sociologists. Working in cross-cultural settings is often an uncomfortable process involving, 'a personal requirement to tolerate ambiguities and confusions, as we seek to hold open our analytic impulses to frame our interpretations through our own familiar assumptions' (Ribbens McCarthy, 2017). It may thus involve a heavy time and space commitment of 'cultural re-tooling', difficulties of language and ethical dilemmas about the appropriation of knowledge (Connell, 2006, p.263). In particular, the time needed and costs of travel for collaborative, capacity-building workshops among research team members across Minority-Majority boundaries, particularly at the stages of qualitative analysis and interpretation of findings, need to be take into account when designing research projects. As academics based in Minority world institutions, we need to acknowledge our often limited engagements with Majority world perspectives, particularly at the research formulation, analysis and writing stages, and recognise ethnocentrism and the implicit value judgements in much theorising and empirical research on children's and families' lives (Connell, 2006; Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2017). The failure to situate the knowledge we produce serves to perpetuate hegemonic worldviews and theorisations about family lives globally.

An interdisciplinary approach and the importance of multilingualism among social scientists, especially those based in the Minority world, are increasingly advocated in order to understand contemporary global challenges (UNESCO and ISSC, 2010). The World Social

Science Report comments, 'everyone should be able to work and collaborate in his or her own language while understanding other languages' (ibid, p.24). Working with multiple languages may pose significant challenges of interpretation for international research teams which require careful consideration, time for collaborative discussions about cultural nuances of language and developing analyses, and funding for translation and interpretation at all stages of the research process, from scoping, research design and fieldwork, to transcription, analysis, writing, feedback workshops and dissemination.

As feminist geographers and sociologists, it seems ever more important to pursue research and ways of working that address the concerns, needs and interests of Southern researchers, practitioners and family members, rather being driven only by our own interests and the demands of the audit culture in neoliberal Minority world universities. While I acknowledge the compromises that are often needed in North-South collaborations investigating diverse family lives, both of the projects discussed in this Intervention sought to de-centre Minority world framings to some extent, and to work across disciplinary, linguistic and Majority-Minority world boundaries. These ways of working often involve considerable challenges (and possibilities) best addressed through 'slow scholarship' (Mountz et al, 2015) and an ethic of care whereby we reflect on how to collaborate with others around our shared interests and bring our particular skills, differing emotional responses and experiences of 'family' within and across contexts, to the process of knowledge production (Evans et al, 2017b). This endeavour will hopefully generate more nuanced insights into the plurality and diversity of everyday family lives globally, including within our own societies, while also recognising the commonalities we share.

Endnotes
1. I recognise that understandings of 'family' are often contested and vary considerably within and between cultures. See also Coppens et al, 2016; Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Korbin, 2013; Morgan, 2018.
2. See Evans et al, 2017a for more in-depth discussion of tensions in working with Wolof, French and English.

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