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**Embodied and Sensory Encounters: Death, Bereavement and Remembering in
Children's Family and Personal Lives**

Abstract

Whilst children's 'significant' death and bereavement experiences have received considerable attention as constituting a family trouble, this article examines children's rarely considered perspectives on encounters with death, bereavement and remembrance which are intrinsic to family and personal lives. Family homes are a site for younger children's previously unexplored embodied, sensory and material engagements with death, bereavement and remembrance. These engagements occur through children's treasuring and displaying keepsakes and photographs, and through children bearing witness to dying pets and deceased bodies. Via these temporally and spatially located practices, familial and cultural values are passed on to children, family is constituted, and children are embedded in a broader kinship group. The article illuminates how children vividly recount experiences of death, bereavement and remembering, invoking 'home' and other private spaces as places in which death is experienced and retold.

Key words: children, death, bereavement, embodiment, memorializing, sensory experience

Introduction

Experiencing the death of a family member is an inevitable life event, and often constitutes a major change within 'the family' (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013, p.7) in terms of family practices and kinship bonds. Whilst the deceased may be absent in body, they remain highly significant to those left behind (Ribbens McCarthy and Prokhovnik, 2014). Studies of younger children's relationships have omitted a focus on the deceased and the significance they are attributed in children's everyday relational lives, with death appearing momentarily

in younger children's accounts in this field of research (Mason and Tipper, 2008; James, 2013). As such, children's experiences of and the meanings they give to deaths, bereavements and family memorializing practices as aspects of family and relational life, remain largely unknown in middle childhood (Davies, 2015).

In this article, I examine children's perspectives on their family and relationships foregrounding the social, cultural and personal meanings they attach to death, bereavement and remembrance in their everyday lives. I re-frame death and bereavement as central to ordinary family and relational practices, experiences of and imaginings of family, suggesting that by doing so we can find out about all relationships that matter to children, including those with the deceased. To fully understand children's experience of death and bereavement across spaces and over time, a biographical approach that reconstructs children's narratives is taken. Analysis of these narratives suggests that materiality and sensoriality play an important role in children's accounts of their relationships to and memorializing of the deceased.

Where death and bereavement are theorised, the majority of work relates to 'significant bereavements', usually referring to parental or sibling bereavement. A professional and research focus on 'significant bereavements' assumes which losses will be most meaningful to children and young people, neglecting wider relational experiences of death (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Jamieson and Highet, 2013). The exceptions include research which explores children's experiences of losing grandparents (Corr, 2004; Carey, 2010), pets (Kaufman and Kaufman, 2006) and friends (Cowan, 2010). Importantly, many authors recognize that the meaning and significance that children attribute to bereavements is paramount (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Kaufman and Kaufman, 2006; Jamieson and Highet, 2013; Evans, 2014; Evans, in press). This article attempts to explore these meanings in a

wider analytical frame and show that a range of deaths and bereavements might matter to children. I attempt to locate children's accounts of death and bereavement in the context of their biographies, their families, friendship and peer groups, and the spatial settings of their relational lives.

Drawing upon empirical data from children aged 8-10 living in the Midlands, England, who participated in a study exploring their family and close personal relationships, I make visible death, bereavement and memorializing family practices in children's biographical accounts. I illuminate the different ways in which individual children respond to death in their lives and show how they ordinarily engage in family practices that memorialize deceased loved ones. Like others, I challenge assumptions that children have little knowledge or 'capacity to understand' death (Bluebond-Langer et al., 2012, p.68). Using children's narrations of encounters with death and bereavement I reveal an abundance of experiences of death and bereavement, including a tangible, material, embodied and sensory (Mason, 2008) knowledge of death, dying and deceased bodies. Evidence of this is presented in children's accounts of relationships which point to a profound engagement with and treasuring of keepsakes associated with or belonging to the deceased, through which deceased loved ones come to be remembered by children and their families.

In the wake of the 'sequestration' and privatisation of death (Mellor and Shilling, 1993), children's experiences of death and bereavement are proposed here as constituting a particular type of 'intimate' knowledge (Davies, 2015, p.194-6). By attending to who children grieved for and those with whom children shared this intimate knowledge of their death and bereavement experiences, we can map out children's close relationships.

Death and Bereavement and Children's Relational Biographies

Deaths and bereavements are notable family and biographical changes and are often theorized as 'turning points, critical moments, biographical disruptions [...]' (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2013, p.7) 'biographical occurrences' (Jamieson and Highet, 2013, p.136) and 'vital conjunctures' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Evans, 2014). Framing death in these ways indicates the overall significance of death as a process of change, which may threaten the child's sense of identity (Jamieson and Highet, 2013; Rolls, 2009). Death may lead to continuity in relationships, characterised by a strengthening of family ties and practices (Evans, 2014, p.18). The degree of disruption can only be understood in the context of the child's biography, including the child's relationships. For example, studies find that greater social support from close friends or others can mitigate the detrimental impact of a significant loss whereas a lack of social support can compound the experience of grief and lead to isolation and social exclusion (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Jamieson and Highet, 2013). Death as a biographical occurrence cannot, therefore, be considered in isolation from children's wider personal circles or social circumstances.

Death and bereavement may shape not only children's past and current life but also their 'anticipated shared futures' with their family members (Davies, 2015, p. 199). Children's pasts and their memories, in particular, have been neglected in childhood studies, with few exceptions, despite children demonstrating that, like adults, they engage with the 'past, present and future' in narrating their lives (James, 2013, p.156). Such biographical narratives are temporally specific and reflective of the child's feelings and circumstances at that particular point in time but ordinarily, younger children's biographies, 'as they themselves experience them', are rarely considered (James, 2013, p.157).

The social studies of childhood offer a valuable understanding of children's biographies as inherently relational. Within this body of work children's narratives of their family lives are interpreted as individual, as well as 'co-created' accounts, generated with family members (James, 2013, p.164) or close others (Davies, 2015). In particular, children may seek insights from parents/grandparents in piecing together memories of early events in their lives. Stories that become important and which are told to them from an early age are often incorporated and re-told as part of their own biographical stories (Mason and Tipper, 2008). In re-telling these narratives, children are interpreting and selecting these as meaningful to their own biographies rather than appropriating and reproducing them (Corsaro, 2006). For example, occasionally, the narratives of kinship that children offer relate to people who children could not personally remember or had never met, yet those significant to parents or grandparents acquired a significance for children too (Mason and Tipper, 2008).

Within the study of personal life, biography is conceived of as relying upon memory, with personal memories often evoked by 'photographs, objects, or other documentary accounts' (Smart, 2007, p. 42), which remind individuals of deceased loved ones and serve to materialize stories about the deceased. An examination of the value that children attribute to material items has the potential to reveal their sentiments about and engagements with family heirlooms or family photographs as integral in understanding their relationships to the deceased.

Theorizing Death in Childhood Studies

Developmental psychology has paid considerable attention to children's understandings of death in the Global North. In this work, death has been conceptualised as the ceasing of 'life-functions', as irreversible, as universal (Speece and Brent, 1984) and having 'causality'

(Bluebond-Langer et al., 2012, p.68). Developmental psychologists have argued that children who possess a 'mature view of death' grasp all the latter assumptions. An important preoccupation in this field has been establishing the age at which children obtain this 'mature' understanding of death (for a summary of research on children's developmental understandings of death, see Bluebond-Langer et al., 2012). Age-based assumptions of children's understandings of death are important because of their use in informing grief and bereavement counselling programmes (Humphrey and David, 2008).

Social research offers a compelling challenge to the claim that understandings of death can be mapped onto a developmental trajectory; sociology, for example, emphasises the meanings given to death and bereavements, as generated within sociocultural and historical contexts, and takes account of how space and place shape individual and collective experiences of death and bereavement (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Evans, 2014; Evans, in press). Furthermore, sociological research illuminates how social identities – gender, social class, nationality, religion, ethnicity, health, and of course position in the lifecourse -influence how death and bereavement are perceived and experienced within those contexts and places (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Evans, 2014; Evans, in press). The interplay between this complex range of structural factors and identities poses a challenge to any notion of a universal age at which children might possess a 'mature view' of death, because death is regarded as a socially, culturally and historically differentiated concept (Gillis, 1997; Seale, 1998; Hallam and Hockey, 2000).

Proximity to and exposure to dying and death inevitably shapes children's perspectives and understandings of death and bereavement. Early sociological research with terminally ill children aged 3-9 hospitalized in a US Leukaemia ward found that 'death and disease

imagery' loomed large in children's conversations with, and observations made by the researcher (Bluebond-Langer, 1978, p.191). This example, along with others (Wass, 1991) indicates the importance of experience and context in shaping children's own perspectives on death, which defies generalizable claims about children's aged-based capacity to understand death. More recent work argues that:

A child's perception and understanding of death will be influenced by chronological age, developmental level, individual personality, past experiences with death and loss, and the family's cultural values or religious beliefs (Corr, 1999, p.458).

Bereavement services for children are one relatively recently developed context in which children come to understand death and their own identity as a mourner (Rolls, 2009). Rolls claims that 'ritual performance[s]' -such as collectively lighting candles and releasing balloons with affective messages for or about the deceased- offered by bereavement services for children offer a 'community', and a valuable replacement for historical public and religious rituals surrounding death (2009, p.175). Professional interventions have an important role in assisting children in making meaning out of death and bereavement experiences (Rolls and Payne, 2007; Brewer and Sparkes, 2011). Additionally, there is value in generating knowledge of children's encounters with deaths and bereavements that may not require professional support, because through this we may learn more about children's understandings of the concept and significance of deaths (Corr, 1991) which could usefully serve to inform death education.

Whilst significant bereavements are an important focus, researchers have, by comparison, neglected to properly consider children's experiences of the deaths of wider kin, pets,

neighbours, and people in children's personal communities such as teachers, sports coaches, scouts or religious leaders; they have overlooked statistical studies indicating that a wide range of bereavements matter to children (Cross, 2002). Pets are one group of 'significant others' (Haraway, 2003) whose deaths are frequently trivialized in the Global North. Whilst many children view pets as family members (Morrow, 1998; Tipper, 2011), pet bereavements are, with exception, rarely considered. Where pet deaths are examined, they are framed as important in the context of previous losses (Kaufman and Kaufman, 2006) or as Tipper (2011) notes, are considered a preparatory opportunity to learn about death and bereavement in advance of human deaths. Studies attending to the sociocultural and historical context in shaping meanings surrounding death and bereavement show that social norms and values shape not only who is grievable (e.g. pets) but also how people grieve and remember the deceased, including, for example, 'what should be remembered and what should be forgotten' (Misztal, 2003, p.15).

Young people are shown to remember or continue their 'bonds' with the deceased (Klass et al., 2001) through treasuring material items belonging to or reminding them of the deceased, spaces associated with loved ones, or aspirations that deceased parents had for them (Sharpe et al., 2006; Evans in press). 'Material memorializing practices' is a concept devised by Hallam and Hockey to capture the way in which memory evoking material items associated with the deceased are kept by the bereaved (2001, p.211-2). Such practices include keeping items such as clothing or jewellery previously worn by the deceased, particularly those that 'enclose' or are associated with the body (Lupton, 1998, p.144). What is passed on in terms of keepsakes or mementoes is sociologically significant in the constitution of 'the family' (Finch and Mason, 2000) but what memory invoking items are kept, and where such memory

invoking items are located, often with the home (Mallet, 2004), is also an important ‘display’ of family (Finch, 2007) and culture too.

Children’s ordinary engagements in their worlds are found to be embodied, material, sensory and emotional (Prout, 2000; Prout, 2005; Horton and Kraftl, 2006; Mason and Tipper, 2008; Kolls and Hörschelmann, 2009) and yet these dimensions of children’s experiences require theorization in the context of death and bereavement. Prout has called for ‘the body’ to receive attention and for the materiality to be considered as one component of the hybridity of childhood, with material items extending children’s embodied agency (2000, p.2). This might occur, for example, when photographs and family mementoes act as ‘‘sensory tools’ which enable[...] children [...] to connect and re-connect with much-loved family members [...] and [...] to ‘visualise the body of a family member’ who is now deceased (Davies, 2015, p.97). In the context of this article’s focus on death and bereavement, family photographs or mementoes have the potential to facilitate children’s participation in family conversations about and the collective memorializing of the deceased.

Drawing more broadly from studies of family and relationships, the ‘sensory’ and how this features in relationships has been usefully explored by Mason (2008) in her theorising of kinship. Mason has set out four ‘tangible affinities’ – ‘different ways of imagining and practising relatedness’ - that comprise kinship (Mason, 2008, p.32). I am most interested in Mason’s ‘sensory affinity’ which captures ‘affinities that are physical, bodily, material and, above all, sensory’ (2008, p.40). This is based on Strathern’s (2005) notion of ‘connections between bodies themselves’, which originally referred to biological connections, but Mason proposes that these ‘connections between bodies’ can also be ‘sensory’ (2008, p.40).

In studying children’s kinship, a focus on the sensory might include children’s attention to facial expressions and body language, how kin sound and talk, how they smell and engage

physically with children, all of which feature in children's accounts of kinship (Mason and Tipper, 2008a; 2008b). Taking up Mason's conceptualisation of sensory affinity, I have found that children in middle childhood attend to and apprehend their relationships based on their observations and experiences of bodies; they are 'highly cognizant of bodies', in particular observ[ing], recall[ing] and record[ing] the regularities' of family members' appearances and interactions with children (Davies, 2012, p.18). These conceptualisations are helpful for understanding how embodiment and materiality are central to children's experiences and accounts of family and kinship. It is suggested that children may be more attentive to their sensory and embodied experiences or more able to voice these (Mason, 2008) and that their embodied experiences differ from those of adults (Prout, 2000). Therefore, it is important to examine the particularity of their sensory and embodied experiences of death and bereavement. The conceptualisations of embodiment, materiality, and sensory affinities discussed above may have important application and offer rich insights in this context of children's death and bereavement experiences.

The Study

The data on which this paper draws was generated for an ESRC-funded study of children's family and personal relationships, which examined children's perspectives on and experiences of their relational pasts, current lives and imagined future relationships. The study involved 24 white British (20) and British South Asian (4) children aged 8-10 years old (9 boys and 15 girls) attending a small community primary (elementary) school in a socio-economically disadvantaged area of a Midlands town, England.

This school-based field study was undertaken over nineteen months. Data includes in-depth observational field notes, two sets of paired interviews with the children (with the exception

of one triad, most were conducted in close friendship pairs, and in two cases, sibling pairs), children's family drawings, 'family books' (Davies, 2015) in which children described and depicted their family stories, and observational notes from visits to a sub-sample of the children's family homes. Methodological and ethical challenges abound in researching children's relational lives particularly when engaging in sensitive conversations about death and bereavement. In the interests of brevity these issues will not be considered here, but I discuss these important issues extensively elsewhere (Davies, 2015; 2017).

Death and bereavement were not a particular focus for the study, aside from an interview question asking children 'who is most important to you, dead or alive?' (borrowed from James and Christensen's ESRC Changing Times project). The research sought to elicit children's family memories, the significant moments and practices that constituted their relationships (Morgan, 1996; 2011). The deceased were discussed spontaneously in children's accounts of important figures in their family memories and stories. Data were also fortuitously produced through observations made of the participating children engaging in a Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) project on 'loss and change'.

Of the twenty-four participants, eleven had experienced the death of a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, an unborn baby sibling and/or a family pet, and two had experienced parental bereavement. Over the duration of the study, I recorded field notes of children's discussions of deaths that occurred in their local communities, and one death that occurred in the vicinity of a participant's home. These details suggest that most of the children had some encounter with death within their broad personal lives.

Elsewhere, it is noted that the majority of children, as well as young people under the age of 16 will experience a bereavement (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006, p.180). A nationally representative UK study of children found that between the ages of five and sixteen 3.5 per cent of children and young people have experienced the death of a parent or sibling and 6.25 per cent of children have experienced the death of a friend (Fauth et al., 2009, p.15). For the younger members of this sample, some would inevitably experience a parent, sibling or friend dying during the remainder of their childhood (Akerman and Statham, 2014, p. 7). These percentages give a glimpse of how many children are affected by ‘significant’ bereavements. No doubt a more detailed picture could be painted by including experiences outside of the parent, sibling and friend relationship. In this research, I suggest that death and bereavement are more ‘mainstream’ issues (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006, p.181) than these statistics indicate. Two of the strengths of the sampling approach used for this paper include that the sample did not specifically target bereaved children, and therefore offers accounts of a range of deaths and bereavements. Secondly, the sample is comprised of children in middle childhood, a group of children whose encounters with death have been somewhat neglected (Davies, 2015). In what follows, I use children’s accounts to explore death as a biographical issue and attempt to elicit the broader relational dimensions of children’s death and bereavement experiences.

Anticipating the Death of Family Members

Studies of children and young people’s biographies often focus on their memories and how former experiences have shaped their present lives but, as noted above, children’s biographies include anticipations and imaginings of future lives. Children, predominantly female participants anticipated the death of their caregivers and close kin. Those children who had and had not experienced bereavements reflected upon the potential death of a loved one and

how this would affect their own biographies; this involved the child considering where they would live, who they would live with, and who would take care of them and their home should their parent or main care giver die.

For example, nine-year-old Stella's mother was unwell and lived in a nearby town to Stella who lived with her father, and four older siblings. Stella reported seeing her mother for one day each weekend and in this context, she imagined what would happen if her father died:

My mum lives in Whitbury and if my dad dies she won't know 'cause none of us know her phone number and um if he's dead then we can't move and I don't know who would take care of the house.

Stella's father was well and relatively young; there was no reason for Stella to imagine his impending death, but her concerns suggest that she viewed her family situation as vulnerable, and indicates how dependent she and her siblings felt upon their father both for practical care and contact with their mother.

Many of the children who anticipated family deaths assumed that people who are old or unwell die, representing older bodies as frail and vulnerable (James, 2005). The relativity of 'old' age meant some children considered their parents and particularly their grandparents as 'really old' and 'gona die soon' (Laura, age 10, describing grandfather aged 61). Other children assumed that illnesses, aches and pains predicted grandparents' impending deaths. Tanya (age 9) described how her Nanny:

...has pains...and she has something wrong with her heart and she could die in a few days or a few weeks.

Tanya's conception of her grandmother's ill health inevitably caused concern, perhaps because she had formerly lived with her grandmother and relied heavily upon her for ongoing care.

Similar anticipations of death surfaced in discussions of children's imagined futures. One interview question invited children to imagine their future relational lives, including whether or not children envisaged moving out of their family home, provoking anticipations of children's parents' deaths. Such discussions encapsulated children's sense of interdependence with parents (James and Prout, 1996; Mayall, 2002; Christensen, 2004), one of the key meanings ascribed to 'the family' (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013). Importantly, such accounts also revealed children's connectedness to close others (Smart, 2007), people with whom children imagined they might live should their parents die. These children suggested that in the absence of their parents they would wish to live with siblings or friends, who were currently important in their personal lives.

At the time of the research, Kayla (age 9) lived with her father, step-mother and half-siblings but she made projections about how her mother's death would impact her future living arrangements:

When my mum dies I'll probably move back to where my mum lives – it brings back good memories for me...when I'm sixteen, she'll probably be quite old. She'll be thirty-

five...well, I'll be living with my mum for a bit and when she dies I'll probably still be there.

These children's anticipations of family deaths locate their families in their wider relational contexts. They consider fragile family connections, and for Stella, a lack of wider familial support. They resonate with Corr's suggestion that younger children often express 'fear of separation and abandonment' if close loved ones die (1999, p.445). Like young adults in Visser and Parrot's (2015) research, Kayla associates connectedness, memories and place in her suggestion that it would be meaningful to occupy her mother's home and the space where significant memories were made.

Home: Material, Embodied and Sensory Encounters with Death

Children's accounts conveyed that material items often evoked stories of the deceased and provided a key means via which children came to know about these individuals. They acquired a particular type of 'tangible' and sensory knowledge of and 'affinity' (Mason, 2008, p.40) with the deceased through engagement with items and photographs, constituting important embodied knowledge of family and kin that children valued (Davies, 2012).

Family homes were central to children's descriptions of their encounters with death, bereavement and remembrance; they were the spaces in which families and children housed keepsakes and photographs of the deceased. However, home could also be a space in which memorializing was negotiated with others in the household; take for example, 9-year-old Eve's account:

Eve: I have loads of pictures of my dad in my room. I stuck 'em on the ceiling dangling down and [they] twist around... Hugh (mum's partner) said he was gona take them all down last week. I had to hide them in my room.

Hayley: Why was he going to take them down?

Eve: I misunderstood. I misheard. He weren't actually gona take them down. He said we could keep them up instead.

Eve's account suggests that her preservation of memories is negotiated in this new relational context through Hugh giving his approval to her memorializing of her father with her photographs.

Many children described how their curiosity about a family photograph or where a particular treasured item had derived from had encouraged parents or grandparents to share their memories of and keep alive the memory of a deceased loved one. Ten year old Neil explained how he memorialized his favorite family members - his grandfather and his deceased pet dog Mabel - keeping Mabel's collar and his grandfather's ring and war medals in a memory box. Neil used these items as comforters in times of sadness; the collar and the ring perhaps had a particular sensory quality, having daily enclosed the bodies of beloved individuals (Lupton, 1998).

'Material memorializing practices' (Hallam and Hockey, 2001) involved children attributing personal meaning to items that represented the deceased. For example, Leena's story of her grandfather's harmonica and how it connects her to him is elaborated below:

My granddad - he used to play music to me on his instrument...[harmonica] He used to sit with me a lot and when he died I was like really really upset. The day he died, I didn't really know. I wasn't upset 'cause I didn't really know. I was only four or six or something like that, and the next day I knew. And this lady was crying and I was like "why's she crying?" And the next day, um, I knew why everybody was crying. And we had this thing in my house and we had to do it in my room. It was in my old house with my grandma. They had this big holy book and they had to read it for my granddad. And I was always asking, "where's my room, where's my room, where am I supposed to sleep?" So I was a little bit confused about it. He is special to me. And I've got his harmonium now so it really reminds me of him.

The memory of her grandfather, provoked by her discussion of the harmonica leads to Leena remembering so vividly the people crying at her grandfather's death, and her own confusion at what was happening. The harmonica is a material reminder and a way into this memory.

Leena's parents' silence about her grandfather's death may be a consequence of longstanding historical conceptions of the child as fragile, 'innocent' and 'vulnerable' (Prout, 2005, p.35) manifesting in their reluctance to explain her grandfather's death (Jackson and Colwell, 2001). Or we can speculate that their preoccupation with their own grief and/or funeral arrangements were pressing. What is striking about this account is that despite Leena living with her grandfather, and not being informed about her grandfather's death, she finds her own space within 'the family' home, her bedroom, being appropriated for the rituals surrounding her grandfather's death - the reading of the 'big holy book'. Leena's memories of her grandfather's death have a particular material and sensory quality and are heavily emplaced.

Other children cherished family photographs and stories about family members. Keepsakes, photographs and family stories serve to remind children and their family members of the deceased person and were key ways in which families kept memories of the deceased alive. Through these material items and accompanying narratives, children gained an understanding of the significance of those deceased loved ones in their wider families. Family stories, keepsakes and photos therefore preserved 'the family' imaginary (Gillis, 1997).

Some material objects lent the deceased a sense of heroism or notoriety (Hallam and Hockey, 2001); it is notable that the notorious figures discussed were all male. Neil was proud of his grandfather's war medals and his contributions to the war. Like Neil, 10-year-old Bridget's deceased great grandfather was described as a medicalist who had 'helped people in the war', and her 'most important person'. Whilst she had never met or known her great grandfather, family photographs and narratives of his bravery and altruism had been shared with Bridget within her family and carried great weight as part of the 'bigger kinship stor[y] or narrative' of Bridget's family (Mason and Tipper, 2008, p.153).

Bridget is an example of children relating stories of people whom they could not personally remember or had never met, yet these people were significant to children's parents or grandparents, and acquired a significance for children too, as found in other research (Mason and Tipper, 2008). The deceased relations and close others whom children discussed in interviews were those who were personally significant to the children and/or their families and the cultural transmission (Smart, 2007) through sharing stories and children re-telling stories is central to maintaining the cultural family imaginary. Stories that parents bequeath to their children, about for example, family members' historical participation in the war

engage children in these narratives, and come to make up the ‘family archive’ (Misztal, 2003) with children becoming key narrators of these family and kinship histories.

The photographs and objects in ‘the family’ home mentioned by children in this study acted as ‘sensory tools’ (Davies, 2015, p.97) or ‘memory elicitors’ (Hallam and Hockey, 2001) evoking the deceased. The items served to maintain or create an affinity or sensory ‘connection [...] between the bodies’ (Mason, 2008, p.40) of Neil and his deceased grandfather and dog, and between Leena and her deceased grandfather. ‘Material memorialising practices’ (Hallam and Hockey, 2001) can be interpreted as ways in which these children continued their bonds with the deceased (Klass et al, 2001). The keeping of these mementos within the home demonstrates their engagements with and contributions to the shared cultural and social meanings given to death, bereavement and remembering within their families and within UK and many Global Northern societies, more generally (Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Gillis, 1997).

Embodied and Sensory Encounters with and Knowledge of Death

In this section, I suggest that children’s perspectives offer valuable insights into the theorizing of embodiment and sensory experiences of death, bereavement and memorializing (Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Ribbens McCarthy and Prokhovnik, 2013) and I outline the types of knowledges and experiences that children have of death itself.

Leena and Trusha, two British South Asian participants, first experienced death in their respective families through seeing their grandfathers’ coffins in their own homes and seeing the deceased body as part of a religious ceremony. They expressed confusion at the mourning

of their respective grandfathers in ceremonies that had taken place in their homes, years prior to the research.

Neither of the children had remembered being informed of their grandfather's death, or prepared for the ceremony. They were both offered but only Leena accepted the opportunity to see her deceased grandfather's body.

Trusha: My mum's dad died. When he died I didn't know what was happening 'cause we were doing this Hindu thing for happiness. We were in my mum's little brother's house [...] and this ambulance came and it had my granddad's body in it and everyone was crying.

Leena: How old were you?

Trusha: Six or five. At the end, my dad told me [that her grandfather had died].

Leena: When my granddad died, I didn't cry.

Trusha: I didn't want to see his body or I would've cried too.

Leena: I didn't see his whole body but I had to go and look at him and his feet were really little 'cause you know, they shrink, old people.

Both children vividly recounted the temporal, spatial and embodied elements of these experiences, including in whose homes and in what specific rooms they took place, and the details of people's actions. Leena had closely observed her grandfather's shrunken body and his 'little' feet. Perhaps these biographical experiences are remembered so vividly because of the heightened emotion attached to these events, e.g. loved ones 'crying', and unexpected incidents such as an ambulance arriving and religious ceremonies which disrupted routine family life.

Across all three accounts of her grandfather's death, Leena recounted guilt following her older brother reprimanding her for not crying and performing a grieving identity. This account offers evidence, similar to that of Eve's account above, of children experiencing and recounting grief occurring within a relational context whereby grief is negotiated, policed and sanctioned (Walter, 2000).

Pet deaths

Many children considered their pets as family members and had also experienced pet deaths. My participants anthropomorphised their pets, assuming them to possess human-like qualities such as a capacity to 'teach' a child to swim, or to 'get a bit embarrassed', undermining the dominant human/animal dichotomy (Redmalm, 2015, p.32). Given these understandings, it is completely unsurprising that children should experience pet death as heart breaking, or a notably sad life event. Whilst often trivialized, pet relationships are highly meaningful to children (Morrow, 1998; Tipper, 2011).

Pet deaths were shared familial experiences and differed markedly from human deaths; children were more likely to witness their pets' last moments alive. 'The family' home was often the space in which they saw pets become ill or witnessed dying pets and deceased pet bodies. The accounts below provide insights into children's close proximity to pet deaths. Simon (age 8) and his brother John (10) told separate narratives of the death of their beloved cat Fluffy. John, had described how:

Fluffy had a heart attack, I saw him go 'ugh', and I picked him up and said, 'don't die, don't die Fluffy'. But he died and I was really sad and cried and my brother [Simon]

cried too. When my dad came home, my mum told dad ‘Fluffy’s died’ and she cried and we were all sad.

This emotional moment in the shared biography of John’s family appears a decidedly embodied and visceral experience involving John nursing and hearing Fluffy’s last murmur. This account shows how the physicality that characterises children’s relationships with pets (Tipper, 2011) is also evident in their pets’ dying moments. This encounter captures a particular close embodied engagement and knowledge of death that takes in the feelings, sights and sounds of this event. Pet deaths may be particularly meaningful if children share longstanding relationships and share a home with that pet (Tipper, 2011), because they constitute a child’s first loss, or because they are one of many cumulative losses (Kaufman and Kaufman, 2006).

Some pet deaths were considered ‘as if’ they had been the death of ‘a human friend, a family member, or a relative’ (Redmalm, 2015, p.27). Neil’s account of his dog Mabel is a good example of this:

I’ve got quite a lot of really sad things. First Mabel, then my granddad. I seen, I watched Mabel die [....] (In a sombre tone). When we was little [he and Mabel] we used to play games together [...] I followed her [...] out into the kitchen and she had a fit under the kitchen table and I called mum and, (pauses, then whispering) she died.

As Sanders suggests, non-human animals seldom die an ‘aesthetic death’ (1995, p.201). Children in this study recounted experiences witnessing and touching the motionless bodies of a much-loved pet or discovering the still body of a pet. The medicalization of human deaths (Mellor and Shilling, 1993) means that children are far less likely to see humans die,

but there is considerable potential for pet-owning children to witness their beloved pets die or view their pet's dead body, revealing the fragility and vulnerability of the body. These same children reported their involvement in their families' burial of pet bodies in the garden, memorialized with a stick or a stone that a child would find to mark the spot where their beloved pet could be mourned. Therefore, the embodiment, sensoriality and tactility (Mason, 2008) of death and the materiality of memorializing lost others were central to these children's accounts of pet deaths.

Death, Spatiality and the Personal

For some children discussions of death, bereavement and memorializing practices were confined to particular temporal, spatial and social contexts and this is evident in the institutional practices of discussing death and bereavement as a particular issue in Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE). The children in this study participated in a class project on 'loss and change' that aimed to facilitate children's discussions of death and introduce them to particular social and cultural rituals that surround death, including graveyard burial.

Children participating in one PSHE session were invited to illustrate an experience of loss or change. I sat with Tanya (age 9) who had been explicit that her father's death was her 'secret'; she whispered that she would not draw her father, but instead would draw a goldfish she had won at the fair. Whilst the PSHE session was constructed as a space and opportunity for her and others to discuss their losses, she subverted this opportunity to disclose this loss. Many children chose to be discrete about death and bereavement, these conversations mostly took place in interviews, a space in which children talked with me and a close friend in relative confidentiality, suggesting that the interview was characterised by the dynamics of a close relationship that permitted these more personal discussions of bereavements.

In the PSHE session, children drew pictures of losses, and the teacher offered the children to ‘show and tell’ the story of their pictures but reassured them that they were not obliged to. This public invitation to represent loss, whilst seemingly well-meaning, was at odds with how many of the children treated their direct experiences of death and bereavement as ‘private’ or ‘personal’ in their interview discussions. Occasionally, clear boundaries were placed around family issues including death, signalling that these issues were the preserve of ‘family’ and not for elaborating in the interview. For example, Harriet said:

When some of my cats need to be put to sleep or when my fish die, I don’t like to tell anybody [...].

This quote captures the way in which death is constructed more widely in UK society as a predominantly ‘private’ experience (Mellor and Shilling, 1993).

Conclusion

Whilst considerable attention has been paid to the significant bereavements that children have experienced, in this article I have shown empirically that children also anticipate significant bereavements and their impact on their own biographies. Through attending to children’s accounts of family and close relationships, this article has begun to document how death and bereavement are intrinsic and ‘normal’ elements of children’s family and relational lives. A re-framing of death and bereavement as central to ordinary family and relational practices, experiences of and imaginings of family would open up a focus on who in the family or personal circle of a child might matter, whether dead or alive. This re-framing would serve to generate important new knowledge within the study of children’s family and close relationships.

In this article, a novel analytical approach to exploring children's death and bereavement experiences has been adopted through reconstructing children's biographies. This has served to illuminate the practical, emotional, material and sensory ways in which deaths and bereavements have, or are imagined to, affect children over time and across spaces. The article supports a notion that children's biographies are inherently relational; their biographical accounts reveal them to be participating in families' remembering of deceased loved ones through everyday memorializing family practices such as cherishing of keepsakes. I have noted the important role of materialities in memorializing others, including showing how the deceased are brought into being within children's family lives, as well as kept alive in memories through material items.

The article shows that children engaged in material and non-material memorializing of the deceased of both those whom children had known personally and those who were significant within their wider kinship narratives. The material keepsakes and photographs, and the social and cultural meanings children attributed to them within their families, serve as crucial in understanding the hybridity of contemporary childhoods (Prout, 2005). The material and the sensorial – in particular children's 'sensory affinities' (Mason, 2008, p.40) with the deceased are key aspects of children's death and bereavement experiences and narratives. The close embodied, sensory and tactile knowledge that many children in this study recounted of deaths they had experienced shows us how children are learning about and experiencing death and bereavements, and provides a rationale for further exploring encounters with death alongside significant bereavements.

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