Sociology

Knowing What You've Got Once It's Gone: Identifying Familial Norms and Values through the Lens of (Sibling) Bereavement

Laura Towers [iD]
University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract
Following the death of a sibling, life as it was known and expected to be lived is permanently and irrevocably set on a different trajectory. Surviving siblings are left to consider all that they have lost beyond the individual who died. Using data from a qualitative study exploring experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course, this article presents a set of assumptions that people had regarding their imagined but unliveable futures. In doing so, it outlines how these ideas contribute to a currently under-developed understanding of normative expectations of the adult sibling relationship, as well as wider familial norms and values. As such, this article will demonstrate that death can actually reveal much about living relationships. It will conclude that bereavement research has much to offer the sociologies of family, relationships and personal life, as an alternative lens through which to learn more about familial norms and values.

Introduction

The sibling relationship has the capacity to be the longest of all kinship ties (Davies, 2015). Although mention of siblings is often associated with childhood, the value of the sibling relationship is not confined to this time, as it retains varying degrees of influence over the duration of the life span (Riggio, 2000). For some, a sibling relationship offers great comfort and support, while for others it is a source of hostility and rivalry (Packman et al., 2006). Often it is a complex combination of conflicting feelings (Punch, 2008). Yet

Corresponding author:
Laura Towers, Sheffield Methods Institute, University of Sheffield, Floor 2, ICOSS, 219 Portobello, Sheffield, S1 4DP, UK.
Email: laura.towers@sheffield.ac.uk

while siblings may grow distant or non-communicative, they are highly unlikely to be relegated to 'ex' or 'used to be' relations. Siblings are thus considered permanent members of each other's relational webs, even though intimacy is not guaranteed (Halliwell and Franken, 2016) and adult siblings may not feature in each other's daily interactions (Voorpostel et al., 2007). The relationship is therefore distinctive due to its 'sticky' quality (Davies, 2019) and the unique longevity of the tie that binds its members (Edwards et al., 2006).

The anticipated duration of the relationship forms part of why the death of a brother and/or sister in childhood or early adulthood is hugely significant, as it 'shatters all expectations and anticipations of the surviving siblings for a shared future that is not to be' (Hogan and DeSantis, 1996: 250). This presumed permanence and sense of grief for a lost future is echoed across the sibling bereavement literature (Halliwell and Franken, 2016; Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). Bereaved siblings can become highly reflective in adult life, considering what their sibling would be like if he or she were still alive (Davies, 1999). It is suggested that individuals must establish what has been lost in order to be able to deal with that loss (Silverman and Klass, 1996) and so bereavement narratives often reveal a preoccupation with defining these aspects of grief (Valentine, 2008). This article will demonstrate that exploring these anticipated losses can reveal much about people's normative expectations of the sibling relationship. As such, a deeper and more rounded understanding of what it means to be and have a brother or sister can be established than currently exists.

This will be achieved by drawing on data from a study exploring experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course. Although death studies is not a discipline in its own right, it is often separated from mainstream sociological fields and perceived as a niche category of study. As such, there is a disconnect between the sociology of death, dying and bereavement, and sociologies of family, relationships and personal life. This means that core sociological concepts are often not applied across boundaries to the extent that they could be. For example, a relational perspective is largely absent from the death, dying and bereavement literature (Broom and Kirby, 2013), while 'barely any mention has been made of the way in which relationships are both shaped by, and shape experiences of, death, dying and bereavement' (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016: 243). Yet calls for greater collaboration between the two fields are being made (Almack, 2022; Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016), with May and Dawson (2018) suggesting that working at these new intersections will enable the sociology of family and relationships to continue developing. This article therefore seeks to begin bridging these gaps by connecting death studies with more mainstream sociological literature to highlight what can be learnt about living relationships when researchers look through the lens of (sibling) bereavement.

The article opens with an overview of the relevant background literature and conceptual focus, before progressing to the main part of the article, which is divided into three sections. Section one will expand current understandings of the anticipated normative sibling relationship by exploring the expectation of shared parental care that siblings envisioned within their imagined futures. Using the example of preferencing biological relatedness, section two will highlight that these normative assumptions can also indicate a wider set of familial norms and values beyond the sibling relationship. This leads to

section three, which considers how and why researchers are able to learn more about people's expectations of living sibling relationships by listening to bereaved individuals' reflections of what has been lost and what could have been. This article adopts a unique conceptual lens, bringing together the sociology of nothing with the core death studies' theory of continuing bonds, to suggest why the absences created by death continue to have meaning over time and what can be learnt from these ongoing connections. In doing so, this article seeks to demonstrate that bereavement focused research can offer an effective and innovative way of providing new insights to the sociologies of family, relationships and personal life.

Being and Having Siblings

Owing to their generational proximity (Milardo, 2010), siblings largely relate to each other with relative egalitarian status (Robinson and Mahon, 1997). This means that power between siblings is more contested than between parents with children and thus siblings may feel more comfortable to interact in certain ways due to the less formal nature of their relationship (Punch, 2005). As such, siblings can engage in fierce conflict or rivalry but maintain the potential for a close bond (Punch, 2008). That said, ageing siblings report that this turbulence typically calms down in adulthood as siblings increasingly rely on one other for instrumental and emotional support (Gilligan et al., 2020). While most adults maintain a variable level of regular contact with siblings (Gilligan et al., 2020), for some the negative aspects of the relationship can outweigh the positive ones leading to sibling estrangement. Yet even in these circumstances, siblings report feeling a strong moral imperative to repair the relationship (Eckel, 2015), as there is a presumed permanence to the bond shared irrespective of closeness (Halliwell and Franken, 2016). This 'sticky' quality of the sibling relationship (Davies, 2019) means that it has the capacity to be the longest and most intimate tie held over the life course (Gilligan et al., 2020). Despite the potential significance of the relationship, however, there remains a noticeable lack of academic focus on this tie compared with other familial relations (Davies, 2015; Gillies and Lucey, 2006). This disregard for siblings is also found within death studies, leading to siblings being ascribed the label of 'forgotten grievers' (Rostila et al., 2012). By commenting on the sibling relationship in both life and death, this article casts some much needed attention in both areas.

Despite the increasing variety of sibling types in contemporary society, the relationship is typically characterised by an assumption of relatedness (Edward, 2010), as well as contact and co-presence in childhood (Davies, 2015). Age is found to play a crucial role in shaping the nature of these relationships as, for example, it is commonly assumed that older siblings will nurture and protect younger siblings (Gillies and Lucey, 2006). Similarly, it is often believed that older siblings will offer younger siblings a 'route map' to adulthood, using their experiences to share guidance and support along the way (Davies, 2019). This is because siblings are expected to face core life course milestones, such as leaving school and having children, at similar times, regardless of how close that relationship is (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). Though birth order roles are not fixed, often contested and resisted in everyday life (McIntosh and Punch, 2009), they are largely spoken of in a 'taken-for-granted way' that reflects their persistence within

dominant social narratives (Davies, 2019). A similarly common presumption is that siblings are expected to share a relationship of ambivalence (Davies, 2015), simultaneously providing love and support while being a source of frustration and vulnerability (Gillies and Lucey, 2006). While the experience of being and having siblings differs between families, clearly there are some prevailing normative assumptions regarding the sibling relationship. As current sibling research mostly features children and adolescents (Gilligan et al., 2020), what is known mostly relates to the norms and values associated with this age range. This article seeks to expand this understanding by featuring adult sibling relationships, thereby extending sociological awareness of what it means to be and have a grown-up brother or sister.

Giving Meaning to the 'Absences' of Death

Experiencing loss is an intrinsic part of grief, mourning and bereavement (Jacobsen and Petersen, 2019). Alongside the death of their brother or sister, siblings report a series of 'secondary' losses that must be addressed (Hindmarch, 1995), such as the loss of their own 'sibling' identity. Yet these changes are not realised all at once; instead, there is a 'sequence, perhaps extending over one's lifetime, of new losses or new realisations of losses' (Rosenblatt, 1996: 50). These can become particularly evident during periods of family transition, such as the birth of a new family member, or later life transitions, such as retirement (Davies, 1999). It is assumed that siblings will encounter these moments together (Milardo, 2010), and so those bereaved are repeatedly reminded of all that is missing, with the loss of their sibling felt more acutely at these times (Rosenblatt, 1996). Thus, while the dead are physically absent, they remain emotionally present in the lives of the bereaved, which is the essential core tenet of the 'continuing bonds' theory (Klass et al., 1996). Proposed originally with the intention of showing that interactions with the dead could be a normal, rather than pathological, aspect of grieving (Klass, 2006), the emphasis of continuing bonds is that individuals maintain an ongoing connection with the deceased, rather than 'moving on' or 'letting go'. Klass et al.'s (1996) work remains a seminal text within death studies that has been applied to consider, for example: maintaining connections with the dead (Valentine, 2008); sustaining the social identity of the deceased (Francis et al., 2005); and expressions of grief through online memorialisation (Bell et al., 2015). Yet while continuing bonds proves to be a useful conceptual tool for considering relationships with the dead, very rarely has it been used to explore relationships between the living.

    The underpinning idea behind 'continuing bonds' links with aspects of Scott's (2018, 2019, 2020) sociology of nothing, which acknowledges that missing persons or objects can retain emotional significance despite their physical absence. Scott (2018) differentiates between two categories of absent forms: those that once existed but disappeared, and those that never existed but are theoretically envisioned. The first type acknowledges when 'a once-present object disappears from the realm of the socially "real" but remains personally significant', with bereavement being the most obvious example of this (Scott, 2018: 11). Despite the clear links to bereavement, however, Scott's (2019) acknowledgement of this is largely confined to considerations of childlessness, such as miscarriage. The second type recognises objects that 'have never existed but are

imagined, as hypothetical potentials', such as children never conceived (Scott, 2018: 12). These can be vividly wondered about, and our imaginary or impossible futures can influence our present understanding of self (Scott, 2020). Though Scott (2018) presents these two categories of absent forms as distinct from one another, this article will demonstrate that they can be connected, as the absences created by death encapsulate both what has been and what will never be.

Though continuing bonds and the sociology of nothing conceptually overlap in some regards, they remain separate from one another. Yet here they are linked together, with the suggestion that the absences so integral to the bereavement experience remain meaningful over time because of the value ascribed to them through continuing bonds. By adopting this conceptual framework, this article aims to make two contributions to knowledge. First, this article seeks to extend understanding and application of the sociology of nothing, as well as the theory of continuing bonds. It will be shown that continuing bonds has sociological value beyond the perceived boundaries of death studies as it can be used to explore relationships between those still living. The sociology of nothing will also be expanded by applying it in the context of loss and grief beyond its current confinement to experiences of childlessness, thereby demonstrating that there is potential for the sociology of nothing to stretch beyond its current remit. As such, this article's second contribution is a response to those calls for greater collaboration between sociological fields. By drawing upon a literature from a broader range of study, it will be shown that there is more to learn about life by hearing from those who have experienced death. This article thereby demonstrates that the sociology of death, dying and bereavement has more to offer mainstream sociology, particularly the sociologies of family, relationships and personal life, than is currently assumed.

The Study

This article is based upon research that investigated how the death of a brother and/or sister impacts upon and shapes the lives of surviving siblings over their life course. Owing to the lack of sociological focus on sibling bereavement, this study was exploratory and applied a relational lens to discover more about the social nature of grief. While set in the context of death, the project was mostly concerned with the living, considering the ways that bereaved siblings' identities and relationships are managed and negotiated in the long term.

All participants engaged in a semi-structured interview that lasted, on average, two to three hours. Interviews were conducted with 36 (mostly white British) individuals (nine cis men, 27 cis women) aged between 19 and 66 years at the time of participation. All sibling deaths occurred when participants were aged between 8 and 34 years, and no restrictions were specified regarding the cause of death. Interviews took place in various sites across England, in a location of the participant's choosing, but included cafes, their home, university campus and a small number using Skype. As 'the bereaved' are a non-visible 'group', there were no straightforward or pre-defined methods for recruitment. The use of indirect methods helped to minimise any pressure to participate (Dyregrov, 2004), while a 'self-defining' approach to recruitment empowered individuals to interpret their own relationship, allowing for the inclusion of step, half and adopted siblings.

Prior to interview, all of the parents in Dyregrov's (2004) study were keen to share photographs and objects associated with their deceased child, highlighting their concern for the child's identity to be recognised and valued. Taking heed of this, all participants in this research were invited to bring to the interview any artefact/s of their choosing, which linked to their sibling in some way. Overall, 14 of the 36 participants chose to bring an object with them. Though mostly photographs, other examples include a watch, newspaper clipping and book of poems. Primarily the artefacts acted as useful prompts during the opening phase of the interview, encouraging people to share what they considered salient memories and family stories. This helped to relax participants and foster a comforting sense of control in the interview setting (Willig, 2017). It also allowed the researcher to develop a greater sense of the deceased sibling, as well as their shared relationship and the wider family dynamics. Though this was achievable without the presence of an artefact, their inclusion within the interview did facilitate a greater depth of understanding regarding the relationships within those participants' accounts.

Though not specifically narrative interviews, an awareness of narrative was maintained throughout data collection and drawn out during the process of analysis. Put simply, narratives are 'stories that relate the unfolding of events, human action, or human suffering from the perspective of an individual's lived experience' (Muller, 1999: 221). They allow people to reflect on their own experiences, as well as the meaning that they attribute to these experiences and thus can be conceptualised as a device through which people make sense of their lives (Birch and Miller, 2000). Maintaining an awareness of storied narratives thus enabled a greater breadth and depth of understanding regarding the participants' varied experiences.

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes across the transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006), though narratives within the individual transcripts were also recognised. Thus, interview transcripts were coded and analysed using a narrative approach to thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). A 'hybrid' approach to coding was applied, which required balancing both inductive and deductive coding (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For example, the decision to adopt a relational approach and draw out the relational aspects of sibling bereavement was decided upon prior to data collection based upon the literature review, but the additional codes generated by applying this lens were arrived at inductively through close reading of the transcripts. These initial codes were organised into themes, which were then re-analysed so that narratives could be drawn out within particular topics, in addition to those that were present within individual participant interviews. Discussion regarding the objects was analysed as part of these transcripts and themes, as the aim was to prioritise the meaning and value given to these objects by the participant, rather than the materiality of the object itself. All aspects of the research adhered to university ethical guidelines and interviews were conducted following ethical approval.

(Normative) Sibling Relationships

Multiple assumptions regarding a normative sibling relationship were revealed throughout the study but discussion here focuses on the anticipation of shared care for parents over time. This example demonstrates the contribution that research on sibling bereavement can offer to normative understandings of the sibling relationship.

The relationship between surviving siblings and their parents was central to many of the interviews. As found by Funk et al. (2018), all participants commented on this relationship and it was clear that, in varying ways, the sibling experience of grief is highly influenced by parents (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). For many of the siblings interviewed, the death of their brother or sister prompted a new sense of care and duty towards shared parents, experienced over time in both positive and negative ways. Most participants talked about the future and how they expected their responsibilities towards parents to change, particularly with regards to increased care needs. One of the aspects that participants commented on most frequently was the 'unspoken expectation' that siblings would have helped to support elderly parents (Bussolari and Horsley, 2017: 114). As Tony explains, 'in terms of being around to look after them [parents], that's where I'm going to miss my sister because we could have shouldered the burden a bit'. While some participants were unclear about how to manage the situation, such as Jackie: 'when they become elderly and they need care and support I think that's something that could be quite difficult to deal with on my own but I will just have to find a way', it was clear that others were thinking ahead, such as Brooke: 'I think when they get older, we need to buy a big enough house where my mum and dad can move into in the future.' Older participants, whose parents were no longer alive, also raised the idea in retrospect that their sibling could have assisted with caring responsibilities, as well as funeral planning and dividing the estate post-death:

> I look back and I don't know how I coped for them years . . . [mum] used to get upset so easily and it was anything for a quiet life . . . I can remember thinking if you'd have been here you could have helped me with all this. (Claire)

It is possible that responsibility may have fallen to participants even if their sibling had lived, as there can be discrepancy between people's normative ideals of the sibling relationship and their actual lived experience (Davies, 2019). However, the chance to find this out was denied and so their sense of duty was no longer questionable. Finch and Mason (1993) argue that feelings of familial obligation are not pre-defined but develop over time as a result of interaction between individuals. Yet without a developing relationship, siblings were denied the opportunity to establish these family practices and so had to rely upon normative expectations regarding family responsibilities. In this instance, the belief that it is the child(ren)'s duty to provide parental care in later life (Finch and Mason, 1990).

For some, this aspect of loss was not immediately apparent, reflecting the idea that grief is a lifelong experience comprised of new realisations over time (Rosenblatt, 1996). For example, participants in their teens and early 20s often did not report feeling the same sense of pressure regarding their parents. Instead, they were largely preoccupied with more immediate concerns, such as learning to manage their grief alongside a number of transitions common in early adulthood, including new jobs, starting university and dating. Interviewed at the age of 30, Becky's comments reflect on the role of time in shaping her concerns:

> Thinking into the future, it's like oh God mum and dad are gonna get really old and frail and crotchety . . . the kinds of things that you never think about as a child but as I get older and watch my friends go through that with their parents you know, I think about that stuff and certainly miss having someone to help out or talk to about that sort of thing.

Becky's words indicate that, had I spoken to her years earlier, she may not have given much thought to the issue of parental ageing. However, as she gets older the increasing immediacy of the situation for her and her peers is prompting her to think about it more frequently. Yet while friends may share details of their concerns with one another, it is clear that care is assumed to be carried out by children.

This additional sense of responsibility is well documented within the sibling bereavement literature (Lamers, 2003; Marshall and Winokuer, 2017), usually presented as a source of burden and frustration (Funk et al., 2018). However, it is worth noting that participants in this study did not speak in such clear-cut terms (see Towers, 2019 for further discussion). Despite the pressures and challenges they faced, often siblings adopted these additional care roles through a sense of love and familial duty (Finch and Mason, 1993). Though they begrudged some of the requirements and outcomes, it was clear that they were not passive in the situation. Indeed, Phoebe's statement acts as a reminder that such support is neither automatic, nor guaranteed: 'I won't be leaned on and I feel guilty because I'm the only one left, she [mother] doesn't have anyone else to lean on but I can't do it.' Though Phoebe's relationship with her mother has stabilised, their history is sufficiently problematic that she is unwilling and unable to take on additional caring duties for her. Yet even Phoebe's words are still revealing of societal norms and values. Following the death of her sister and brother, Phoebe's sense of guilt stems from feeling that it is her sole responsibility as the surviving child to support her mother physically and emotionally. Moreover, her reflection about being 'the only one left' indicates that, ordinarily, she feels it would have been a responsibility shared between the three siblings.

As indicated by Phoebe, it was clear that a sense of responsibility towards parents was felt more acutely by participants with no other living siblings (Forward and Garlie, 2003). As Brooke explains: 'There were three of us with that responsibility before and it's all me now.' Following the death of both brothers, Abi shared this sense of pressure when comparing her experience of arranging her mum's funeral with that of a friend with three siblings:

> I was ever so jealous about this because I just had to do it all on my own and make it up on my own . . . There are times I think I'd really just like to be able to share this a little bit more.

Although care for elderly parents is often unequally distributed (Leinonen, 2011), very few of the participants spoke of the future in this way. Instead, they indicated a more egalitarian set of assumptions. With a number of siblings still alive, Melissa demonstrates this point: 'No I don't think I have a duty of care. There's less of us but there's still four of us.' The existence of potential afforded to individuals with other living siblings thus diminished the immediacy of concern for future parental welfare, thereby further reinforcing the normative assumption that caring for ageing parents is to be shared between siblings.

Regardless of how close they were to their brother or sister when alive, participants had pre-conceived ideas of all that they had lost beyond the personal relationship itself. Despite their individual differences in experience, participants were often united by a common set of assumptions about the adult sibling relationship. Cultural representations of the 'typical' sibling relationship are pre-occupied with emphasising the similarities and differences shared by brothers and/or sisters, often portraying them as opposites, meaning that media representations of siblings largely focus on jealousy and rivalry (Davies, 2015). Popular media, news, educational policy and family/school practices also reinforce a set of normative roles regarding sibling birth order positions (Davies, 2019). While these studies begin to give a sense of the normative sibling relationship, the example of parental care clearly demonstrates that there is significantly more to know about this bond. Exploring people's anticipated losses revealed much about their expectations of what it means to be and have a brother or sister, thereby contributing to a fuller understanding of normative ideals regarding the sibling relationship over the life course. Yet listening to people's assumptions of loss can also speak of wider familial norms and values, as will be discussed in the next section.

Wider Norms and Values

Siblings provide the opportunity to expand kinship ties both laterally, via siblings' partners, and diagonally, via siblings' children. Participant comments indicated not only the assumption that their sibling would pursue these relationships, but also revealed an implicit set of expectations regarding the nature of these relationships. As such, a number of social norms beyond that of the sibling relationship were identified. One of these was the prioritisation of 'blood' ties, which will be explored here as an example.

Beyond the death of their sibling and loss of that specific relationship, participants indicated that they also experienced a series of 'secondary' losses (Hindmarch, 1995). There is some acknowledgement that a significant part of the sibling bereavement experience is the realisation that the family is different than it was before (Hogan, 2014), but discussion presented here demonstrates that siblings also grieved for the family that was yet to be:

> The chances that would have been if she'd survived, that she'd now be married, divorced, who knows, but quite possibly she'd have had kids and the loss of opportunity not only for her but of the family that I'm never gonna have as a result of that. (Dan)

Though unsure of the specifics, Dan anticipated the possibility of his sister expanding his relational network was likely. The unfulfilled relationship mentioned most frequently was nieces and nephews, with participants frequently lamenting the lost opportunity to become an aunt or uncle to their sibling's children. Relationships with aunts/uncles can be 'casual, involving little contact or intimacy', but they can also be 'diverse, intimate, complex relationships' with parental-like qualities of care and support (Milardo, 2005: 1234). The relationship between aunt/uncle and niece/nephew is therefore one of potential significance. As such, Samantha was deeply upset that the death of her elder brother also signified the end of a possibility to one day become an aunty:

I have no siblings, I'll never be an aunty . . . I think that was one of the things I really felt when he [brother] died, only being the two of us. Seeing this huge void in the future . . . Yes, it's been a really big thing for me actually.

Her words reflect that she perceived the role as aspirational, with its absence heightening the 'void' of her imagined future. These are important contributions in themselves as the position of aunts and uncles is 'an under-theorised and under-researched category' in need of further sociological exploration (May and Lahad, 2018: 4). However, these discussions also reveal a preoccupation with more traditional ways of conceptualising family, highlighting the value that participants attributed to genetic relatedness: 'Even though I have a large extended family, and lots of cousins, just the feeling that I wouldn't have those kind of immediate blood relatives in the future' (Samantha). This qualification at the end indicates the perceived value of blood ties in Samantha's imagined future. While recognised that the aunt/uncle role may in part be fulfilled via partner's siblings, here Adam suggests that such a relationship would lack a sense of authenticity when compared with a blood tie: 'I am really disappointed that I won't be a *proper* uncle, although I'll be an uncle through my girlfriend's side if her brothers ever have children.'

Overall, it was evident across many of the interviews that the aspirational families they imagined were idealised as biologically connected. Though there were a small number of participants who expressed more flexible conceptualisations of family, it was clear that, for most, DNA mattered. This echoes the work of Nordqvist (2017: 866), whose work on donor conception similarly found that 'the cultural trope of "the gene" carries vital importance for how people approach family life'. Indeed, it was clear that genetics retained high cultural value across a range of family ties, not limited to the connection with nieces and nephews: 'We'd have to work really hard to fill a house up with family. My daughter thinks we've hardly got anybody . . . we've got friends that we see and we value, but it's not a blood relationship' (Abi).

Clearly then, there was a uniquely perceived value inherent to a biological sibling relationship. This is significant as sociological studies of family and personal life have repeatedly shown that the lived reality of kinship is far more complex than traditionally regarded. Morgan's (1996) seminal work on family practices signalled a shift in understanding, ensuring that the term 'family' is now more inclusive (Smart, 2007), while conceptualising families as chosen (Weston, 1991) and friends as family (Pahl, 2000) reflected a change in understandings of what it means to 'be family'. While sociological theorising has shifted significantly to encapsulate the plurality of families, within wider society it would appear that 'structure-based genetic family discourse still holds strong' (Nordqvist, 2017: 878). Despite this, however, knowledge of how and when these genetic discourses retain meaning is limited, often explored in medicalised contexts such as assisted reproduction (Nordqvist, 2017). Yet developing a broader awareness of the value ascribed to genetic relatedness has important implications for family sociologists. For example, understanding the ways that being biologically linked (or not) influences people's thinking would deepen considerations of the ways that families engage and interact within and between themselves. By exploring the idealised imaginary in circumstances where biological connections were, but are no longer, possible, bereavement research offers a unique way for sociologists to explore why genetic relatedness remains

so desirable. It is thus able to contribute valuable insights to the discussion by offering an alternative, non-medicalised lens through which to revisit considerations of what it means to 'be' and 'have' family in contemporary society.

Learning about Life from Death

The central premise upon which each of the arguments presented hinges is the understanding that the relationship between brothers and/or sisters is a permanent lifelong tie (Davies, 2015; Robinson and Mahon, 1997). Regardless of how close participants were to their sibling and the intimacy of the bond shared, every individual spoke of their sibling as someone they expected to grow up and grow old in parallel with. Other sibling bereavement studies similarly report a consistent sadness and regret over the loss of a shared future together (Hogan and DeSantis, 1996; Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). Reflecting the complicated nature of the sibling bond (Gillies and Lucey, 2006), participants rarely used a binary of 'good' or 'bad' when describing the relationship with their brother or sister. Instead, their answers demonstrated the complexities of these ties: 'It's one of those things that even though I can say he infuriated me, he was annoying, this that and the other, no one else can ever say that. Any criticism of him has to come from me' (Poppy).

The only participant to report having a largely negative relationship with her older brother was Britney, describing him as 'very different' and 'not very close'. Consequently, after he died aged 19 she noted: 'I didn't really lose a relationship, I lost what could have been a great relationship. I lost what could have been, rather than what was.' Although her connection with her brother was challenging, Britney was open to the idea that the situation could change and remained hopeful for a time that their bond would be closer. This reflects the assertion that, even if the living relationship was troubled, surviving siblings may experience guilt or regret that the relationship was not able to fulfil its lifelong potential (Edward, 2010). It is even suggested that this yearning for an imagined future can be more intense in cases where there is 'unfinished business' or unresolved feelings of discontent (Packman et al., 2006).

The presumed permanence of the sibling relationship is emphasised here as it is this assumption that ensures that the death of a sibling violates all expectations of a shared future together. It is these anticipations that come to light in bereavement and are worthy of study by sociologists if we are to learn more about the sibling relationship, as well as familial relationships more broadly. This is because 'people, experiences and opportunities concretely become "nothing" in the context of bereavement', which makes them 'paradoxically "something" worthy of study' (Scott, 2018: 15). It is the space that the sibling once occupied that is significant precisely because of its emptiness, and the meaning attached to it by the living sibling through their continuing bond. Moreover, it is the longevity of these connections that ensures siblings continue to give meaning to these absences over time and thus repeatedly evaluate all that they have lost. This applies to absences that were present but physically disappeared (the deceased sibling), as well as absences that never existed (nieces and nephews not born). The assumed permanence of the sibling relationship, combined with the continuing bond shared, ensures that the discernible void created by these absences is carried alongside them, felt in the present and

foreseen in the future. The lost opportunity to actually live out their sibling relationship meant that participants were forced to draw upon stock social narratives in order to artic-ulate what they *believed* would happen. Thus, participants spoke of the aspirational sib-ling relationship that they had hoped would come to fruition, had their brother or sister not died. It was these common assumptions that revealed the extent to which participants shared a set of idealised norms and values regarding the sibling relationship.

Yet the presumed permanence of the tie is central to this article for a second reason. Anticipating that a relationship will last a lifetime can mean that its worth is not fully considered or appreciated until after it has been lost. Bereaved in her late teens, Becky reflects on this idea:

> It was completely a relationship that we both took for granted I think . . . you expect your parents to die at some point but you expect your siblings to be there for most of your life. It's one of those relationships, certainly how I felt about it and still do, that it's just a given.

Becky's assertion that the relationship was taken for granted while her sibling was alive reflects other participant comments presented in this article. It was precisely because of their bereavement that siblings had already spent a lot of time and energy *outside* of the research environment carefully considering all they had lost. As Scott (2019: 160) notes, these 'nothings' create an 'expansive backdrop to our conscious lived experience, haunting and overshadowing all that we do with the imagined possibility of being oth-erwise'. While Scott (2019) acknowledges that these imaginary 'nothings' can poten-tially be brought to the fore, it is argued here that bereavement research actively encourages and facilitates this process. As grief requires individuals to establish what has been lost in order to begin addressing that loss (Silverman and Klass, 1996), partici-pants were largely aware of their imagined 'other' lives and so were readily able to articulate them. Though estrangement may prompt similar considerations of loss, while those siblings are alive there remains uncertainty and potential regarding the future of the relationship. It is the definitive nature of death, combined with the increased and ongoing reflection prompted by the continuing bonds of grief, that uniquely locates the bereaved as a source of insight. Adopting a research lens of bereavement thus offers a specifically intuitive way of learning about aspects of the normative sibling relationship that are not readily conceived of in life.

Conclusion

There is an unrecognised value of bereavement research in advancing understandings of living relationships. This article demonstrates that, owing to the continuing bonds main-tained with the deceased, the multi-layered absences created by their death are readily reflected upon and identified by those bereaved, re-considered over time as a way to take stock of all that is lost. By exploring people's imagined futures and acknowledging these anticipated losses, it is possible to learn more about people's expectations of the norma-tive sibling relationship and thus develop a far deeper understanding of this relationship than currently exists. Moreover, these assumptions often contain a latent set of ideals that can be analysed to reveal a wider collection of familial norms and values. The example

raised here concerned the prioritisation of genetics, but the potential for discovery using this conceptual tool goes beyond this. Though there was insufficient space to explore these within this article, other societal norms identifiable within participant narratives related to gender roles and life course trajectory. As such, there is a wide scope of issues to be explored in this way.

It is acknowledged that widespread application of this article is limited by its focus on British norms and values, owing to the location in which the research was conducted and the backgrounds of people who took part. Normative expectations of the sibling relationship vary between countries and cultures (see Edward, 2010), as do experiences of grief (Rosenblatt, 2019), so further research into these differences would be beneficial. Though the specific findings are not easily transferred to siblings beyond Britain, the suggestion that mainstream sociology would benefit from connecting with the lesser drawn upon sociology of death, dying and bereavement remains intact. Moreover, there is potential to apply these ideas to other kinship ties. As the presumed permanence of the relationship is central to the discussion presented here, it is possible that these ideas can be transferred to other relationships based upon a similar longevity. For example, parents expect their relationship with a child to last their lifetime, with the potential to expand their kinship ties through grandchildren or partners-in-law, and so normative expectations of parenting could also be explored in a similar way. Owing to the original research topic, sibling bereavement has been used in this article as a case study to show the potential of using bereavement as a lens through which to learn about living relationships. As such, it highlights the benefits of operating at the intersection of disciplinary boundaries by demonstrating that bereavement research is a largely untapped resource that has much to offer the sociologies of family, relationships and personal life.

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ORCID iD

Laura Towers 🄳 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4047-5222

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Laura Towers is a research associate in the Sheffield Methods Institute at the University of Sheffield. She is currently working with Professor Kate Reed on bereavement-focused research. Her own work explores the complexity of negotiating changing relationships and identities within the context of sibling bereavement.