



This is a repository copy of *'There's a huge hole left in the middle of the family': locating family practices within the context of (sibling) bereavement.*

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/232725/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Towers, L. orcid.org/0000-0003-4047-5222 (2025) 'There's a huge hole left in the middle of the family': locating family practices within the context of (sibling) bereavement. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 14 (2). pp. 177-193. ISSN: 2046-7435

<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674324x17068706068793>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>



research article

'There's a huge hole left in the middle of the family': locating family practices within the context of (sibling) bereavement

Laura Towers^{id}, laura.towers@sheffield.ac.uk
University of Sheffield, UK

Family life is permanently and irrevocably changed by death, requiring those bereaved to adopt new ways of 'doing' family. Drawing on data from a qualitative study of sibling bereavement experiences, this article demonstrates that death can retain a powerful presence for the living, shaping the way that family members relate to one another. It is argued that bereavement can influence the establishment, and enactment, of family practices, thus highlighting that family practices can be subtly couched in the context of bereavement. This article expands Morgan's concept of family practices in a direction that has yet to be explored. It will conclude that sociologists can learn more about the dynamic intricacies of family life by recognising the potential influence of death and bereavement on the way that relationships are navigated and negotiated over time.

Keywords bereavement • death • family practices • siblings

To cite this article: Towers, L. (2025) 'There's a huge hole left in the middle of the family': locating family practices within the context of (sibling) bereavement, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 14(2): 177–193, DOI: 10.1332/204674324X17068706068793

Introduction

Death is one of the few inevitabilities of life. Yet it remains largely overlooked by sociologists of families and relationships. In being the first to consider [Morgan's \(1996; 2011a\)](#) work on family practices in relation to sibling bereavement, this article expands our understanding of Morgan's work in a new direction and offers sociologists a different lens through which to explore family life. It acknowledges the influential role that death plays in the ways that family is 'done' over time and seeks to show how family practices can be better understood if recognised in the context of bereavement. In doing so, it reconnects death with the mundanity of everyday life, emphasising the relational and temporal nature of bereavement experiences, and enhancing our overall understanding of how family members relate to one another. As such, it contributes to a small but growing body of work that demonstrates how connecting death studies with the sociologies of families, relationships and personal lives, can greatly improve

our understanding of living relationships (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016; Borgstrom et al, 2019; Almack, 2022; Towers, 2022; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2023).

Owing to the overall argument of this article, the focus is not sibling bereavement per se, but the way that bereavement influences the ways that family members relate to one another in the context of sibling loss. Yet by exploring this through the lens of sibling bereavement, this article inevitably improves our understanding of sibling bereavement experiences, particularly given the overall lack of attention given to grieving siblings in general (Marshall and Winokeur, 2017). The limited literature available largely originates in the ‘psy’ disciplines (for example, psychiatry and psychology), and so emphasises individual pathology, thereby failing to acknowledge the relationality of bereavement or the temporal longevity of grieving experiences. The examples shared in this article demonstrate some of the ways that sibling bereavement is embedded in both time and relationships. In doing so, it makes a secondary contribution by enhancing understanding of what it means to be a bereaved sibling and providing an alternative, experiential account of this loss.

Within popular culture, as well as academic and clinical approaches, death is conceptualised in crisis terms, as an ‘extraordinary event that brings about intense and extreme emotional experiences’ (Ellis, 2013: 252). As such, there is a dominance of ‘rupture-related thinking’ (Ellis, 2013: 251), which sees death as destabilising our sense of self and rupturing the assumed security of our biography (Jakoby, 2015). Consequently, the ‘bereavement process’ is understood to require ‘repairing that rupture and developing a new way in which to adopt a new sense of self’ (Souza, 2017: 61). Yet such thinking reflects the dominant medicalised understanding of bereavement as a condition to be treated (Valentine, 2008), and transforms death into something disconnected from the mundanity of everyday life (Ellis, 2013). It also conceptualises bereavement in individualistic terms, to be managed in isolation from social relationships, and thereby fails to recognise the relational nature of bereavement experiences (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2023). Bereavement denotes a state of loss, whereas grief is an emotional reaction to that loss (Doka and Martin, 2010). As it is not possible to restore what has been lost, the status of ‘being bereaved’ is permanent; a bereaved mother will always be a bereaved mother, regardless of when her child died or if she has any other living children. Part of bereavement, therefore, is learning to adjust and adapt to a new way of life without the person who died (Doka and Martin, 2010). Thus, while bereavement experiences can undoubtedly be profound, challenging the very essence of who we are, they can also be grounded in the routines and relationships of everyday life.

For better or worse, family life is irreparably changed following a death (Funk et al, 2017), with significant implications for ongoing family relationships (Almack, 2022). Yet death studies is typically concerned with understanding how people maintain relationships with the dead, and so very little attention has been given to the ways that people manage ongoing relationships with the living following a death (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016; Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2023). A small number of studies have begun to explore how death affects families and the way they ‘do’ relationships in bereavement; specifically, in relation to inheritance (see Finch and Mason, 2000) and funeral planning (see Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016; Woodthorpe, 2017). An even smaller number have applied Morgan’s (1996; 2011a) idea of family practices, though these mostly focus on times when a family member is dying (Ellis, 2013; 2018; Borgstrom et al, 2019; Almack, 2022). While Pearce and Komaromy (2021) offer some insight into ways of ‘doing’ family life following a death, in the context

of parental loss, a direct consideration of family practices in bereavement is largely missing from the discussion; a gap which this article seeks to address.

The article begins with a review of the relevant background literature and conceptual framework, before offering an overview of the original study. It then progresses to the main discussion, which is divided into three parts. Using the example of communication, section one demonstrates that bereavement can continue to subtly shape mundane family practices long after the initial death takes place. Following this, section two considers how decision making about life events also considered family practices, such as moving house, can be influenced by bereavement as well. This leads to section three, which recognises that family practices can overlap, as individuals negotiate being part of an 'original' family alongside their 'chosen' family. As such, this final section highlights how bereavement can influence the way that individuals approach and negotiate these overlapping practices. These arguments highlight that the sociologies of families, relationships and personal life can better understand family practices by recognising the lingering presence of death within living relationships, while the multidisciplinary death studies could be enhanced by further recognising the relationality of bereavement experiences. As such, the article concludes that there is much to learn about family life, relationships and practices, by continuing to enhance the connections between death studies and mainstream sociology.

Death in the 'family'

Any discussion of 'family' must open with the recognition that 'family' is a highly contested term (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012), as it falsely implies a series of rigid and fixed structures (Morgan, 1996). Yet Morgan (2011a) himself acknowledges that the idea of 'family' retains value and significance, as it remains a distinct sphere of everyday practices and experiences, and people still employ the language of family in daily life (Edwards et al, 2012; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012), social policy (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016) and political discourses (Edwards et al, 2012). As such, 'in the continuing aftermath of death 'family' needs to be understood as a powerful but problematic, very fluid, and co-constructed term' (Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2023: 6).

Though death is a 'significant "family" event' (Almack, 2022: 237), referring to 'family grief' as a collective overlooks the individuality of each member's experience and oversimplifies a complex interaction of emotions (Breen et al, 2018). Rather, there is an 'interplay of individual family members grieving in the social and relational context of the family, with each member affecting and being affected by the others' (Gilbert, 1996: 271). While there is a growing body of literature that recognises the influence of family life and relationships on bereavement experiences (Rosenblatt, 2000; Valentine, 2008; Walter, 2020), it is the reverse consideration, of how bereavement shapes family life and relationships, that takes priority here. Across projects, Tony Walter highlights the symbolic ways in which 'family' is constructed in the context of bereavement. For example, funerals help to reinforce traditional cultural norms of 'family' over more fluid interpretations (Walter and Bailey, 2020), while unspoken hierarchies of grief reinforce, and are reinforced by, perceptions of who is considered more or less 'entitled' to grieve; these then help to reify notions of who is, or is not, seen to be a member of the (grieving) 'family' (Robson and Walter, 2012).

A much broader range of literature is available when considering specific relational connections. With regard to siblings, Winokuer (2017) found that parental death

can lead siblings to lose touch, as they are no longer pulled together by a shared connection, while [Connidis \(2001\)](#) suggests the death of parents can bring siblings (back) into contact with one another. Once again, however, there is insufficient exploration of how people *experience* these moments and thus the impact of death on their everyday family relationships is overlooked. Indeed, the literature overall is preoccupied with the period of grief immediately following a death, and thus fails to recognise bereavement as an ongoing experience that families navigate and negotiate over time ([Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2023](#)). As such, very little is known about the impact of ongoing experiences of bereavement on family life. This article therefore contributes to this gap in knowledge by exploring how family practices can continue to be directly shaped by bereavement, using the lens of sibling loss to further this discussion.

(Re)locating family practices

As is often cited, the central premise behind the ‘practices approach’ is the idea that family is something that people ‘do’, rather than ‘have’ or ‘be’ ([Morgan, 2011a](#)). It carries with it a sense of action and an assertion that family life is a set of activities, rather than a static structure with fixed positions, such as that of ‘mother’ or ‘father’. Practices are ‘often little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken-for-granted existence of the practitioners’ ([Morgan, 1996: 190–1](#)). Though often associated with everydayness, the essence of practices is that they are part of routine family life and occur with some regularity, be it daily, weekly, monthly or annually ([Morgan, 1996; 2011a](#)). [Morgan \(1996\)](#) notes that family practices have an emotional dimension to them, as well as personal or moral significance, creating meaning for the practitioners and their actions. However, this does not mean that they are always considered in positive terms; many practices are considered to be oppressive or constraining.

One of the original aims when introducing ‘family practices’ was to address the notion of sameness and rigidity implied by the term ‘family’, instead seeking to acknowledge that families are greatly variable and constantly changing ([Morgan, 2011a](#)). One aspect of this fluidity is seen in the way that family life is implicated in a number of social institutions and alternative social practices, meaning that practices described as family practices may be considered in different terms. For example, parenting practices may also be described as gendered practices. As such, practices ‘merge and overlap’ one another. Another aspect of this fluidity is the way that family practices are not exclusively confined to the home, instead being conducted in various situations and locations, including those not associated with family life ([Morgan, 2011b](#)). For example, [May \(2023\)](#) demonstrates how ‘family’ can be enacted in public settings and spaces, away from the ‘family’ home.

Even though ‘death comes to us all’ ([Almack, 2022: 227](#)), there is surprisingly very little recognition of death within sociological research on family practices, as well as sociological family literature more generally. This oversight could be due to the perceived incongruity between the mundanity of everyday family life and the rupturing experience of death ([Borgstrom et al, 2019](#)), or due to a ‘flatness of sight’ within family sociology ([May, 2023: 62](#)). One of [Morgan’s \(2011a: 6\)](#) few references to bereavement suggests that family practices aim to ‘convey a sense of everyday life both in the sense of those life-events which are experienced by a significant proportion

of any population (partnering, parenthood, sickness, bereavement) and equally, those activities which seem unremarkable, hardly worth talking about'.

By identifying bereavement as a 'life event', the idea is perpetuated that death is disconnected from the everyday. Yet a growing body of work is demonstrating that it is possible, and indeed beneficial, to recognise how family practices are enacted at the end of life (Ellis, 2013; 2018; Borgstrom et al, 2019; Almack, 2022). For example, Ellis (2018) explores the materialities of food and eating to demonstrate its social and symbolic meaning for those living with a terminal illness, while Borgstrom et al (2019) highlight the fluidity of family practices by examining their presence away from home, within institutional settings such as hospice care. Though Almack (2022: 237) aims to extend the application of Morgan's (1996) family practices to 'the area of death and dying', this (as is often the case) excludes experiences of bereavement. This article therefore seeks to expand the core sociological concept of 'family practices' by demonstrating that it is possible to gain a greater depth of understanding about the way that some families 'do' family and the meaning that they apply to their actions by recognising that some practices should be understood in the context of bereavement. By reconceptualising bereavement as an ongoing experience, rather than a one-off event, we can see the everydayness of bereavement experiences and acknowledge the role that it plays in guiding people's actions. As such, it is an important consideration for family sociologists to remember when seeking to understand how and why family members relate to one another in certain ways.

The study

This article is based on research that explored how the death of a brother and/or sister shapes and influences the lives of surviving siblings over their lifecourse. The study applied a relational lens to recognise the multitude of relationships that siblings are embedded within and examine the role of these ties within the bereavement experience. By adopting this conceptual approach, it was inevitable that analysis led to learning about family life and relationships. As found by Funk et al (2017), all participants commented on their relationship with (step)parents in depth, far more than any other kinship tie, and it was clear that, in varying ways, sibling bereavement experiences are highly influenced by this (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). This article thus focuses on the relationship between bereaved siblings and their (step)parents to reflect participant experience and best demonstrate the arguments being made.

A total of 36 (mostly White British) participants (9 men, 27 women) living in England took part in a semi-structured interview that lasted, on average, two to three hours each (see Appendix A for participant overview). All sibling deaths occurred when participants were aged between 8 and 34 years, while individuals were aged between 19 and 66 years at the time of participation. Although all participants are currently residing in England, one was raised in Mexico, one in the US, two grew up in Northern Ireland and one was born in Kuwait but moved around the Middle East as a child. All bar the latter lived in their country of birth at the time of their sibling's death. A 'self-defining' approach to recruitment was applied, employing opportunistic and snowball sampling methods to minimise any sense of pressure or obligation to participate in the research. The use of a self-defining approach also allowed individuals to interpret their own sibling relationship, enabling the inclusion of a diverse range of connections, such as step-, half- and adopted brothers or sisters. As 'the bereaved' are a non-visible 'group',

there were no straightforward or pre-defined methods for recruitment so participants were recruited through a range of means including social media and university volunteer mailing list, as well as the charities Child Bereavement UK, The Compassionate Friends and The Rotary Foundation. Influenced by the avenues used for recruitment, the vast majority of participants were university-educated and employed in professional jobs. No restrictions were placed regarding the cause of death, but a minimum of five years had to have passed since their sibling's death. Interviews took place in a location of the participant's choosing across various sites in England, including cafes, their home, university campus and a small number by telephone or Skype.

Though not explicitly narrative interviews, an awareness of narrative was maintained throughout data collection and drawn out during the process of analysis. This is because narratives enable people to reflect on the value and meaning of their experiences, and so are a useful device for people when trying to make sense of their lives (Birch and Miller, 2000). Thematic analysis was used to identify themes across the transcripts (Braun and Clark, 2006), though narratives within the individual transcripts were also recognised. As such, 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). These codes were organised into themes, which were then reanalysed so that narratives could be drawn out within particular topics, in addition to those found within individual interviews.

All aspects of the research adhered to university ethical guidelines, and fieldwork was carried out following ethical approval. Several steps were taken to ensure participant welfare, including reassuring participants that they did not have to answer any questions they found distressing, reminding them of their right to withdraw should the experience prove emotionally stressful, and signposting participants to bereavement support services should they seek further assistance. It is also acknowledged that conducting bereavement research can be emotionally challenging for the researcher as well as the researched (see Reed and Towers, 2021, for a fuller discussion of the author's experience in this regard).

Findings and discussion

Everyday practices

A number of everyday family practices were identified across the interviews but the discussion here focuses on communication between parents and surviving adult children. This was by far the relationship most frequently discussed, and the most common conceptualisation of 'family' readily adopted by participants. This example demonstrates how being bereaved continues to shape and influence the way that family members interact long after a death.

For many of the siblings interviewed, the loss of their brother(s) and/or sister prompted a new sense of care and responsibility towards their parents, experienced in both positive and negative ways, which had to be negotiated over the lifecourse. Additional feelings of concern are well documented in sibling bereavement literature (Marshall and Winokuier, 2017), and raised as a potential source of burden and frustration (Funk et al, 2017). This heightened sense of responsibility was often, though not always, felt more acutely by those with no other living siblings. As Kate

(30) argues: "It certainly makes a difference if you feel like you're all they've got in terms of kids."

For those who reported feeling a need to support parents, one of the key features was maintaining an elevated presence, through increased levels of contact (both physical and verbal). This was relevant in the immediate time following their sibling's death: "I felt I had to call them every day. They said I didn't have to but yeah I did, I had to call them every day" (Poppy, 35, bereaved five years), as well as years afterwards: "I feel very, very conscious to maintain regular communication with my mum and just have a really good relationship with her" (Kate, 30, bereaved 18 years).

Participants identified no specific purpose behind these bi-directional conversations other than to 'check in' with one another and remain part of each other's lives. Morgan (2011b: 3) notes that 'many family practices consist of or are accompanied by talk', using a variety of means such as telephone, video chat or email. By enacting these practices and purposefully orientating them towards another family member, it serves to define and reassert their position as 'family', demonstrating the work that people engage in to construct and maintain the family unit as a meaningful social entity (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). Indeed, by 'seeking out other family members in order to have these conversations, family connections are being reaffirmed and given some kind of significance' (Morgan, 2011b: 3). As such, though the primary intention of this increased communication was for siblings to keep in touch with parents and maintain a connection with them, by integrating this family practice into their daily routines it also helped to reaffirm their relationship as parent and child.

It could be that participants' caring behaviours towards their parents would have been established over time regardless, as adult children are increasingly expected to take responsibility for ageing parental welfare (Silverstein et al, 2006). Moreover, there is little evidence to support claims of family decline, with many adult children reporting having regular contact with their parents (Dykstra and Fokkema, 2011). Yet Brooke highlights that her behaviour is specifically linked to the death of her two older brothers:

'I ring my mum and dad every day. I do want to speak to them and that's partly for me as well but I think also I am always making sure that I ring and that they're not on their own ... those sorts of decisions that I make are maybe quite small ones but I've just put them in my routine ... I think I wouldn't feel that sense of responsibility massively like I do now.' (Brooke, 33, bereaved when 11 and 17)

This heightened sense of care following a family member's death is unsurprising, as other studies have shown that kin relationships respond at times of crises by offering practical and emotional support (Finch and Mason, 1993). Despite being detrimental and inhibiting at times, bereaved people often maintain these behaviours due to a sense of loyalty borne from invested kinship ties (Valentine, 2008). Though his parental relationship was much more tenuous than Brooke's was, Adam similarly reveals that bereavement was the strong driver for his choices:

'If it wasn't for my brother's death then life would be completely different. I would still keep in contact but I wouldn't be making such an effort. I make the effort I do because I know they don't have anyone else. With him never

being around, I've kind of had to keep close to them.' (Adam, 32, bereaved 18 years)

Both Brooke and Adam were bereaved 18 or more years prior to being interviewed for the research. With such a significant time lapse since their siblings' deaths, it is unlikely that a non-bereavement researcher would immediately consider this experience as a key motivator for their actions. This reflects a wider societal norm that recognition for those who have experienced a family death fades over time (Baddeley and Singer, 2009). Actions more indicative of bereavement are revisiting memories, tending the grave, and memorialising the dead (Klass et al, 1996). As such, it is unlikely that the death of their sibling and subsequent bereavement would be readily identified as the driving influence behind Brooke's need to communicate every day and Adam's insistence on communication under strained terms. Though the fluidity of family practices means that these behaviours could be simultaneously bereavement *and* communication practices (Morgan, 1996; 2011a), here it is suggested that they are best understood as family practices that are embedded *within* the context of bereavement. This idea is perhaps best articulated by Dan (46, bereaved 21 years): "It's not at the forefront of my brain anymore but it is one of those filters through which I see the world. I have various things that condition my responses to things and my sister's death is one of the main ones."

In Dan's words, bereavement has become the lens through which his thoughts, feelings and behaviours can often be recognised. It is this sentiment which explains how everyday family practices can be best understood when recognised in a wider context that incorporates death. By acknowledging the ongoing presence of long-term family bereavement and locating family practices in these past experiences, it becomes possible to gain a far greater understanding of members' aims and motivations. This in turn grants sociologists a clearer view of family life, including how family members relate to one another.

Life events

Beyond their everyday family practices, participants acknowledged how the death of their sibling was influential when making important decisions, concerning, for example, whether to move house or have children. Samantha (41, bereaved seven years) talked of her desire to have children, partly for her parents' sake: "I want to make sure that there is a family there and that my parents have something to be happy about again, something to look forward to." This reflects the findings of Funk et al (2017: 10), who also found that participants 'expressed feeling a sense of pressure to have children [...] out of a sense that parents needed a grandchild'. Though such significant decisions are not family practices in the everyday sense most frequently discussed, they fall under Morgan's (2011a: 6) remit of being a life event 'experienced by a significant proportion of any population'. Although it is recognised that the outcome of these decisions would inevitably shape their eventual everyday family practices as well.

Once again influenced by a commitment to maintaining parental welfare, several participants factored parents into the decision-making process regarding significant life events such as whether or not to relocate. During our time together, it was clear that Claire's life had been shaped enormously by a commitment to care for her parents,

following the sudden death of her only sibling 41 years ago, when she was 23 and he was 16. Part of this required her and her husband to decline the opportunity to move to the US; an experience that she reflects on in detail:

'We'd got chance to go and live in America years ago and we didn't go. We couldn't leave my mum and dad you know because they'd have been on their own and they just depended on us such a lot ... She [mum] used to get upset so easily and it was anything for a quiet life. She used to tell everybody that if it hadn't of been for me and the kids she thinks her and my dad would have ended their lives and she always said that it was us that kept her going.' (Claire, 64, bereaved 41 years)

Though parental pressure at this level of intensity was not common among the interviews, it is clear that Claire felt a huge sense of responsibility towards her parents. As such, she stayed local to them and based her life around caring for their needs until their recent deaths. In contrast, Poppy, though born in England, was living with her husband in Mexico when her only sibling died aged 27, five years prior to interview. Here she talks about how her bereavement influenced their decision to move back to England:

'I would definitely say that it contributed to me moving back because I couldn't settle, I got really homesick and then there was the whole kind of, with my parents, are they okay, having to call them every day, it would be so much easier if I was at home and all the rest of it.' (Poppy, 35, bereaved five years)

Poppy's choice was partly guided by the desire to be closer to her family in order to seek their support and take comfort in the familiar, but she was also aware that it would lessen the burden of care that she felt. Due to a gradual reduction in social care, looking after ageing parents is increasingly perceived to be the responsibility of family members, usually adult children (Silverstein et al, 2006). As such, it is common for parents to be considered (to varying degrees) when making decisions about relocating, particularly if care for those parents falls to one child (Shelton and Grundy, 2000). Though such focus is often prompted by parental illness or ageing, both Claire and Poppy were young adults at the time of (not) moving and neither raised parental health or age as a cause for concern. While Claire and Poppy were driven by a need to support their parents, ultimately the root cause of this anxiety was the death of their sibling.

Although concern for ageing parents was frequently raised within the research, it was not cited as a reason for moving by those who had already relocated. Instead, they spoke in a more general sense of needing to be present for parents in the here and now. This can be seen in Ray's account, who moved with his wife and two young children to be nearer to his mum so they could take care of her (Ray's dad died when Ray was 16) following his only sibling's terminal diagnosis:

'That was the driver for us moving back to the village so we could be close to my mum and sister because we knew they would need support ... all the way through it and afterwards, taking my mum on holiday with us and things like that, I don't know if compensate is the right word but you know,

trying to make the best of a bad job rather than leaving her on her own and having to cope with it on her own.' (Ray, 56, bereaved 22 years)

Ray's words demonstrate an awareness of the longevity of bereavement, as he sought to be there for his mum over time, not just the immediate period following his sister's death. His willingness to relocate and integrate his mum into planned activities demonstrates an acceptance of his newfound obligations, with the expectation that it would continue long into the future. In each of these participant examples, siblings identified the death of their brother or sister as the cause of their concern and a significant factor in their decision making. Overall, therefore, bereavement can continually shape family practices, both in the everyday mundane sense as well as those life events which take place less frequently.

Maintaining practices between families

Discussion thus far has illustrated how mundane family practices, as well as significant life events, can be embedded in bereavement experiences. In making this argument, the focus has centred on the relationship between parents and adult surviving siblings. However, parent-child relationships 'are not exclusive of other relationships' (Chambers et al, 2009: 36). Indeed, many of the participant quotes shared in this article have alluded to partners and children but, so far, the effect of this on those relationships and shared practices has been overlooked. Discussion now turns to this omission, demonstrating how family practices intersect and are negotiated between 'families'.

Each of the participants cited in this article had moved out of their original 'family home' and, at the time of interview, most were living with long-term partners and/or parenting children. One aspect of the practices approach is that family practices are not exclusively confined to the home, instead being conducted across various situations and locations (Morgan, 2011a; May, 2023). In this instance, siblings were carrying out practices between homes, trying to balance commitments to their family of origin alongside their family of choice. This is somewhat reflective of the tensions experienced by those described as the 'sandwich generation' when seeking to balance looking after children with care for ageing parents (Grundy and Henretta, 2006). Consequently, siblings were navigating ways to maintain multiple sets of overlapping family practices, including those with their partner and their partner's 'families'. As relationships do not operate in isolation from one another (Chambers et al, 2009), this creates the potential for tension and conflict if family members disagree on the alignment of these practices. Following the death of her brother (and only sibling) 41 years ago, Claire explains the pressure this put on her and her partner over the decades they had been together:

'I've thought about that since, and he [husband] was always great with my mum and dad because it made them even more over-protective towards me ... My husband was just brilliant, right up to the end [of her parents' lives], because he knew how much they depended on me.' (Claire, 64, bereaved 41 years)

Thankfully for Claire, her husband was fully supportive of her commitments to her parents. Though their care needs were highly demanding, his patience and

understanding enabled Claire to balance these daily practices with those enacted with her husband and their two children. Though in different, less burdensome ways, Brooke also felt a great sense of care towards her parents following the deaths of both of her older brothers when they were 18. Like Claire, however, she was similarly fortunate in the support she received:

'What's his [husband's] take on it? Yeah, I don't know, I think because you know we have been together for so long, it's kind of just the norm, isn't it? ... He knows and is supportive of me with stuff but kind of tries to, helps me to push outside of some of that stuff as well.' (Brooke, 33, bereaved when 11 and 17)

Alongside his acceptance and reassurance, Brooke also appreciated her husband's encouragement to move beyond the constriction that she sometimes felt and regarded it as a positive step towards achieving greater independence. Clearly, some participants had found a way to manage the practices actioned with their parents, alongside those carried out with their partners and children. Though not proposed in this way, [Zelizer's \(2012: 149\)](#) concept of 'relational work' can be applied here, defined as 'the creative effort people make establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations'. This relational work is continuous and ongoing ([Zelizer, 2012](#)), contributing as a form of emotional labour ([Hall, 2023](#)). The level and complexity of this relational work varies between relationships (as well as cultural and global contexts), with some participants experiencing a more challenging time when balancing their commitments: "Being sucked back into that first family isn't good for me and I feel torn between my own family and my parents and unable to balance the two," (Poppy, 35, bereaved five years). As Poppy articulates, this overlapping can lead to feelings of tension and a personal struggle to accommodate everyone's needs. As 'family members are frequently involved in the control of their own emotions while managing the emotions of others' ([Morgan, 2011a: 114](#)), it can be mentally and physically draining trying to achieve a balance that all family members are fulfilled by. However, if this effort is perceived to be one-sided then its longevity can be time limited:

'I'm the only one who makes an effort and I don't mind making the effort but if it gets to the point where we are restricting our lives, like if we have a family and stuff, if it ever gets to that point, I think that will overtake what I've been doing so far.' (Adam, 32, bereaved 18 years)

Though not a significant issue in the present, Adam foresaw difficulties in the future and suggests that having children will be the point that he reconsiders his commitments. This highlights the idea that family life is 'constantly undergoing change' ([Morgan, 2011a: 3](#)) and 'ways of doing family that enabled them to get by earlier in the lifecourse may no longer be present' ([Chambers et al, 2009: 35](#)). As such, individuals must find new ways of managing their family practices, in ways that suit their changing situation. Crucial to this article, however, is the acknowledgement that bereavement shapes and influences the scope that people have to navigate these overlapping pressures. For example, feelings of familial obligation make it hard to simply 'walk away' in times of difficulty ([Finch and Mason, 1993](#)); siblings often feel pressure from public narratives that prioritise grieving parents ([Goldman, 2017](#)),

and parents can be protective of surviving children following the death of a child (Rosenblatt, 2000). Overall, therefore, it must be recognised that bereavement can be a dominant, yet subtle, presence in the shaping and management of family practices. This influence must be recognised if sociologists of families, relationships and personal lives are to fully understand how and why some family members relate in the ways that they do.

Conclusion

Death forever alters the ways that family members relate to one another. As roles shift and responsibilities change, bereavement can be influential in the way that family is 'done' over time. It is increasingly recognised that family relationships are the context in which individual loss is experienced. However, this article has refocused this discussion to suggest that bereavement can be the context in which family life and relationships are routinely located. This is because everyday mundane practices, as well as significant life events, can continue to be informed and influenced long after the death of a family member. The examples of maintaining communication and moving house were used to illustrate this point but there are a range of additional activities that could also be drawn on. However, the passing of time and the shift from families of origin to families of choice also means that individuals can be tasked with managing multiple, overlapping family practices. The way these decisions are negotiated can once again be heavily influenced by aspects of the bereavement experience. In making these arguments, this article contributes the first consideration of family practices in the context of sibling bereavement to broader discussions of Morgan's (1996; 2011a) work and highlights the importance of recognising the role of death when seeking to understand family life.

Though the primary contribution of this article is the value of situating families in the context of their bereavement, a secondary contribution is that it furthers knowledge and understanding of sibling bereavement experiences. Following the death of their brother and/or sister, bereaved siblings often feel a duty of care and responsibility for their parents, experienced in complex and conflicting ways (Towers, 2022). The examples of communication and decision making discussed in this article largely hinge on these ongoing feelings of care, and so the arguments made here continue to build a picture of this fundamental aspect of sibling bereavement. They also highlight the relational and temporal nature of bereavement, thereby demonstrating the need for death studies to further recognise the importance of these concepts in bereavement experiences.

While families are fluid and can consist of a multitude of relations (Morgan, 1996; Smart, 2007), here the relationship between (step)parents and (adult) children is used as a demonstrative case study. The examples given feature bereaved siblings and focus on issues specific to the loss of a brother or sister, but their consideration serves to make a wider point regarding family practices. Parents can experience similar feelings of heightened responsibility towards surviving children (Rosenblatt, 2000), so it is likely that similar ideas could be explored through the lens of parental bereavement. However, the loss of a family member means different things to different people, and so experiences and impacts of loss vary depending on the nature of those relationships (Walter, 2020).

Overall, the core aim of this article is to highlight that decision making regarding family practices *can* be highly informed by bereavement, for many years after the initial death. Taking this into account and recognising the possible presence of death in living relationships, there is potential for sociologists of families, relationships and personal life to develop a far greater understanding of the ways that individuals relate to one another and navigate 'doing' family. Widespread application of this article is limited by its focus on British norms and values, particularly as normative expectations of the sibling relationship vary among countries and cultures (see Edward, 2010). Indeed, it is acknowledged that the study participants are mainly White British and highly educated, factors which have significant implications for how 'family' and sibling relationships are understood. Despite these limitations, the suggestion that bereavement continues to influence family life remains intact, and it remains clear that there is more to learn about family relationships by continuing to enhance the connections between death studies and mainstream sociology.

ORCID ID

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

Funding

The research was funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Studentship (no. ES/J500215/1).

Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to the 36 siblings who took part in the research. Thanks also to Dr Lauren White for offering feedback on an early draft, and to the reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References

- Almack, K. (2022) A death in the family: experiences of dying and death in which everyday family practices are embedded and enacted, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 11(2): 227–41. doi: [10.1332/204674321x16472778502561](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674321x16472778502561)
- Baddeley, J. and Singer, J. (2009) A social interactional model of bereavement narrative disclosure, *Review of General Psychology*, 13(3): 202–18. doi: [10.1037/a0015655](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015655)
- Birch, M. and Miller, T. (2000) Inviting intimacy: the interview as therapeutic opportunity, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3(3): 189–202. doi: [10.1080/13645570050083689](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570050083689)
- Borgstrom, E., Ellis, J. and Woodthorpe, K. (2019) 'We don't want to go and be idle ducks': family practices at the end of life, *Sociology*, 53(6): 1127–42. doi: [10.1177/0038038519841828](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519841828)
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77–101. doi: [10.1191/1478088706qp063oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa)
- Breen, L.J., Szylyt, R., Gilbert, K.R., et al. (2018) Invitation to grief in the family context, *Death Studies*, 43(3): 173–82. doi: [10.1080/07481187.2018.1442375](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1442375)
- Chambers, P., Allan, G., Phillipson, C. and Ray, M. (2009) *Family Practices in Later Life*, Bristol: Policy Press.

- Connidis, I. (2001) *Family Ties and Ageing*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Doka, K. and Martin, T. (2010) *Grieving Beyond Gender: Understanding the Ways Men and Women Mourn*, Rev. edn, New York: Routledge.
- Dykstra, P. and Fokkema, T. (2011) Relationships between parents and their adult children: a west European typology of late-life families, *Ageing and Society*, 31(4): 545–69. doi: [10.1017/S0144686X10001108](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X10001108)
- Edward, J. (2010) *The Sibling Relationship: A Force for Growth and Conflict*, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson.
- Edwards, R., Ribbens McCarthy, J. and Gillies, V. (2012) The politics of concepts: family and its (putative) replacements, *British Journal of Sociology*, 63(4): 730–46. doi: [10.1111/j.1468-4446.2012.01434.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2012.01434.x)
- Ellis, J. (2013) Thinking beyond rupture: continuity and relationality in everyday illness and dying experience, *Mortality*, 18(3): 251–69. doi: [10.1080/13576275.2013.819490](https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2013.819490)
- Ellis, J. (2018) Family food practices: relationships, materiality and the everyday at the end of life, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 40(2): 353–65. doi: [10.1111/1467-9566.12606](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12606)
- Fereday, J. and Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006) Demonstrating rigour using thematic analysis: a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1): 80–92. doi: [10.1177/160940690600500107](https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107)
- Finch, J. and Mason, J. (1993) *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*, London: Routledge.
- Finch, J. and Mason, J. (2000) *Passing On: Kinship and Inheritance in England*, London: Routledge.
- Funk, A., Jenkins, S., Astroth, K., Braswell, G. and Kerber, C. (2017) A narrative analysis of sibling grief, *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 23(1): 1–14. doi: [10.1080/15325024.2017.1396281](https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2017.1396281)
- Gilbert, K. (1996) ‘We’ve had the same loss, why don’t we have the same grief?’ Loss and differential grief in families, *Death Studies*, 20: 269–83. doi: [10.1080/15325024.2017.1396281](https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2017.1396281)
- Goldman, L. (2017) Why did my sister have to die?, in B. Marshall and H. Winokuer (eds) *Sibling Loss Across the Lifespan*, New York, NY: Routledge, pp 25–36.
- Grundy, E. and Henretta, J.C. (2006) Between elderly parents and adult children: a new look at the intergenerational care provided by the ‘sandwich generation’, *Ageing and Society*, 26(5): 707–22. doi: [10.1017/s0144686x06004934](https://doi.org/10.1017/s0144686x06004934)
- Hall, S.M. (2023) Social reproduction, labour and austerity: carrying the future, *The Sociological Review*, 71(1): 27–46. doi: [10.1177/00380261221135753](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221135753)
- Jakoby, N. (2015) The self and significant others: towards a sociology of loss, *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 23(2): 110–28.
- Klass, D., Silverman, P. and Nickman, S. (1996) *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Marshall, B. and Winokuer, H. (2017) *Sibling Loss Across the Lifespan*, New York, NY: Routledge.
- May, V. (2023) Family life in urban public spaces: stretching the boundaries of sociological attention, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 12(1): 60–74. doi: [10.1332/204674322x16696234868984](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674322x16696234868984)
- Morgan, D. (1996) *Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Morgan, D. (2011a) *Rethinking Family Practices*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morgan, D. (2011b) Locating ‘family practices’, *Sociological Research Online*, 16(4): 1–9.

- Pearce, C. and Komaromy, C. (2021) Introduction: narrating death, in C. Pearce and C. Komaromy (eds) *Narratives of Parental Death, Dying and Bereavement*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 1–32.
- Reed, K. and Towers, L. (2021) Almost confessional: managing emotions when research breaks your heart, *Sociological Research Online*, 28(1): 261–78. doi: [10.1177/13607804211036719](https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804211036719)
- Ribbens McCarthy, J. (2012) The powerful relational language of 'family': togetherness, belonging and personhood, *The Sociological Review*, 60(1): 68–90. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02045.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02045.x)
- Ribbens McCarthy, J., Woodthorpe, K. and Almack, K. (2023) The aftermath of death in the continuing lives of the living: extending 'bereavement' paradigms through family and relational perspectives, *Sociology*, 57(6): 1356–74. doi: [10.1177/00380385221142490](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221142490)
- Riessman, C. (2008) *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, London: Sage.
- Robson, P. and Walter, T. (2012) Hierarchies of loss: a critique of disenfranchised grief, *OMEGA*, 66(2): 97–119. doi: [10.2190/om.66.2.a](https://doi.org/10.2190/om.66.2.a)
- Rosenblatt, P. (2000) Protective parenting after the death of a child, *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss*, 5(4): 343–60. doi: [10.1080/10811440008407851](https://doi.org/10.1080/10811440008407851)
- Shelton, N. and Grundy, E. (2000) Proximity of adult children to their parents in Great Britain, *International Journal of Population Geography*, 6(3): 181–95. doi: [10.1002/1099-1220\(200005/06\)6:3<181::AID-IJPG181>3.0.CO;2-U](https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-1220(200005/06)6:3<181::AID-IJPG181>3.0.CO;2-U)
- Silverman, P. and Klass, D. (1996) Introduction: what's the problem?, in D. Klass, P. Silverman and S. Nickman (eds) *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, pp 3–27.
- Silverstein, M., Gans, D. and Yang, F. (2006) Intergenerational support to aging parents, *Journal of Family Issues*, 27(8): 1068–84. doi: [10.1177/0192513X06288120](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X06288120)
- Smart, C. (2007) *Personal Life*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Souza, M. (2017) Bereavement: an anthropological approach, *Death Studies*, 41(1): 61–7. doi: [10.1080/07481187.2016.1257888](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2016.1257888)
- Towers, L. (2022) Knowing what you've got once it's gone: identifying familial norms and values through the lens of (sibling) bereavement, *Sociology*, 57(5): 1175–90. doi: [10.1177/00380385221133214](https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221133214)
- Valentine, C. (2008) *Bereavement Narratives: Continuing Bonds in the Twenty-First Century*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Walter, T. (2020) *Death in the Modern World*, London: Sage.
- Walter, T. and Bailey, T. (2020) How funerals accomplish family: findings from a mass-observation study, *Omega*, 82(2): 175–95. doi: [10.1177/0030222818804646](https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818804646)
- Winokuer, H. (2017) The impact on siblings when a parent dies, in B. Marshall and H. Winokuer (eds) *Sibling Loss Across the Lifespan*, New York, NY: Routledge, pp 167–73.
- Woodthorpe, K. (2017) Family and funerals: taking a relational perspective, *Death Studies*, 41(9): 592–601. doi: [10.1080/07481187.2017.1325419](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2017.1325419)
- Woodthorpe, K. and Rumble, H. (2016) Funerals and families: locating death as a relational issue, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 67(2): 242–59. doi: [10.1111/1468-4446.12190](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12190)
- Zelizer, V.A. (2012) How I became a relational economic sociologist and what does that mean?, *Politics & Society*, 40(2): 145–74. doi: [10.1177/0032329212441591](https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329212441591)

Appendix A

Participant pseudonym	Participant age then/ at time of interview	Deceased sibling type*/ age at death	Other living siblings
Jane	20/29	Brother, 22	2 younger brothers
Andy	8/40	Sister, 13	No
Peter	30/60	Sister, 32	3 older sisters, 1 older brother
Jackie	29/35	Brother, 25	No
Adam	14/32	Brother, 16	No
Kate	12/30	Brother, 21	1 older brother
Amber	15/20	Brother, 18	No
Becky	19/30	Brother, 17	No
Martin	20/37	Brother, 27	No
Claire	23/64	Brother, 16	No
Ray	34/56	Sister, 28	No
Holly	17/50	Brother, 15	No
Theresa	24/56	Brother, 21	No
Pat	11/48	Brother, 4	1 older sister, 1 younger sister, 1 younger brother
Melissa	12/19	Brother, 18	2 older sisters, 1 younger sister
Ruth	22/35	Brother, 24	No
Frances	34/48	Sister, 39	1 younger brother
Gayle	27/66 51/66	Brother, 22 Sister, 49	No
Samantha	34/41	Brother, 38	No
Phoebe	14/44 30/44	Sister 19 Brother, 32	No
Charlotte	30/60	Sister, 33	1 older brother, 1 younger brother, 3 younger sisters
Asim	16/32	Sister, 28	5 older sisters
Britney	17/25	Brother, 19	No
Tony	30/41	Sister, 33	No
Poppy	30/35	Brother, 27	No
Bella	16/55	Brother, 21	1 older brother
Beth	16/22	Brother, 18	No
Brooke	11/33 17/33	Brother, 18 Brother, 18	No
Philippa	14/19	Sister, 0	1 older sister, 2 younger sisters
Viv	18/30	Brother, 17	1 younger brother, 2 younger sisters

(Continued)

Appendix A: Continued

Participant pseudonym	Participant age then/ at time of interview	Deceased sibling type*/ age at death	Other living siblings
Abi	12/61 20/61	Brother, 23 Brother, 16	No
Dan	25/46	Sister, 23	1 younger sister
Mary	12/33	Sister, 23	1 older brother
Rosa	17/30	Sister, 5	1 older brother, 1 younger sister
Adele	25/34	Sister, 27	4 older sisters
Ashley	31/61	Identical twin sister, 31	No

Note: * Step-, half- and adopted siblings not specifically outlined out of respect for participants who identified as 'siblings'.