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Funerals and families: locating death as a relational issue

Abstract

Situated at the intersection of the Sociology of Death and Sociology of the Family, this paper argues that the organisation and funding of funerals is an overlooked and available lens through which to examine cultural and political norms of familial obligation. Drawing on interviews with claimants to the Department for Work and Pensions' Social Fund Funeral Payment, the paper shows how both responsibility for the organisation and payment of a funeral is assumed within families, and how at times this can be overridden by the state. In highlighting the tension between reflexive choice and political norms of family espoused in this policy context, it supports Gilding's (2010) assertion that understanding family practice through reflexivity alone neglects the institutions and conventions within which 'doing' family takes place. In so doing, the paper further makes a case for families and relational negotiations and tensions to be more explicitly included within sociological understanding(s) of death more generally.

Introduction

Despite calls for the empirical study of death and its impact to be integral to sociological thinking (Stanley and Wise, 2011) to date the Sociology of Death has been consigned an identity as a quirky specialism somewhat disconnected from mainstream sociological interest in the family, relationships and personal life. Within the Sociology of Death attention has typically focused on de-traditionalisation, secularlisation and the late-modern individual, exemplified by discussions about the visibility of death within industrialised societies, the meaning of a good death, and institutionalisation (see McManus, 2013 for a good overview). When consideration has turned to relational

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aspects, death has been conceptualised according to specific stages of the lifecourse, such as dying and bereavement in childhood (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006) and old age (Hockey, 1990, Moss and Moss, 2014; Richardson, 2014). The relational perspective – specifically the familial perspective - has been for the most part overlooked (Broom and Kirby, 2013) with emphasis instead on relationships between the living and the dead (see Nadeau, 1998; Valentine, 2008). Of the research that has examined relationships between the *living,* concentration has been on the persons surrounding the dying individual at the point of end of life care being delivered (see McNamara and Rozenwax, 2010; Kramer and Yonker, 2011; Ellis, 2013), with the individual and their network often posited in contrast to the institutional rules within which dying takes place.

The omission of relationships and their impact on the end of life, death, and bereavement within the Sociology of Death is not unique however. Within the Sociology of Family, barely any mention has been made of the way in which relationships are both shaped by, and shape experiences of, death, dying and bereavement. Arguably one reason for this is the way in which intellectual trends in Sociology shape the focus of work. As will be shown later in this paper, death was a key feature of understanding family life within functionalist Sociology of the 1960s, yet as the sociological study of families evolved in the UK to focus on family practices, attention moved from the way in which mortality shaped relationships, towards the 'doing' of those relationships. This focus corresponded with the ageing of the population, with fewer and fewer people being directly impacted by death in the latter decades of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The most pertinent work within the Sociology of Family literature that has examined the impact of death on families reveals the complexity of 'doing' relationships after someone has died. Showing how resources bequeathed within a network once an individual has died both expose and construct relationships, Finch and Mason (2000) made a convincing case for 'reflexive relationalism', whereby the example of inheritance indicates the importance of quality, agency and individual choice within familial and wider kinship relationships. More recently this was expanded by Gilding (2010), who argued that while reflexive choice and the quality of relationships are significant in determining the nature of 'doing' family (and inheritance), there are still deeply embedded institutionalised norms and rules that frame family practices.

The extent to which funerals specifically have been examined by sociologists within both the death and family sociological realms is even scanter. Previous research has examined the chronological organisation of the funeral ritual (Harper, 2008), the role of funeral directors (Howarth, 1996), funeral satisfaction (O'Rourke, Spitzberg and Hannawa, 2011) and the depiction of death, including funerals, in the media (Raisborough et al, 2013). Very little attention has been given to relationships, obligation, and specifically the 'doing' of relationships and family at the time of the funeral (Bailey, 2012). Work to date has instead emphasised individual choice vs. tradition in funeral ritual (Caswell, 2011), with an unspoken assumption existing that it is clear whom within the family organised the funeral, who paid for it, and who attends the service (Bailey, 2012).

It is at this intersection of the Sociology of Death and the Family that this paper is situated. Using illustrative data from a small scale qualitative study with claimants for a Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Social Fund Funeral Payment, it argues that the organisation and funding of funerals is an under-explored and available lens to study political and cultural norms of 'doing' family. Moreover, it seeks to show how beliefs regarding responsibility within a family can be usurped by policies related to state support for funerals that both reveal the institutionalised nature of 'the family' as a concept, and normalise expectations about familial obligation. In a climate where policy relies on kin being easily accessible and well understood (Finch and Mason, 1991; Smart, 2005) and the cultural assumption that in a given situation most people will agree/recognise what is the 'proper thing to do' (see Finch, 1989), the funeral is a sociologically under-recognised yet readily available occasion to examine the way in which sociological and political assumptions about 'doing' family today can be seen, reinforced and undermined. This is the first argument of this paper. The second argument is that sociologists working within the Sociology of Death need to embrace and explore the relational aspects of death more explicitly. Moving beyond the oft-cited tension between individuals and institutions towards an appreciation of the reflexive way in which death is negotiated within families, there is considerable scope for examining how familial obligation at the time of death has been, and continues to be, normalised both within families and policy.

Background

Family sociology

Almost half a century ago, functionalist sociologist Blauner (1966) suggested that the post-industrial family was partly shaped by the pressure of mortality. A year later Parons and Lidz (1967) famously argued that death was central to how individuals orientated themselves to the world, and how social order was stabilised, be it interpreted through a discourse of religion, science or medicine. Recently Bayatrizi (2008) has gone even further, to suggest that death was integral to the origins of sociological thinking about the "experience of *living* in society" (p.19, original emphasis).

Yet as already noted the influence and impact of death has been peripheral to the majority of British sociologists specialising in family in the following five decades. As sociologists moved away from functionalism as a grand narrative and instead towards debates about late-modernity, sociological attention in the 1960s and 1970s evolved to focus on the structure and nature of families, with subsequent attention turning to family practices and the 'doing' of family (see Morgan 1996) and family obligation in terms of 'who does what for whom' (Finch, 1989: 13). More recently, familial obligation has been considered in terms of the way in which responsibility and duty is experienced at the point of life 'events' such as parenthood and separation (O'Dwyer et al, 2012; Simpson 1998; Smart, 2005). Over the last decade debate has extended into the expediency of the concept of family as a theoretical and political tool (see Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Gillies, 2011; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Edwards, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2012), partly in response to the development of the sociological study of intimacy and personal life (see Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007; and Gilding 2010 for a good summary of the evolution of these sociological arguments).

Embedded within recent debates regarding the conceptual usefulness of family has been a critique of the individualisation thesis (see Beck, 1992; Beck-Gernsheim, 1998), and whether a growth of late-modern individualism has meant that obligation to others is based on individual choice rather than tradition and custom. In examining reflexivity in the context of obligation, Gilding (2010) has argued that there is currently too much emphasis on reflexivity, and that the 'imprint' of institutional rules and conventions on family practices has been disregarded too readily. Instead, he contests, the way in which family is practiced is a complex intertwining of reflexive and mutable arrangements and exchanges according to the quality of relationships and institutional(ised) norms and practices. Broom and Kirby (2013) have recently indicated that this intertwining is evident within the ways in which families negotiate the dying of one of their members, flagging tension between the state and the family in terms of who has the authority and/or obligation to step in to provide for the dying person. Raising comparable questions regarding expectations about obligation and responsibility between families and the state when it comes to the organisation and payment of the funeral, the intention in this paper is to illustrate how funerals are conceptualised, both sociologically and politically, according to normative cultural assumptions about family obligation (see Stewart 2012 for a discussion of how this state sponsored ideal is manifest in social care policy). It further seeks to show that this is a substantial omission within both the Sociology of Death and Sociology of Family literature.

The relational quality of funerals

While this paper makes a case for the relational aspects of death to be more central to both the Sociology of Death and Family literatures, there have already been hints at the potential for this overlooked issue in previous research. Over thirty years ago Bowling and Cartwright (1982) examined the transitional requirements and experience of moving from coupledom to life alone for a surviving spouse. Within this, they made no explicit mention of how the funeral arrangements were negotiated in the immediate period after the death however, implicitly suggesting that it was the responsibility of the surviving spouse to organise and pay for the event. A quarter of a century later this assumption was echoed in a mixed-methods study on the financial implications of the death of a partner by Corden et al (2008). Here, funerals were considered one of the various practical arrangements required by the surviving spouse after the death of their partner. Providing a tantalising glimpse of the potential for funerals as a lens through which to examine familial relationships, Corden et al indicated the potential for tension "when members of a partner's family of origin wanted more elaborate and more expensive arrangements it could be hard to resist or negotiate… such family conflicts about funeral expenses remained unresolved for many months" (p.104). Beyond this assertion they did not expand on the nature of those conflicts however, nor detail any instances of family members being denied involvement by others, or not wanting to be involved in the first place.

Understanding who is involved in the organisation of a funeral was taken up more recently by Bailey (2012), who examined what constitutes a 'good' funeral for attendees. Bailey's is a particularly useful starting point for this paper as, using data generated through the Mass Observation Archive, she illustrated the hierarchical nature

of families when attending funerals. Drawing on Robson and Walter's (2012-13) work on hierarchies of grief and Doka's (1989) work on disenfranchised grief, Bailey used argued that for the vast majority of directive correspondents there was a clear sense of who within the funeral congregation was responsible for its organisation. This, she went on, indicates that funeral mourners share common and normative assumptions about who is most affected by a death and their consequential status at the funeral (see also Reimers, 2011). Contingent on the composition of the remaining family members, the individual responsible for the funeral (that is, the funeral director's client) were typically the surviving spouse or the adult child of the deceased. Similar to Corden et al however, Bailey did not go into further detail about how funeral organisation/payment was negotiated within a family when there were several surviving adult children; nonetheless, she did provide insight into the potential for tensions within funerals, with references to correspondents feeling/observing others being disenfranchised from 'the family' owing to their status as a 'non-close' family member, a family friend, or a secret lover. What is more, in bringing her study findings together, she argued that there exist unspoken assumptions about familial relationships according to long-standing expectations about the constitution of 'a family', and that these are founded on what respondents in her study regarded as 'legitimate' relationships. In other words, she illustrated how Gilding's (2010) assertion that 'doing' family in this context is a mixture of reflexive choice and long-standing institutionalised expectations about obligation and inclusion within a family network.

Although not specifically research on death, the final study of note is Finch and Mason's (2000) aforementioned work on inheritance. Seeking to show how

relationships within and beyond the genetic/direct lineage of family both play out and are constructed by the act of bequeathing assets, Finch and Mason argued that inheritance practices need to be understood in terms of 'reflexive relationalism'. In examining inheritance they showed how family members are engaged in "the business of constituting kinship, not just reflecting it" (p. 162), through deliberately including and excluding people according to the quality of the relationships rather than a pre-determined hierarchical (and genealogical) structure. The nature and quality of these relationships were made up of 'relational practices'; that is, in actions, behaviours and experiences rather than established norms and rules. Sociologically this was an important step towards developing an understanding of the way in which 'family' is done and experienced, but has been subject to critique in overlooking the authority and influence of political and economic institutionalised norms of behaviour (Gilding, 2010). As will be shown in this paper, the political norm of familial obligation embodied in the FP indicates that this is alive and kicking.

Nevertheless, using the concept of reflexive relationalism in the context of the funeral helps to go beyond the previous emphasis in sociological literature on the tension between individual choice and tradition in late/neo modernity at funerals. This paper thus moves towards a more dialectic understanding of the funeral and how it illustrates and constitutes the 'doing' of contemporary family, while at the same time being shaped by cultural and political norms about familial obligation. To make this case, the paper utilises the findings of a small scale qualitative study into paying for funerals and support provided by the state. Conducted prior to the implementation of Universal Credit in 2013, the research examined the administration of the Department for Work

and Pensions' (DWP) Social Fund Funeral Payment (FP) from the perspective of claimants and stakeholders.

The Funeral Payment and funeral costs

The FP is an award made to claimants who are eligible if in receipt of a specific benefit[1] (see Drakeford, 1998 and Authors, 2013, for more detailed discussions of its origins). In order to claim for an award, the claimant has to fall into one of the following relational categories identified by the state:

- the partner of the deceased individual when they died
- the parent of the deceased child/stillborn child
- a close relative or close friend of the deceased individual, and it is regarded as reasonable to accept responsibility for the funeral costs[2].

For the purpose of an FP claim, a 'close relative' is defined by the DWP as a parent, father-in-law, mother-in-law, step parent; son, son-in-law, step-son, step-son-in-law; daughter, daughter-in-law, step-daughter, step-daughter-in-law; brother, brother-in-law; and sister, sister-in-law. As this paper will show, how these family members are identified in practice by the DWP in terms of the 'reasonable' expectation that they will pay for the funeral of a family member is a pertinent illustration of the political normative assumption that family members *will* step in at the point of death to pay for a funeral.

In the most recent report for the Social Fund, in 2012-13 approximately 8% of all deaths in the UK resulted in a claim for a FP; 66,000 claims were made, of which 35,000 (54.3%) were successful (DWP, 2013). One of the most common reasons for a claim being turned down was that another family member was identified by the DWP as being responsible for the funeral costs.

To contextualise the paper further, it is important to highlight the imposition funding a funeral can have on an individual, whether or not they are successful in their claim for a FP. In 2013 the average cost of a funeral was £3456, a figure that has risen 80% over the last decade and a trend that shows little sign of abating (Sun Life Direct, 2013). During the same period, in 2012-2013 the average FP award was £1225, made up of £700 funeral costs plus disbursements (DWP, 2013). All claimants are required to submit a full invoice from a funeral director with their application, meaning that they have to enter into a legally binding agreement for the funeral prior to knowing whether or not they will receive anything from the State. As a result, even if the claimant's application is successful it is highly likely that the DWP contribution will not cover the full cost of the funeral and that they will have an outstanding fee to pay. In other words, whether their claim is accepted or not, for those family members who submit a claim for a FP, it is likely that in taking on the organising and financing of a funeral they will be committing to debt.

The study

Taking place over a six month period and funded by XXXX as part of their broader research programme into attitudes towards dying and costs at the end of life, the study

was conducted as an independent academic project with the authors retaining the intellectual property of the academic output. The principle intention of the study was to explore the perspective of the claimant with regard to the accessibility of the benefit, and has been detailed in a policy focused paper published elsewhere (see Authors). This sociological paper originates from the data generated when discussing with claimants how they negotiated the funeral costs with their family members. As the key criteria for the study was to be a recent claimant, individuals were not recruited according to gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status or age. The study was also not seeking to be comparable in terms of claimants and non-claimants, so non-claimant participants were *not* recruited.

In total 64 participants were recruited and interviewed during the project's lifetime. They included 30 FP claimants, all of whom had submitted their claim in the last 2 years; along with 8 funeral directors, 10 national organisation/third sector representatives, 2 MPs with a public record of an interest in this area, and 14 local authority employees who dealt with Public Health Funerals (PHFs) as a tangential form of state support for funeral arrangements[3]. The focus of this paper is on the data generated by the 30 claimants.

In terms of recruiting claimant participants, a three-way combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used. First, participants were recruited via requests for participation in local media, online blogs and forums. Second, participants were recruited through funeral directors, who were approached for assistance via national trade bodies. Efforts were made to contact funeral directors from across the UK, with

the majority of responders based in the south of England. Several funeral directors contacted the research team after being told about the study by their colleagues, with an offer to help with recruitment. Funeral directors were then supplied with information about the study, which they shared with their clients. Their clients contacted the research team if they wanted to take part in the study. The ethical implications of using funeral directors as gatekeepers are discussed below. Third, the authors worked with a national advice charity to recruit participants through their local advice centres. Following a national request for assistance from the head office, three regional representatives of the charity agreed to support the study and, in common with the funeral directors, they approached potential participants and shared with them details of the project. This led to a small number of participants contacting the research team to volunteer to take part.

Taking place concurrently, the funeral directors, MPs and organisation representatives were recruited through their expressed interest in funeral costs made in the public domain (for example, in the trade press and national news stories), via referrals and recommendations from other participants, and through pre-existing networks associated with the authors' research centre. Local authority employees were recruited through a call for participants circulated to environmental health officers (or their equivalent) who deal with PHFs, via a national trade organisation. As the focus of this paper is on the claimants, the data generated from this group of participants has been omitted.

All participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study via an information sheet and consent form, including details about the funder of the project, the purpose of the

research and what would happen to the data after they took part. All signed two consent forms, one of which they kept for their own records and the other by the research team.

The interviews with FP claimants took place either on funeral directors' premises in a private room, or at a convenient venue arranged with the participant. One interview took place with the participant's partner present. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, with identifying detail stored separately from the data. Data was analysed using a thematic coding approach, and prioritised according to the principle of saturation as espoused within grounded theory. According to good research practice (BSA, 2002), all extracts from data used in this paper have been anonymised beyond the type of participant (FP refers to a claimant), and their allocated number within the project. The funder was not given any identifying information about the participant (beyond their relationship with the deceased which was evident in the anonymised interview transcripts) without their express and written permission.

Ethical issues

As gatekeepers, funeral directors were ideally placed to be able to identify and access clients who had claimed a FP. Through the process of the research, the authors were consolidating the positive relationship that the funeral directors had established with their client, and were able to give both the funeral director and the claimant an opportunity to reflect on their experience. Of equal importance was the contribution made by staff from the national advice charity, who were able to assist the researchers in approaching potential participants. In all cases, any identifying material has been minimised to ensure that the parties involved are not able to recognise themselves, or

each other. As a result, the geographical location of the participants and the benefits they were a recipient of has been anonymised, in order to protect participant identity.

Moreover, in working with a commercial organisation, it was made clear from the outset with participants that the purpose of the study was to generate academic insight into the FP experience. Furthermore, participants were explicitly informed in the consent form that their anonymised transcript would be shared with the funder, with the contract between the research institution and funder plainly stating that the transcripts would be used for the purpose of the project only. The funder's representatives did not take part in the academic analysis nor have they contributed to this paper.

What follows is an overview of the findings relevant to this paper, intended to illustrate the potential tension for families at the time of organising the funeral, exacerbated by the state's endorsement of normative family ideals and expectation that family members will voluntarily step in to support another. The findings are organised around the way in which state support for funerals is accessed, to demonstrate the way in which family and kinship is assumed by family members, and assessed by the state.

Findings

Opting to take responsibility

With criteria for the study being that they had submitted a claim for a FP, at the point of the interview all participants had already accepted responsibility for the funeral costs.

To do so, they had approached a funeral director and become their client, resulting in the funeral director issuing an invoice for the funeral that accompanied their FP claim. In common with all participants was the assertion that they had the closest relationship with the deceased of the surviving family members and that it was therefore apposite that they accepted responsibility for the organisation of the funeral, and as a result its payment. Echoing Finch and Mason (2000), their rationale for having the closest relationship was typically that they were either the surviving spouse or that they had the most (regular) contact with the deceased person. This contact had usually been over a significant period of time (ie. several years rather than months) and sometimes translated into their being a carer for the deceased prior to the death:

> My cousin… [I was] really bought up with him and done everything with him mostly, go there Sunday dinners and things like that, and mostly I was with him all the time. My mate, the poor sod, he's been ill all his life. (FP6)

> I've two older brothers – they're 31 and 32 – but my oldest brother is in XXX. He hasn't seen my dad for 12 years since he left home. My other brother tried to keep in contact but could never understand [his father's illness]. I kept in touch and then towards the later stages I became his carer… (FP15)

> I'd gone- I didn't live with him [my husband]. We were separated. We had separated two years, but I was his carer and I saw him every day. He had the dog in the daytime, so the dog wasn't on her own, and it was company for him and I'd go and get her at teatime – I took her on all her walks and everything. (FP17)

In all interviews, taking financial responsibility for the funeral was a direct result of the claimant's own assessment of the quality of relationships between family members.

Exercising their judgement in such a manner echoed Finch and Mason's (2000) observation of reflexive-relational decisions made by individuals when choosing who to bequeath their assets to. Yet, as will be shown here, participants' judgements that they were the appropriate member of the family to organise and pay for the funeral did not, on occasion, correspond with the DWP's assessment of their relationship to the deceased. Evidencing Gilding's (2010) intertwining of reflexive choice and institutional rules and norms, the claimants were not able to act free from the constraints imposed by the state via this policy, illustrated in the way in which the claimant's choice to organise the funeral based on the quality of their relationship to the deceased was undermined by normative political expectations of familial obligation.

State assessment: genetic ties over quality of relationships
As part of the claim process, individuals were required to detail the nature of their family relationships in order for DWP decision-makers to determine whether or not they could be, and *should* be, held financially responsible for the funeral. This was particularly important when the claim was not for a spouse and there were other family members alive. Indeed, the DWP's identification of another family member as 'responsible' for the funeral is one of the main reasons why FP claimants have their claims refused every year[4].

For the participants in this study who had been unsuccessful[5], while the claimant felt it was right that they should 'foot the bill' owing to their relationship with the deceased person, they had been informed in a written response from the DWP that they were *not* determined to be the 'responsible' family member. For example, one claimant had

assumed responsibility for the funeral owing to the poor quality of the relationship both he and his deceased mother had with his other siblings, yet was told by the DWP that his siblings should pay:

> On receipt of the bill of nearly £3,000 [for my mother's funeral]… I sent off the completed [FP] form, to be informed that because there were other siblings, be it estranged [and] living in excess of 100 miles away, they would not see it within their remit to pay any costs for or towards the funeral. (FP24)

For this claimant, the poor quality of the relationship between his deceased mother and two other adult siblings was usurped by the DWP's normative assessment of hereditary familial obligation. In other words, owing to a genetic link between family members, it could be assumed by the DWP that they would pay for the deceased mother's funeral. For another participant whose claim was rejected as they were assessed as ineligible, they were left with the funeral debt because they felt they could not approach their sibling for financial help due to the poor quality of their relationship:

> I have got a brother but I haven't spoken to him since – my daughter is 25 and I haven't spoken to him since she was 18 months old…. He never came [to see our dying mother], he didn't look after her. No, nothing. I had to do everything myself. (FP1)

Poor relationships between adult siblings, or siblings simply refusing to get involved with the funeral for a parent, were not uncommon in the interviews. In one case, a

participant told of how her partner (who was present in the interview) had organised and committed to the funeral costs before submitting his claim for a FP, which was subsequently turned down as there were other surviving family members. At the point of deciding about the content of the funeral those family members had already stated that they would not contribute towards it:

> …. the rest of the family allowed my partner to sign for [the costs], so it fell down on my partner, and they knew that, they knew what they were doing. (FP26)

For these claimants, the relationship that they had with their siblings was deeply embedded within their personal biography (Finch and Mason, 2000). As part of this, their expectations of one another were frequently tied to their both tangible and assumed respective caring and financial responsibilities for their other family members, particularly their parents (see Dykstra and Fokkema, 2011). Yet not all instances of tension were related to adult sibling relationships or their relationships with their parents. In one interview, a father had claimed a FP for his adult son's funeral but was told by the DWP that his son's live-in girlfriend was identified as being responsible for the funeral costs. The participant had appealed the DWP decision on the grounds that his son's relationship with his girlfriend had been for a relatively short period of time, but to no avail:

> … because he had got this girl living with him, she is his next of kin. I said [in my appeal letter] 'she isn't his next of his kin, they weren't married, they

weren't engaged, she was just looking after him so therefore I am entitled' [to organise and pay for his funeral] (FP11)

This participant felt strongly that as the father of the deceased he had both the obligation and, importantly, the *right* to pay for his son's funeral. However, despite his desire to assume responsibility for his son's funeral, his wish was overturned by the DWP's assessment that his son's live-in girlfriend (however short lived) retained the financial responsibility. It is interesting to reflect on how many other situations there may exist where a short sexual relationship would effectively be regarded as 'trumping' that of the father-son relationship.

Family members, or in this case a live in girlfriend, not paying towards a funeral -even though identified as 'responsible' by the state - was not just an issue for those participants who were unsuccessful in their claim however. Even if successful participants could face the problem of a shortfall and family members refusing to contribute towards it. One participant was successful in their claim as they were able to articulate the long-term estrangement between father and sons, and when they submitted their claim they realised that in doing so they were going to be taking on debt:

> On the form that I filled in for the DWP, it did ask if he had any people, any surviving children, parents, anyone close who may pay for the funeral, unless they've not had contact. And my brothers haven't had contact with Dad for 12 years. And I did ask, I still have a bill to pay. I mentioned it to both others, who've just outright said no. So it is left to me. (FP15)

In another instance, a successful claimant participant (FP8), who left with an outstanding fee to pay had felt unable to ask for a contribution from her deceased brother's ex-wife because "she just gave us so much hassle". Instead, she opted to pay for the shortfall with her credit card.

Discussion

Although limited in number, these illustrative quotes indicate cultural and political normative expectations that at the point of the funeral family members will want to do the 'proper thing' (see Finch, 1989) and that the state can readily identify a family member to take responsibility. In terms of cultural norms, data suggested that there was a strong sense of pride and duty associated with assuming the responsibility for the funeral (see also O'Rourke et al. All participants had exercised choice in voluntarily accepting responsibility for the funeral owing to their assessment of the quality of their relationship with the deceased. Most often this assessment of quality was borne out of their spousal relationship, or their 'closeness' in visiting and/or caring for the deceased. This closeness was typically entrenched within their personal biographies, with the participant implicitly identifying themselves as the dutiful family member towards the deceased. All claimants spoke of wanting to do the 'right thing' by the deceased in both organising and providing them with a funeral. On the other hand however, their desire to pay for the funeral could be undermined by the state's assessment of their claim, underpinned by the political normative expectation that another family member could be identified as a willing contributor towards the funeral. This institutionalized norm disregarded the varying quality of relationships within a family. Thus, an individual's

reflexive choice to opt to take, or even reject, responsibility for the funeral was neither a given nor automatically state-endorsed. Underpinning this tension between an individual's choice to take responsibility and the state's institutionalized norms is an ongoing lack of clarity regarding 'next of kin' within the UK. When it comes to inheritance, as Finch and Mason (2000) have shown, this can lead to issues when assets are divided up following a death, particularly when re-partnering has occurred and children are born in multiple relationships. In contrast, for funerals this means that when establishing responsibility for funeral costs no single individual has an obligation, or a right, to pay. This contrasts with previous work on hierarchical cultural expectations as to who organizes and pays for a funeral (see Bailey, 2012); with data in this study including a father wishing to take responsibility and their claim being rejected by the DWP in favour of a live-in girlfriend, and siblings refusing to contribute to the funeral of their parent.

Expectations regarding family being willing to do 'the right thing' remain entrenched within policy in this area. In terms of this paper's contribution to the Sociology of Family literature, this finding supports Gilding's (2010) assertion that there has been "emphasis upon reflexivity over and above convention" (p. 763). While individuals are actively choosing to organize and pay for a funeral, their choice can be undermined by the state's institutionalized norms and ideals. 'Doing' the funeral and the system in which state support is rationed and channeled are – like inheritance – worthy examples of the ways in which reflexivity and cultural and political norms are intertwined. It is not enough to assume that individuals have reflexive freedom to decide who within a family organizes and contributes towards a funeral; there are expectations and policy

systems that can override these wishes. As a result, and thereby lending support to Ribbens McCarthy (2012), through paying for the funeral provides ample evidence of the theoretical and political worth and continued use of the concept of the 'family' and familial obligation.

For the Sociology of Death, taking a relational perspective on the funeral moves beyond a previous emphasis on individual choice in funeral ritual (see Caswell, 2011) and problematises the concept of hierarchies of attendees at funerals (see Bailey, 2012). Instead, it moves towards a sociological understanding of the funeral as a relationally-situated family practice. In other words, the contemporary funeral needs to be perceived not only in terms of performance and ritual, tradition and individuality, but also in terms of what it both reveals and conceals about the 'doing' of family and the reflexive quality of relationships. With this in mind, it may be time to return to functionalist assertions regarding the impact of death on relationships, in examining the functionality of the funeral as an event that can both reinforce and destabilise.

As there has been an implicit assumption within the literature that it is clear who has financially contributed towards the funeral (see Bailey, 2012; Caswell, 2011; Corden, 2008; Harper, 2008) it is interesting to consider why funerals have not been considered from this perspective to date. One reason for this could be the pervasive view espoused in bereavement literature that families are convivial and prepared to undertake a familial duty at the point of death (see for example Holloway et al, 2013; Littlewood, 1992). Furthermore, the pervasive cultural assumption of there being a hierarchical nature of relationships when an individual has died, with hereditary family members privileged

over friends, neighbours and colleagues (see Bailey, 2012), masks the reflexive nature of relationships. As the cost of funerals continues to rise it is likely that the issue of who pays for the funeral will grow, not least because as the population ages and ultimately begins to die a growing number of people will be impacted upon. Problematising families within the Sociology of Death literature is thus a substantial gap, ripe for further sociological investigation and critique.

Conclusion

This paper is situated at the intersection of literature within the Sociology of Death and the Sociology of the Family. It has sought to make two arguments. The first is that the issue of who pays for the funeral, when examined in the context of the DWP Social Fund Funeral Payments, exemplifies the intertwining of reflexive relationalism and institutionalised norms and expectations. When there is no legal next of kin, the reflexive nature in which relationships between family members are experienced and integrated into personal biographies means that at the point at which a funeral requires organisation and payment individuals are able to choose to accept or reject responsibility. These decisions can, however, be undermined by the state which through the FP policy endorses a normative expectation that other family members can be identified and *will* voluntarily contribute towards a funeral for another. Thus, understanding funeral organisation and payment through the lens of reflexive relationalism alone is too simplistic.

The second argument of the paper was that the Sociology of Death has overlooked the relational aspects of death, and in this case, funerals. While the case for relational

analyses of end of life are being made elsewhere (see Broom and Kirby, 2013; Ellis, 2013), sociological attention is also required when it comes to understanding the relational influences that shape decisions and behaviour at the point of organising the funeral. Taking this perspective moves debate beyond tradition vs. individuality at funerals towards a more nuanced and subtle understanding of the reflexive way in which individuals both construct, sustain and reject their relationships with others, both living and dead, at this time. With the death rate predicted to rise as the population ages, this is an area ready for sociological attention.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

[1] Income Support, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit (at a higher rate than the family element), Working Tax Credit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. This is subject to change with the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

[2] A close friend is likely only to receive an award if there is no identifiable surviving family according to the DWP's definition.

[3] Public Health Funerals are the statutory responsibility of local authorities according to the 1984 Public Health Act (section 46), where it details that the local authority will provide a funeral if no one is able or willing to organise one for a deceased person.

[4] According to a Freedom of Information request submitted by the project funders in 2012.

[5] The study was unable to recruit many unsuccessful participants. In sum, two took part. Following discussion with funeral director and advice centre gatekeepers, it was agreed that the low take up rate was a consequence of the experience having taken place within the last two years and the unsuccessful bereaved claimant still feeling 'raw' about their experience.