

Commentaries

**DDB 2012 REPORT FOR JOURNAL OF
*ILLNESS, CRISIS & LOSS***

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Currently much is made of the dying individual, but their deaths take place in a wider social context, particularly the family. The British Sociological Association Study Group “Social Aspects of Death, Dying and Bereavement” (DDB) took up the challenge to explore death and the family for its 2012 annual symposium held in London. Key to the theme of the day was exploring how relationships and relating are central to the ways in which death, dying, and bereavement are experienced and conceptualized.

The day included eight presentations based on theoretical and empirical work which directly engaged with the theme of family. Morning presentations by Charlotte Kenten (King’s College London) and Hannah Rumble and Kate Woodthorpe (University of Bath) demonstrated how family—and who counts as family—is made visible through practices of organ donation in intensive care and funerals respectively. Julie Ellis (University of Sheffield) challenged traditional approaches to conceptualizing family in studies of dying, which focus on coping and care, to look at the everyday practices of family life during the dying process.

Following on from this, Gayle Letherby (Plymouth University) discussed perinatal loss and its associated disenfranchised grief, emphasizing how people seek to maintain family connections in the face of loss and lack of social support.

Renkse Visser (University of Amsterdam) highlighted how young adults in the Netherlands remember lost parents through the use of mementos, such as small family shrines, which is a traditional practice there. Ruth Evans (University of Reading) and Laurie Dunn (University of Liverpool) both discussed how death and dying may create new roles in the family, such as “widow” or “carer,” emphasizing issues of responsibility within families. Bethany Morgan Brett (University of Essex) concluded the day by explaining midlife experiences of aging and the generational shift. In total, the presentations spoke to how the self is renegotiated through the experience of death within the family.

A new addition to this year’s program was an artist’s presentation by Sukey Parnell. She spoke to images of her mother and family life, documented as part of her Masters in photography during the last year of her mother’s life as she lived with Sukey and her children. This generated much discussion illuminating, along with the other papers, the practical aspects of understanding how death is experienced in the family and the legacy of this experience.

The day drew a full room, with delegates from the United Kingdom, the United States, the Netherlands, and Germany including academics such as anthropologists, geographers, and sociologists alongside practitioners from palliative care and charitable organizations. The theme proved popular by bridging topics and exploring the importance of looking at death in terms of family studies. Overall, the symposium met its aim to illuminate how death is handled within families, revealing much about the familial networks in which people operate, and the ways in which people create meaning and attribute value in light of life and death.

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