Construction of Socio-culturally Situated Identities and Relationships within the Context of Widowhood and Bereavement Rituals

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ABSTRACT This paper examined the socio-culturally situated identity and relationship building within the context of widowhood and bereavement rituals. Participants were Tshivenda-speaking widows located in the Vhembe District of the Limpopo province, South Africa. Six focus groups interviews were conducted with widows to gain their constructions of socio-culturally situated identities and relationships within the context of widowhood and bereavement. Discourse analysis was adopted in order to analyse the collected data. Participants used language that identified themselves as widows in relation to others, including the husband when he was still alive and when he was dead, through the use of "I", "they" and "him" or "my". They also used language that justified belonging to a collectivist culture. The paper concluded that the way in which participants constructed their socio-culturally situated identities and relationships represented their identities as widows in relation to others in the role of sympathisers within their experiences. The paper recommended that people have to understand the identity that widows construct for themselves and the relationship they have with people around them respect the association widows have with others.

INTRODUCTION

Death is one aspect of life that can never be constructed independent of the culture and group of people who experience it and within which it occurred. As a result it is imperative to pave focus of this paper within the background and construction of culture as a way of providing relevance of widows' construction of socio-culturally situated identities and relationships within the context of widowhood and bereavement. Socio-culturally situated identity and relationship construction refers to using cues and clues to assemble situated meanings about what identities and relationships are relevant to the interaction, with their concomitant attitudes, values, ways of feeling, ways of knowing and believing, as well as ways of acting and interacting (Gee 2014).

In Ford and Mauss (2014: 1), culture is constructed as patterns of historically derived and selected ideas and their embodiment in institutions, practices, and artifacts, influencing how individuals think, feel and behave. Such influences are passed from one generation to the other (Nicolas 2011). What characterises this influence is the extent to which a culture promotes interdependence versus independence amongst people (Ford and Mauss 2014).

The way culture is constructed implies that there are people who have a common way of thinking and behaving that identifies them as belonging to a particular culture or differentiate them from others. What makes it unique, possibly, is that it is shared among a collection of interconnected individuals, who are often demarcated by race, ethnicity, or nationality; externalised by rich symbols, artefacts, social constructions, and social institutions used to form the common ground for communication among members (Hong 2013). However, culture may undergo continuous modifications as aspects of the knowledge tradition may be falsified or deemed not applicable by a newer social order and reality (Hong 2013).

The culture of a particular community, therefore, prescribes the members' way of behaviour and thinking, which makes it possible for them to act and interact in a particular way in different situations, including death of a husband. The implication is that those who behave differently from those culturally prescribed patterns come to be considered abnormal and those who behave as prescribed for a particular situation will be considered normal.

However, it is through people's actions and interactions that they show to which culture they belong. As such, culture becomes the way and

means with which things are done and communicated (Ulvydienë 2014) for that particular group of people. It therefore, would not be surprising finding that widows from a particular culture have common way of expressing themselves with the use of language that constructs their socio-culturally situated identities and relationships. Such communication might make it difficult for one to understand if coming from a different culture (Ulvydienë 2014).

In cultures with an emphasis on embeddedness, people are viewed as entities embedded in the collective. It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that their version of knowledge become fabricated (Burr 2015). Meaning in life is expected to come largely through social relations, through identifying with the group, participating in its shared way of life, and striving towards its shared goals. Embedded cultures emphasise maintaining the status quo and restraining actions that might disrupt in-group solidarity or the traditional order. Important values in such cultures are social order, respect for tradition, security, obedience, and wisdom (Singh 2015). How grief is expressed depends upon the subculture and the interactional setting (Moss and Moss 2014).

Based on the above highlighted factors around socio-cultural issues, the need for this research came to fruition with a research question *"How socio-culturally situated identities and relationships are constructed within the context of widowhood bereavement."*

In this paper results pertaining to the construction of socio-culturally situated identities and relationships within the context of widowhood and bereavement were considered.

Objective of the Paper

To explore and describe widows' construction of socio-culturally situated identities and relationships within the context of widowhood and bereavement rituals

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted social constructionism paradigm for its advantage of accepting knowledge as constructed not created (Andrews 2012) and that individuals are "integral with culture, political and historical evolution, in specific times and places, and so resituates psychological

processes cross-culturally, in social and temporal context" (Galbin 2014: 85). This fits well with a qualitative methodology and exploratory design adopted in this paper.

Participants and Setting

A total of twenty-four participants were selected through the use of purposive followed by snowball sampling methods. The first six widows were selected purposively with the ability of the researcher to judge whether a participant complied and is knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation (Brink et al. 2012). Each of them was used to form a separate group and identify other participants for that particular group. Snowball sampling was then used to locate and recruit more participants for each of the groups by asking the initial selected participants to suggest other people they knew fitted the criteria (Brink et al. 2012). The effectiveness of snowball sampling is that people who have had similar life experiences tend to know each other. This also ensures that the participants are comfortable discussing the topic with each other, which helped gain more in-depth information from their conversation.

The following criteria were applied to potential participants: The participants should have lost a husband through death, be able to speak Tshivenda fluently, aged 30 and above so that age differences in the group setting would not affect the way much younger women expressed themselves in the presence of older women (should they find themselves in the same group).

The focus groups consisted of 24 women who had lost their husbands through death. Six groups were held with group sizes ranging from 3 to 5 participants. The participants' ages finally ranged from 38 to 68 years. All women who were interviewed used Tshivenda as their first language. The reason for having a smaller sample was the fact that one of the primary goals of discourse analysis is to understand the transcripts under investigation and not to make generalisations to a particular population.

Instrument

Data were collected from six focus group interviews. The advantage was that focus groups allow researchers to obtain discursive data. They

reflect the shared nature of discourses, with patterns emerging through different participants' contributions (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). Because an interview is a social situation in which conversation takes place through language, and that interaction between people in the course of social life allows fabrication version of knowledge (Burr 2015), the researcher can explore the participants' interpretative practices and situated meanings to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Procedure

Participants were asked to sign a consent form to indicate that they had agreed to participate in the study and gave the researcher permission to tape record the groups. An interview guide was compiled with questions that encouraged the participants to talk about their perceptions of performing bereavement rituals as expected by their community after the death of their husbands. All interviews were conducted in local schools, tape recorded and later transcribed. The transcribed data were also translated from Tshivenda to English.

Data Analysis

Since there are various means to identify discourses, Burr (2015) argues that discourses manifest in text, and could be identified using cultural competence and critical distance (Blanche et al. 2006). Although it was important to understand the culture behind the text, the discourse analyst also has to distance herself from that culture. In the analytical process the researcher had to extract herself from living in culture to reflecting on culture. As a discourse analyst the researcher had to reflect on the text with the aim of identifying the language used within the text as ways of constructing socio-culturally situated identities and relationships. There was a need for conceptual work to be done before the material was touched, and as the analysis proceeded, it was necessary to step back a number of times to make sense of the statements that had been selected.

Firstly, in order to make sense of the data, the researcher immersed herself in the data and thoroughly read through transcriptions over and over again in order to understand and describe results pertaining to the socio-culturally situat-

ed identities and relationships within the context of widowhood and bereavement.

RESULTS

The results were presented on the basis of the stories told by the participants in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. Due to the relationship that is there between constructed identities and relationships within widows construction in relation to their experiences the two concepts could not be separated but allowed to inform each other. The ways in which participants constructed their socio-culturally situated identities and relationships as bereaved people –as widows – and the relationships they built as a result of losing a husband are described. In the extracts from the participants the researcher used pseudonyms and abbreviation representing Groups (G), to distinguish groups where data was collected.

By using language in different ways, the participants socially constructed their widow identities in a way that legitimised the one speaking of grief and her sense of bereavement. It gave meaning to their loss by valuing it and positioned the participants as victims, the broken ones, the ones who needed sympathy from others, and the ones who needed healing by others.

Other women in the church also helped to console me even though they still have their husbands (Selina: G3).

In their stories, participants told me about people, places, times, objects, institutions and God. All these helped to position them further as widows, the sad ones who needed support and who experienced very intense emotions.

That is our culture, my grandchild. I know that you who are educated do not see any value in performing these rituals, but it is important to perform them (Phophi: G6).

I do not know (laughing) if you will understand what it means? All those rituals that are performed in our culture, to tell the truth, they were all performed here (Salume: G6).

As they told their stories, they took on the role of the bereaved woman who should be pitied, and as someone who knew something that the facilitator did not know (the bereaved versus the reader or the not-bereaved). The participants placed some of the audience in the role of sympathisers (who understood the meaning) and

they put me (the interviewer or reader of their story) in the role of the ignorant, the not-knowing or the young.

The participants, as bereaved widows, also elicited sympathy by explaining their feelings of guilt because their husbands died, and they were blamed of being responsible for the death.

I suspected they were blaming me. They thought I had killed him. It was tough (Tshidaho: G4).

All the time they were telling their stories, they used the relevant social languages that fitted the situation of being a bereaved woman who had to perform all the rituals. They used language that would elicit the sympathy they perceived as their right as bereaved women.

If I had a choice, I would not do those things because I did not know how they prepared those concoctions. For health purposes I do not think I would perform those rituals (Muofhe: G4).

The participants even regarded those telling their stories from a different perspective (for example, religion) as not knowing how it felt to be a bereaved woman and as being ignorant (not-knowing) about the social and cultural knowledge of their culture.

They also defined their social networks based on their status as the bereaved widows (identity) who had been dependent on their husbands for many things; who could not drive a car; and who had to accept others making decisions for them. They had no legitimacy in the family institution after their husbands died. The definition of social networks has to do with the construction of the husband-wife relationship.

Yes, in our culture, widows are not allowed to be seen out of the house before her husband's burial. It is believed that she is mourning her husband…. I did not worry about anything. I knew there were people who will do the arrangements, like my children. In fact my husband had younger brothers (Mutshekwa: G5).

When a husband is dead, it is difficult to decide what to do and what not to do. That is because as a woman, you are married to this family. As a result, you have to abide by the rules of the family (Sarah: G2).

Some participants also identified themselves as not knowing and positioned the in-laws as the ones knowing and feeling more intense grief than they themselves did during their interactions. They also defended their culture by telling the group members that it (including its ritu-als) was no different from other cultures, and that people should value their culture and because in a sense they were who they were because of their culture.

In this paper participants used *"I" t*o refer to what they talked about themselves. In several cases they used "*I*" in their cognitive statements as they talked about thinking and knowing (*I know...* or *I think...)*. They also used the *"I"* in ability and constraint statements to refer to having to do things (*having to perform the rituals* and *inability to oppose the in-laws or culture)*.

Participants like Mutshekwa (G5) used cognitive statement that made it clear that other people *"will do the funeral arrangements"*. That idea showed that she had a previous interaction/relationship with those people and now she was confident that they will arrange her husband's funeral. Another example was Phophi (G5), who said *"I know that you who are educated do not see any value in performing these rituals"*. It appeared in response to her previous interaction with educated people who were ignorant of the performance of bereavement rituals and who possibly did not understand the value of bereavement rituals. It may also be the way that she has constructed educated people.

It was evident in their stories that death of a husband positioned participants within socio-cultural identities and relationships with other people they interacted with when the husband was still alive.

DISCUSSION

The paper findings evident that in the context of family and death of a husband widows construct particular socio-culturally situated identities and relationships. Burr (2015) maintained that people's identity arises out of interactions with other people and is based on language that they use. It was through their interaction and communication with others that the participants constructed their identity. For example, the interaction they had with their husband, in-laws, relatives and community members contributed towards their construction of their identities as widows. This supports Moss and Moss's (2014) assertion that bereaved family member is influenced by other bereaved family members. As a bereaved widow, her identity is influenced by the relationship she has with other members of the family. Burr (2015) argued that

people's identity is constructed out of the discourses that are culturally available to them.

Kellas (2013) advocates relationship between storytelling and individual personal health. Such relationship implies that in the process of telling the story, a storyteller will recognise a changed identity. This confirms Stroebe and Schut's (2010) argument that changes are expected across the duration of bereavement where the expectation becomes less attention to loss-oriented and more to restoration-oriented tasks.

In this paper, participants used language that identified them in a certain way in relation to others and that identity had particular meaning to the participants. The language they used put them in certain positions different from others' status. In their talk, participants used language that positioned them as the victims, the broken ones, the ones who needed sympathy from others and the ones who needed healing through interaction with others. They talked about other people, institutions, times, places and objects that all positioned them as widows who needed support and who experienced intense emotions. This is possibly due to the perception that women appear to be more loss-oriented following bereavement (Stroebe and Schut 2010). The paper finding advocates the level of dependence widows carry in their constructed identity. This finding differ from Moss and Moss's (2014) finding that a major concern for widows was to develop a sense of personal independence within the family where such widows described their independence as central to their sense of identity; though their sense of independence was socially constructed.

In all these categories, they talked about themselves in relation to something (death or rituals) and others (husband and in-laws). This implies that in their talk, the value of significant others was of importance in the participants' actions and interactions.

Their use of cognitive statements appears to communicate the previous interaction that took place in their world. Due to the relationship that participants had with their husbands participants expressed it through the feeling of guilt and blame that they received from others. The element of blame is consistent with Dorothy and Akoto (2014) who indicated that every time a person dies his death is blamed on something or someone. In this context widows' feeling and expression justify the call for sympathy.

Everything they talked about was placed in a particular context. Their discourse was situated within a specific sequential environment and occasion (death), institutional setting (family), and argumentative framework. Had it not been for the death of their husbands, they would not have identified themselves as widows or as being in need of sympathy. As they tell their stories their identity is confirmed as Kellas (2013) advocated that storytelling confirms family identity; in this context widow's identity.

The use of *"I"* in their statements to refer to themselves was another way participants built different socially situated identities in their language. According to Gee (2014) speaking in the first person, *"I" i*s just another way in which participants constructed identity in and through language. They identified themselves as the ones suffering from loss. Widows identified themselves as vulnerability and precariousness (Portacolone 2013)

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings discussed above, the paper concludes that when women have lost their husband, the language they used create particular socio-cultural constructed meaning dominated by the use of concepts like *"I"* to refer to themselves, "*they*" referring to those they have relationship with and "my" referring to the association they had with their husband. A sense of ownership of their surrounding appears to be distant due to cultural demands from the identity of widowhood. The way in which participants constructed their socially-situated identities and relationships also involved their identities as widows and the relationship they had with their husbands and their in-laws, when the husband was still alive and after his death. They represented their identities through the use of *"I"* in their statements, and their relationship with others through the use of cognitive statements that in most cases called for sympathy. They put others in the role of sympathisers after their husbands' death, due to either the pain they experienced or the blame they received from the in-laws.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that when women have lost their husband people have to understand the identity that women consider for them-

selves and the relationship they have with people around them. Community have to listen to these widows with an attentive ear so to provide relevant assistants with an understanding of how they used to associate themselves with the deceased and how they associate themselves with the relatives and friends.

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