

## Multiple Losses and Gains: Tshivenda-Speaking Widows' Accounts in the Context of the Death of a Husband

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examined the widows' accounts of the multiple losses and gains in the context of the death of a husband. Both, purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify and select the 24 widows who participated in six focus group discussions. Thematic analysis of the data yielded several accounts in relation to the death of a husband. Besides the loss of a husband as a physical being, widows lost the husband's roles and meanings, purpose of life, companionship, attachment and emotional support, sexual gratification, status and position in the society. For some of the participants, the loss of a husband added to their existing responsibilities and to others, it was associated with transitional gain from dependence to the independence and freedom that they missed when the husband was still alive. The paper concluded that death of a husband is not always negative but depends on the perspective widows perceive it in.

### INTRODUCTION

Although it is considered an expected and irreversible part of life, death is one of the aspects that have a negative impact on the lives of family members and close relatives. The death of a loved one can activate a complexity of emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and changes like no other known experience in life. After the death of a loved one, people grieve their loss, try to make sense of it, and find it necessary to reorder their private worlds and their meanings in a completely different way (Richards 2001). Widows think about and describe their own bereavement experiences in order to interpret them and create their own reality (Moss and Moss 2014) influenced by the loss of a husband.

In addition to losing the husband, widows have to deal with emotional distress of loss as well as need to solve real problems of living requiring restorative tasks (Stroebe and Schut 2010). That is because such a loss involves forceful and unwilling deprivation of someone loved, having something withheld unjustly and injuriously, and the stealing away of something valuable (Attig 2001). Consequently, when the spouse dies, there is a loss of couplehood, interlocking roles, commitments and traditions with

spouse. Themes of loneliness and loss occur, along shifts in patterns of daily living (Moss and Moss 2014).

For widows, having lost the husband is just one of the many experiences they encounter. Studies by Danforth and Glass (2001: 513) reveal that widows do not only lose their husband, but also "the very purpose and shape of life" that possibly used to be defined according to the position and role the husband used to play in their lives. Studies by Parkes (2001) reveal that the intensity of reaction to loss is rooted in the attachment and degree of dependency that was there between the deceased and the bereaved.

As indicated in Sihlongonyane (2004), death of a husband brings with it difficulties and challenges for those who have to go without the much valued financial resources. Rosenblatt and Nkosi (2007) argue that upon the death of a husband widows express grief feelings about poverty and lack of economic resources, rather than about the dead husband *per se*.

Even though death has negative consequences for the bereaved (widow), it is also assumed that it has positive consequence accompanying it. Sometimes it comes as a relief from the continuing stress of caregiving towards the end of a loved one's life (Frantz et al. 2001). In cultural contexts where women have been socialized into dependent social roles, some kinds of losses may act as a means to remove social constraints to growth and independence that were not there when the husband was still alive. For women in these social contexts, loss may in some ways be

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liberating from dependence to independence (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2001). All these assumptions have to be qualified by a study that focuses on women, particularly from a cultural background that really expect women to depend and submit to their husbands.

Given the fact that little research has been done in the context of death from the African cultural perspective, it was found imperative to focus on the vulnerable group of Tshivenda-speaking women who are subjected to many challenges after the death of a husband. For example, the group that is expected to mourn the death of a husband and complete the mourning period prescribed by the culture, similar to Ghanaian widows (Korang-Okrah 2011). Millions of women around the world, especially those in developing nations consequently lose their rights to own, inherit, and manage property following the deaths of their husbands (Korang-Okrah and Haight 2015). Based on the above highlighted factors, the current paper intended to explore the widows' accounts pertaining to the multiple losses and gains associated with the death of the husband. The paper was guided by the research question: "What are the widows' accounts pertaining to multiple losses and gains associated with the death of a husband?"

Addressing such a question would enable the researchers to understand what the widows lose or gain when the husband dies within the Tshivenda-speaking community. That is because there is no single way of constructing the loss of a husband through death. Individuals have different ways of constructing death. The same applies to widows in relation to the death of a husband.

### **Objective of the Paper**

To explore and describe the widows' accounts pertaining to multiple losses and gains associated with the death of a husband.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach and exploratory design were adopted in the present study. Studies by Terre Blanche et al. (2006) reveal that in situations where it is difficult to identify and measure the important variables, researchers engage in open-ended, inductive exploration that is possible by means of qualitative research. Hence, the choices of the current study design.

In this study, the target participants had undergone the experience of husband bereavement and were residents in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Purposive and snowball sampling were adopted to select 24 participants, aged from 38 to 68 years, who participated in focus group discussions. Purposive sampling was used in order to ensure that specific elements that contain the most characteristics, representation and attributes of the population are included in the sample (Strydom and Delport 2011). The effectiveness of snowball sampling is that people who have had similar life experiences tend to know each other and it is associated with the study of a vulnerable or stigmatized population (Balter and Brunet 2012). Six participants were identified purposively and requested to identify other participants who qualified to be part of the six groups of four to six members. Personal contacts were made to build trust and convince participants to participate in a group discussion because failure to convince them might result in no data to analyze (Noy 2009).

The procedure considered for data collection involved focus group discussions with widows who were willing to participate. Participants gathered in the school classroom and the purpose of the study was explained. They were given chance to consent their willingness to participate verbally and by signing a consent form. The selected participants were interviewed in six groups until no new data could be gathered any longer (Greeff 2011). The focus group questions allowed widows to discuss their experiences of losing the husband, what was lost and what they gained with his death. The researcher who served as a moderator allowed them to continue talking until she was certain that the saturation point had been achieved (Ambasa-Shisanya 2007). That was evidenced by repeating information provided. All focus group discussions lasted not more than ninety minutes. Data was tape recorded, transcribed verbatim and later translated from Tshivenda to English.

Since the participants were invited to participate in a focus group discussions about their personal experiences and perceptions regarding the loss related to the husband's death, focus group interaction allowed the researcher to obtain rich data by allowing participants to think about and voice their own views within the context of the views of others (Patton 2002) and

when expected patterns emerge through different participants' contribution (Stewart and Shamdani 2014). Berg and Lune (2011) argue that interaction between group members largely emphasizes the participants' viewpoints. In order to gain their viewpoints, focus group discussions were guided by the question: "How did Tshivenda-speaking women, who have lost a husband through death, construct their experiences of grief?" The way the participants experienced grief varied and depended on how they perceived their loss. This paper only focused on what widows lost and gained with the husband's death.

As elucidated by Cresswell (2009), the researcher adopted a thematic analysis of the transcribed and translated data for this paper. This analysis searched for themes that were common across the transcripts and that focused on the widows' accounts regarding multiple losses and gains in the context of the husband's death. This method of analysis comes under the umbrella of qualitative interpretive analysis that involves 'reading through the data repeatedly, and engaging in activities of breaking the data down (thematizing and categorizing) and building it up again in novel ways (elaborating and interpreting)' (Terre Blanche et al. 2006).

### **Ethical Issues**

In order to protect the rights and the welfare of the respondents (Wassenaar 2006), ethical issues were considered. The researcher approached each participant individually and explained the purpose and significance and the advantages and possible disadvantages of the study, as well as the general implications of her participation. Although some participants could not read or write, and because the topic under investigation was sensitive in nature, the researcher gave each woman the information leaflet and explained it to them to ensure that their participation is based on an informed and voluntary decision to participate, and were not forced, deceived or coerced in any way (Neuman 2000; Strydom 2011a). To ensure that they decided to participate in the study without any force and deceit from the researcher, they signed an informed consent form.

All participants received assurance of the confidentiality of their data. This encouraged them to join the focus group discussion. Per-

mission was also obtained for recording the discussions prior to the commencement of the focus group sessions.

Considering the sensitivity of the topic under investigation, the researcher also engaged in a debriefing session as soon as the interviews were completed. This gave participants the opportunity to work through their experiences (Strydom 2011a), and assisted them through any possible emotional harm that could have been caused by the discursive process, and also to clarify and correct some misunderstandings that might have occurred during the discussion (Babbie and Mouton 2001).

### **Measures to Ensure Trustworthiness**

For the purpose of this paper, credibility and transferability were ensured. In order to ensure credibility, the researcher continuously reflected upon the purpose and the procedures followed to answer the major research question. Since the researcher was the moderator for the focus group discussion, she guided group members to ensure that they remain within the context of the topic under investigation. There was congruence between the data and the language used by the participants, and the report was plausible within the context of the study. In order to ensure transferability, a detailed description of each of the themes developed from the research question has been included in the results section to provide detailed findings. The verbatim expressions from the participants were also included as an evidence to remain consistent with what the participants said.

## **RESULTS**

The results are presented in the form of themes that emerged from the focus group data. Data pertaining to each theme is presented qualitatively in the form of relevant accounts of the widows. The broad themes identified from the data are:

1. Losses associated with death.
2. Gains associated with death.

Each theme is discussed with sub-themes. Extracts from group (G) members are quoted to support the findings. In the extracts from the participants, the researcher used pseudonyms and abbreviations representing Groups (G), to distinguish groups where data was collected.

### Theme 1: Losses Associated with Death

This study has found that the death of a husband was associated and accompanied with multiple losses that added to the factors influencing the widows' grief. It was not only the loss of a husband but also several losses attached to his death that intensified their experiences and their construction of grief as painful. Such included loss of roles and meaning, purpose of life, companion, attachment and emotional support, sexual gratification, and status and position.

#### *Loss of Roles and Meaning*

Participants varied in how they constructed the level of meaning that their husband had in their lives in relationship to the level of pain they experienced. To some participants, a husband meant the person who provided certain resources needed for survival, while to others he provided a sense of identity that disappeared when he died. The widows became devastated when he died since they knew that they have lost all that he meant for them.

*How would you feel if it was your husband? I think you would also cry unless if he had no meaning in your life (Maria: G1).*

*When we were together, it was easy to finance his schooling. As I am saying I know there are things I know I cannot do for that boy when his father is no longer there (Susan: G6).*

#### *Loss of Purpose of Life*

For some widows the death of the husbands also took away the reason for living without them. This was true for some of the participants in this study. Salphina (G6) emphasized the meaning that her husband had, while other participants stated that they could not see any reason for living without their husbands.

#### *Loss of Companion*

The participants constructed their experiences of grief in terms of loss of a companion and felt lonely because the position that their husband used to occupy and the roles he played in the family were now empty. The friend who was always there and trusted was gone.

*He was like a friend to me. That means his death meant a loss of a friend, in fact, a very*

*close friend. A friend I trusted so much (Salphina: G6).*

#### *Loss of Attachment and Emotional Support*

Participants constructed death as something that was able to cut a strong bond that was there between the widows and their husbands. The participants constructed their husbands as something of great value that was lost when they died. Having a husband was associated not only with companionship but also somebody with whom family values and activities could be shared. In this regard, the participants' grief experiences showed that they were deeply attached to their husbands. The loss of such a valuable person left them devastated, knowing that they would miss him and the physical attachment they had with him. They would miss him also as someone they shared their emotions with.

*Since I am still young I still need a man, but where can I find one who is not married? The one who can be mine. I can only find another one's husband who will only come and go (Selina: G3).*

*Whenever I remember the good times we had when he was still alive, I feel that loss (Avhasei: G5).*

#### *Loss of Sexual Gratification*

Participants constructed grief experiences in relation to their physical and sexual needs that could no longer be satisfied. The attachment that satisfied their physical needs was gone, intensifying the pain of grief. Their loss brought a need for someone else who could satisfy their physiological needs.

*One thing that is so difficult in life is that even when you go to church flesh is flesh, it needs what is due to flesh, the spirit is spirit and it needs what is due to spirit. That there is no more that person you will spend the night with, you see (Dorothy: G3).*

#### *Loss of Status and Position*

When they lose their husband, widows lost the position as someone's wife. The loss of such a position subjected the participants to a position of oppressive inequality in relation to other community members and their in-laws. They

constructed themselves as being different, lesser beings who occupied a different, lower societal position that could make other women fear that they (widows) could take their (other women's) husbands.

*To me the most difficult thing was that your friends would never be your friends anymore. They are afraid that you will take their husbands (Muofhe: G4).*

*I can tell that some of the people I was friends with, no longer come to my house. I had a problem before, but now I understand the reason. It is because they still have their husbands and they possibly think I will take their husbands. Jaa, life can be complicated when you are a widow (Tshidaho: G4).*

## **Theme 2: Gains Associated with Death**

### ***Negative Gains***

Apart from the constructions of death as painful in relation to all the losses they experienced upon the death of a husband, participants also perceived death as associated with additional family roles and responsibilities for them. The husband would not only serve as a father, but also as someone to share responsibilities with (in relation to gender roles). Upon his death, his responsibilities are added to the widows'.

*So everything is my responsibility. When a child comes from school with a need, I have to make sure that I provide. It is my responsibility (Dorothy: G3).*

*That is happening to me now. We used to share responsibilities together, but now I have to carry all the responsibilities alone (Avhasei: G5).*

### ***Positive Gains***

Even though death has negative consequences for the bereaved (widow), it also has positive things accompanied with it. For widows who witnessed the long illness of their husbands, death came as a relief from the continuing stress of caregiving.

*The late was sick for a very long time. We could also see that he was going to die. During his last days he could not even speak (Anna: G2).*

While some widows constructed the loss of the husband in terms of negative gains, others associated the loss of a husband with indepen-

dence and freedom that they missed when the husband was still alive. In this way, loss may be liberating, moving them from dependence to independence.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is evident in the findings that when widows are confronted with death of a husband, they encounter both losses and gains. It was not only the loss of a husband, but also several losses attached to his death that intensified their experiences and their construction of grief as painful.

Death of a husband took away the role that he played in their (widows) life and also the meaning he had. To some participants, a husband meant the person who provided certain resources needed for survival, while to others he provided a sense of identity that disappeared when he died. Korang-Okrah and Haight (2015) maintain that millions of women around the world, especially those in developing nations lose their rights to own, inherit, and manage property following the deaths of their husbands. In this paper, widows became devastated when the husband died because they knew that they have lost all that he meant for them and possibly what they had when he was still alive.

For some widows the death of the husband also takes away the purpose for life without their husbands. This supports Danforth and Glass (2001) who reveal that widows do not only lose their husband, but also the purpose and shape of life. These participants accepted the dependency position to the extent that they did not trust their own capability to survive beyond their husband's death. This shows that the husband was positioned on a higher authority level that determines their sense of survival. This is possibly because of the belief that the man is the head of the household and is responsible for the economic support of all the household members (Korang-Okrah and Haight 2015).

The participants constructed their experiences of grief in terms of loss of a companion and felt lonely because the position that their husband used to occupy and the roles he played in the family were now empty. This finding supports Moss and Moss (2014) who maintain that when the spouse dies, the themes of loneliness and loss occur. For the participants, the friend who was always there and trusted was gone.

When family and community members that came to offer different forms of support leave, the widows need to adjust to an environment in which the husband is missing (Selepe and Edwards 2008).

Participants constructed death as something that was able to cut a strong bond, which represented emotional dependency between the husband and wife. His value seems to have disappeared with his death. According to Moss and Moss (2014), when a spouse dies there is loss of couplehood, interlocking roles, commitments and traditions with the other spouse.

Having a husband was associated not only with companionship but also somebody with whom family values and responsibilities could be shared. In this regard, the participants showed that they were deeply attached to their husbands. The loss of such a valuable person left them devastated, knowing that they would miss him and the physical attachment they had with him. They would miss him also as someone they shared their emotions with. This finding supports Lau's (2014) findings that the support received from husbands (a particular form of strong ties and bonding social capital) emotionally and practically in daily life was consistently strong and that other forms of strong ties (that is, other family members) seemed to be less crucial. It appeared that should they not have had a strong attachment with their husbands, the language used to construct their grief experience would have been different.

Participants also talked about their physical and sexual needs that could no longer be satisfied with the husband's absence. The attachment that satisfied their physical needs was gone, intensifying the pain of grief. Their loss brought a need for someone else who could satisfy their physiological needs. Overall, the loss of their loved ones created an imbalance in the family, and created frustration in the lives of the bereaved participants. This supports Chan et al. (2005) and Selepe and Edwards (2008) who maintained that death causes disequilibrium in the family and community.

The availability of a husband in their life gave them a particular status and position in the community that disappeared with his death. When they lose the husband widows lose their position as someone's wife. The loss of such a position subjects the participants to a position of oppressive inequality in relation to other com-

munity members and the in-laws. They constructed themselves as being different, and occupied a different, lower societal position (Chan et al. 2005). In their construction, other married women occupied higher positions that included respect and value.

The way the participants constructed their experiences and perceptions of the death of their husbands highlighted the issue of the labeling that they were subjected to in society. In their perceptions participants thought that married women regarded widows as having less value in society as they feared that they would steal their (married women) husbands away from them (married women). Although the participants were subjected to the position of a lesser being, without value in society, they nonetheless possessed the 'authority' that other women feared. This authority supposedly accorded them the power to sexually attract other women's husbands. Hence, they were considered threats to those who are married. Labeling contributed to the marginalization of widows as single women at a time when their need for support from society and relatives was increased.

Apart from the constructions of death as devastating in relation to all the losses they experienced upon the death of a husband, the husband's death brought additional family roles and responsibilities for them (widows). Unemployed widows need to work to earn their livelihood or to repay the debts they incurred when the husband died (Chauhan 2011). The husband would not only serve as a father, but also as someone to share responsibilities with (in relation to gender roles). Upon his death, his responsibilities are added to the widows'. This finding supports Ingolf and Eydal (2014) who indicated that the remaining spouses have to do everything alone with so many practical matters to take care of, and even things they must learn how to take care of for the first time.

When the husband was still alive they were wives. Upon his death they gained a new status of widowhood that is associated with a lower societal position (Chan et al. 2005), as compared to other married women who occupied higher positions that included respect and value.

Even though death has negative consequences for the bereaved (widow), it also has positive things accompanied with it. Sometimes it comes as a relief from the continuing stress of caregiving towards the end of a loved one's life (Frantz

et al. 2001). This is relevant for widows who witnessed a long illness of their husbands.

While some widows constructed the loss of the husband in terms of negative gains, others associated the loss of a husband with independence and freedom that they missed when the husband was still alive. In this way loss may be liberating, moving them from dependence to independence and freedom. This appears to be possible for women who have a high level of education and are largely enlightened and economically stable (Calhoun and Tedeschi 2001). For widows who were financially dependent, the loss of a financially supportive husband might be devastating.

### CONCLUSION

Although death of a husband is accompanied by pain among all participants in relation to the loss of a husband as a physical being, individual perspective is worth considering when intending to offer help and support to the bereaved widow. That is because the widows' accounts concerning the death of a husband were associated with multiple losses to some and gains to others. Death of a husband may be experienced from both negative and positive perspective if understood from the context of the social reality of the communities where it occurred. This conclusion was influenced by the fact that although there were multiple losses that widows experienced after the death of a husband there were those widows who associated death of a husband with some gains.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations included the absence of complementary interviews with the in-laws who have lost their child to elicit their experiences since they are as well affected by the death. Only descriptive data was used qualitatively in order to extract themes and provide a better understanding of the widows' accounts in the context of the death of a husband. A sample of twenty-four participants is limited to generalize the findings to the whole of Tshivenda-speaking widows. Since the expected group membership should be large enough (6 to 10) to produce rich discussion of focus group question, four to six members was another limitation.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommended that the assistance and support offered to the widows by the community and the professionals should be based on the understanding of the context of the social reality of the community where the death occurred. Widows should be part of the support decision that is taken for them. Although widows appear to experience devastating challenges following the death of a husband, future research should consider the widowers' experiences of grief following death of their wives.

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