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DECLARATION

I, Puseletso Masebolao Dlukulu, hereby declare that the work on which this thesis is based is original (except where acknowledgements indicate otherwise) and that neither the whole work nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree at this or any other university, institution for tertiary education or examining body.

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Puseletso M. Dlukulu
ABSTRACT

Death is a drastic event in one’s life. Through grief, mourning and bereavement, people heal the hurt of their loss of a loved one. Little research exists on bereavement in Black transitional societies of South Africa. As such, the objective of this study was to explore how widows in South African transitional societies, whose husbands have died of terminal illnesses, experience bereavement, and how they cognitively process and cope with the loss. The Participants’ bereavement process was defined as starting when they become aware of their husbands’ anticipated death (anticipatory bereavement). Unstructured and structured interviews were conducted with 10 widows from the community under study and a thematic analysis was performed on the data. Five themes emerged concerning the Participants’ personal characteristics, their challenges and how they dealt with them, their experiences of stressors, and coping. Although the Participants responded to the news of the deaths of their husbands in a similar manner, there were differences in other responses, reflecting individual differences in coping strategies. Some Participants seemed more adaptive, with greater openness and flexibility in social cognition and greater problem-focused coping, while others showed more negative emotions in social interaction, greater loneliness, and expressed relatively closed and inflexible social cognition. However, positive or negative responses and coping did not necessarily determine whether bereavement would be functional or dysfunctional. It was found that the Participants’ anticipatory bereavement did not ease or shorten their sense or period of bereavement after their husband’s death. A model of the cognitive-affective-motivational-behavioural network of bereavement was developed, taking into account the role of culture and how each Participant’s cognition, affect, and the kind of attachment to their husbands motivated their behaviours in particular ways in coping effectively or ineffectively with their bereavement.

**KEY WORDS:** Terminal illness, death, widowhood, bereavement, death rituals, urban society, coping, cognitive theory, transitional society, attachment theory
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