



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

**BLACK URBAN WIDOWS: THEIR EXPERIENCES OF AND COPING WITH  
BEREAVEMENT IN A TRANSITIONAL SOCIETY**

by

**PUSELETSO MASEBOLAO DLUKULU**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (PSYCHOLOGY)**

In the Faculty of Humanities

Department of Psychology

University of Pretoria

**PROMOTOR: PROF. C. WAGNER**

April 2010

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere gratitude goes to:

The late Professor J.B. Schoeman, for his unconditional assistance, guidance, understanding, patience and encouragement, which often inspired and motivated me, making me feel supported.

Dr. Claire Wagner, for her knowledge and insistence on professionalism and presentation of my work, and as such, putting me on a higher level than I was before.

The Participants of this study for trusting me with their feelings and for their belief in me when I took them back to the memories and experiences that they would rather forget.

The Pimville Methodist Church and Catholic Church for providing me with access to the Participants.

Fr. Liam for his willingness to assist and support, which gave me the courage to see this study through.

My husband Khaya and children Teddy and Mpho for being my source of inspiration; my husband for his understanding and support, wanting to see me be a better person and improve myself, and my children for their understanding and sacrifice. My colleagues Mapula and Matete for their advice, concern, kindness, love and support.



## 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.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Puseletso M. Dlukulu', on a light-colored rectangular background.

-----

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



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Model of cognitive-affective-behavioural network of bereavement of widows in a transitional society



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1 Description of the Participants

Table 4.2 Summary of themes and sub-themes

Table 4.3 Participation in African death rituals

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>DECLARATION .....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES.....</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1:INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.2 THE GLOBAL EXPERIENCE OF LOSS .....	1
1.3 BACKGROUND TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLACK URBAN SOUTH AFRICAN TRANSITIONAL SOCIETY .....	4
1.3.1 Black urban South African communities before 1994 .....	5
1.3.2 Black urban South African communities after 1994 .....	6
1.4 JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY .....	8
1.4.1 The rationale for focusing on women .....	12
1.4.2 The rationale for focusing on terminal illnesses .....	16
1.5 THE AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY .....	17
1.6 CONTRIBUTION OF THE RESEARCH TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE.....	18
1.7 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY .....	20
1.8 CONCLUSION .....	21
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK..</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION .....	22



2.2 BEREAVEMENT.....	23
2.2.1 Definition of bereavement.....	23
2.2.2 Conceptualisation of bereavement.....	24
2.2.2.1 Functional and dysfunctional bereavement.....	25
2.2.2.1.1 Functional bereavement.....	25
2.2.2.1.2 Dysfunctional bereavement.....	27
2.2.2.2 Determinants of bereavement.....	31
2.2.2.3 Misconceptions about bereavement.....	33
2.2.2.4 Emotions.....	33
2.2.2.5 Emotional pain.....	35
2.2.2.6 Grief.....	35
2.2.3 Diagnostic issues of bereavement.....	37
2.2.3.1 Differentiation between bereavement and depression.....	37
2.2.3.2 Differentiation between mood and anxiety disorders.....	40
2.2.4 Cultural perspectives on bereavement and related concepts.....	41
2.2.4.1 Culture.....	41
2.2.4.2 Ethnicity.....	45
2.2.4.3 Religion and cultural practices.....	45
2.2.4.4 Place identity.....	51
2.2.4.5 Marriage rituals.....	53
2.2.4.6 Death.....	54
2.2.4.7 Death rituals.....	57
2.2.4.7.1 Death rituals in traditional societies.....	58
2.2.4.7.2 Death rituals in transitional societies.....	62
2.2.4.8 Mourning.....	70





2.2.4.9	Widowhood practices in other African countries .....	73
2.3	THEORETICAL APPROACHES FOR STUDYING BEREAVEMENT.....	77
2.3.1	Cognitive theory .....	77
2.3.1.1	The nature of schemata.....	77
2.3.1.2	Changes of schemata through the processes of organisation and adaptation .....	80
2.3.1.3	The self-schema .....	81
2.3.1.4	Scripts .....	83
2.3.1.5	Attribution theory.....	84
2.3.2	Coping strategies.....	86
2.3.2.1	Coping styles .....	86
2.3.2.2	Sternberg's problem-solving cycle.....	89
2.3.2.3	Factors that mediate the impact of loss and an individual's coping .....	91
2.3.3	Attachment theory.....	92
2.3.4	Schachter and Singer's two-factor theory of emotions.....	96
2.3.5	Systems theory .....	102
2.3.6	A unified integration of bereavement concepts and theories .....	105
2.3.6.1	Integrated phases of bereavement (functional and dysfunctional) .....	105
2.3.6.2	Comparison between cognitive theory, attachment theory and family systems theory.....	108
2.3.6.2.1	Cognitive and attachment theories.....	108
2.3.6.2.2	Comparison between attachment and family systems theory.....	109
2.3.6.2.3	Family systems theory and bereavement.....	110
2.4	CONCLUSION .....	112
	<b>CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>114</b>
3.1	INTRODUCTION .....	114



3.2 DESIGN .....	115
3.2.1 Qualitative research.....	115
3.2.2 Advantages and disadvantages of using qualitative research .....	118
3.2.2.1 Advantages .....	118
3.2.2.2 Disadvantages .....	119
3.3 RECONCILIATION OF THE QUALITATIVE DESIGN WITH A COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	120
3.4 PARTICIPANTS IN THIS STUDY .....	130
3.4.1 Access to potential Participants.....	130
3.4.2 Sampling method.....	130
3.5 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION .....	132
3.5.1 The qualitative interview and its value.....	133
3.5.2 Unstructured interview .....	134
3.5.3 Semi-structured interview .....	137
3.5.4 Interview guides .....	137
3.5.5 Interview procedure .....	139
3.5.6 Participant observations .....	142
3.6 ETHICAL ASPECTS.....	144
3.7 DATA ANALYSIS.....	145
3.7.1 Data management .....	145
3.7.2 Data reduction.....	146
3.7.3 Data display .....	150
3.7.4 Drawing conclusions and verification .....	150
3.8 CONSISTENCY AND INTEGRITY OF THE STUDY .....	151
3.8.1 Trustworthiness.....	152
3.8.1.1 Credibility .....	152



3.8.1.2 Transferability .....	153
3.8.1.3 Dependability .....	154
3.8.1.4 Confirmability .....	154
3.9 REFLEXIVITY .....	155
3.10 CONCLUSION .....	158
<b>CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>159</b>
4.1 INTRODUCTION .....	159
4.2 DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS .....	160
4.3 THEMES .....	162
4.3.1 Theme 1: Personal characteristics .....	163
4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1: The nature of the couples' relationships before and during the illness .....	163
4.3.1.1.1 Patterns of communication and cooperation .....	164
4.3.1.1.2 Perceptions and attributions .....	167
4.3.1.2 Sub-theme 2: The couples' knowledge and understanding of the illness .....	168
4.3.1.3 Sub-theme 3: The different roles played by the Participants and their husbands individually .....	170
4.3.1.4 Sub-theme 4: Strengths and vulnerabilities .....	172
4.3.2 Theme 2: The Participants' challenges and how they dealt with them ...	174
4.3.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Past significant losses in the widows' lives .....	174
4.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Stressors .....	174
4.3.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Caring and treatment regimen of the dying husbands ..	177
4.3.2.4 Sub-theme 4: The attitudes towards and responses to the illness and its ramifications .....	179
4.3.3 Theme 3: The Participants' experiences of stressors .....	182
4.3.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Physical symptoms .....	182

4.3.3.2 . Sub-theme 2: The Participants’ response to the news of their husbands’ deaths .....	184
4.3.3.3 Sub-theme 3: The response of the Participants’ in-laws to the Participants .....	184
4.3.3.4 Sub-theme 4: Emotions experienced .....	187
4.3.4 Theme 4: Coping .....	192
4.3.4.1 Sub-theme 1: The couples’ resources.....	192
4.3.4.2 Sub-theme 2: The Participants’ approaches to their challenges.....	196
4.3.4.3 Sub-theme 3: The Participants’ coping styles .....	204
4.3.4.4 Sub-theme 4: Participation in African death rituals .....	208
4.4 CONCLUSION .....	209
<b>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION ..</b>	<b>210</b>
5.1 INTRODUCTION .....	210
5.2 DISCUSSION OF THE PARTICIPANTS’ BACKGROUND HISTORY.....	211
5.3 DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS.....	214
5.3.1 Theme 1: Discussion of the findings in respect of personal characteristics .....	215
5.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1: The nature of the couples' relationships before and during the illness .....	216
5.3.1.1.1 Patterns of communication and cooperation.....	217
5.3.1.1.2 Perceptions and attributions .....	220
5.3.1.2 Sub-theme 2: The couples’ knowledge and understanding of the illness .....	221
5.3.1.3 Sub-theme 3: The different roles played by the Participants and their husbands individually.....	222
5.3.1.4 Sub-theme 4: The couples’ strengths and vulnerabilities.....	223
5.3.2 Theme 2: Discussion of the findings in respect of the Participants’ challenges and how they dealt with them.....	227



5.3.2.1 Sub-theme 1: Past significant losses in the Participants' lives.....	227
5.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2: Stressors.....	227
5.3.2.3 Sub-theme 3: Caring and treatment regimen of the dying husbands ..	231
5.3.2.4 Sub-theme 4: The attitudes towards and responses to the illness and its ramifications.....	233
5.3.3 Theme 3: Discussions of the findings in respect of the Participants' experiences of stressors.....	235
5.3.3.1 Sub-theme 1: Physical symptoms .....	235
5.3.3.2 Sub-theme 2: The Participants' response to the news of their husbands' deaths .....	236
5.3.4 Theme 4: Discussions of the findings in respect of coping .....	238
5.3.4.1 Sub-theme 1: The couples' resources.....	238
5.3.4.2 Sub-theme 2: The Participants' approaches to their challenges.....	240
5.3.4.3 Sub-theme 3: The participants' coping.....	244
5.3.4.4 Sub-theme 4: Participation in African death rituals .....	246
5.4 DEVELOPMENT OF A SYSTEMATIC BEREAVEMENT MODEL.....	249
5.4.1 Introduction .....	249
5.4.2 Cognition.....	251
5.4.3 Cognition and culture.....	251
5.4.4 Cognition and affect.....	254
5.4.5 Cognition and attachment.....	255
5.5 THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL RATIONALISATION OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION .....	256
5.6 CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE PRESENT STUDY.....	264
5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS PERTAINING TO THIS STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH.....	265
5.8 CONCLUSION .....	267
<b>REFERENCE LIST .....</b>	<b>269</b>



**APPENDIX A.....295**

**TRANSCRIPTS OF INTERVIEWS.....295**