

CHAPTER 4

BEREAVEMENT AND BEREAVEMENT RITUALS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to address the constructions of bereavement rituals as informed by religious-cultural discourses. The opening section focuses on the social construction of bereavement and grief, as well as the ways people cope with death. This section provides a foundation for a discussion on bereavement rituals. Discourses on bereavement rituals are also discussed as they have an influence on how people construct mourning. The meaning and functions of bereavement rituals are also addressed. A section on gender and bereavement is included as gender issues and the position of women in societies play a role in how rituals are constructed. The concluding section addresses the religious-cultural discourses that inform performance of bereavement rituals.

4.2 THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF BEREAVEMENT AND GRIEF

4.2.1 Bereavement

Bereavement is defined as a state of having suffered a loss (Rando, 1993). It involves forceful and unwilling deprivation of someone we love, having something withheld unjustly and injuriously, and a stealing away of something valuable (Attig, 2001; Rando, 1993). Attig's and Rando's explanation implies that during bereavement, an individual suffers and is even victimised. The bereaved person experiences an unexpected loss. Such a loss can be physical, social or psychological. A physical loss is the loss of something tangible, whereas a psycho-social loss, which is sometimes called a 'symbolic loss', involves the loss of something intangible and psychological in nature. In mourning the death of any loved one, a mixture of both physical and psychosocial losses as well as a number of secondary losses occurs. In other words, loss through death appears to involve multiple losses (Davies, 2004). To understand such losses

depends on one's culture because there are cultural differences in what is understood to have been lost through death (Rosenblatt, 2001).

In the above definition of bereavement, death is personified. Like a thief who takes people's belongings by force, death is seen as stealing a loved one from his or her family. In a culture that constructs a family in terms of husband-wife-children, the death of a husband leaves the family disturbed and unbalanced. People then react in different ways in order to deal with this disruption to their everyday lives.

Talking of bereavement as a loss, suffering or victimisation suggests furthermore that bereaved people are not normal, but are rather ill and suffering. They have to let go of their attachment to the deceased person and move on with their life so that they can return to 'normal' behaviour and recover from their depression occasioned by the loss (Neimeyer, 2001). This way of talking possibly comes from a community in which people associate bereavement with loss and being robbed of something that leaves one suffering a particular pain. The assumption here is that a different conception of bereavement would be expressed in different language terms.

4.2.2 Grief

Grief is defined as "the process of experiencing the psychological, behavioural, social, cognitive, spiritual and physical reactions to the perception of loss" (Rando, 1993, p. 22). It is regarded as the unique and individual experience that is rooted in the attachments people form with each other (Maritz et al., 2008; Parkes, 2001). Rando's (1993) definition and Parkes' (2001) conclusion suggest that grief can be experienced in psychological terms (e.g., feeling of sadness, numbness, fear, etc.), behavioural terms (e.g., withdrawal, crying, inability to perform daily duties, etc.), social terms and physical terms (e.g., shortness of breath, feeling of tightness in the throat, etc.). Grief also depends on the level of attachment that people have. That is possibly the reason Nadeau (2001) states that as people grieve they make sense of their experiences by interacting with others. Grief, however, appears to be dynamic, not static (Gunnarsson & Ohlen, 2006). It involves many changes over time that can be considered

developmental in nature. For example, the change in status from being a wife to a widow requires an adjustment that may not happen within a day or even many days.

The way that people express and resolve grief is influenced not only by individual psychodynamics and the circumstances surrounding a death, but also by the social environment and culture through various prescribed rituals, beliefs, and family rules (Chan et al., 2005). The social setting is the backdrop against which grief is acted out. It influences the way we view and respond to a loss (Fulton & Metress, 1995). For example, in a society that places a high value on the extended family system, like among the Tshivenda-speaking people, the death of even a fairly distant relative might be keenly felt. In Western society, dominated by the nuclear family, such deaths may not be considered as a direct loss unless there is a special attachment to the given individual (Fulton & Metress, 1995).

Grief appears to be a reaction to all types of loss, not just death. Death is only one example of loss, albeit the most dramatic one. The death of a spouse is regarded as the most difficult one (Thompson, 1995). Grief is a natural, expected reaction to death. The absence of grief, when warranted by the factors circumscribing the loss, is considered abnormal and indicative of pathology (Rando, 1993). The 'abnormality' of an absence of grief appears to be informed by community leaders who tell people that there are certain 'tasks' to be accomplished during the process of grieving. For example, Graig (1989) argues that certain psychological tasks need to be accomplished. The survivors need to accept the reality and effect of the loss and re-channel their emotional energy, which they had invested in their relationship with the deceased. This view is consistent with the idea of seeking detachment from the deceased as the main purpose of grief. Studies by Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) and Van der Hart (1983), maintain that although some bereaved people do indeed cut their bonds, many continue to relate to the dead, thus ensuring a link between the dead and the living. This suggests that should people fail to grieve, they cannot 'heal' from the loss.

Grief also depends upon the individual's unique perception of his or her loss. It is not necessary for the loss to be socially recognised or validated by others for the individual to grieve, although it appears to be most helpful when this occurs (Rando, 1993), especially when behaviour patterns are socially constructed as either acceptable or not. In this context, an abnormal way of grieving is determined by the community. For example, in the Tshivenda-speaking community, it is acceptable for a woman to grieve visibly through crying and staying in the house prior to the day of the funeral. The absence of crying is considered abnormal. When people feel obliged to show that they are grieving in accordance with established cultural norms, they may cry even when they do not perceive the loss as warranting such actions. Visible mourning may then be used as a means to appease others in the community who expect it.

Whatever the nature of the loss, people's cultural background plays a role in the construction of mourning. Fulton and Metress (1995, p. 358) maintain "mourning is the culturally patterned process by which grief is managed and resolved". As a way of coping and accepting the impact of loss, traditional Africans believe that they have to perform certain rituals that pave their way to healing. In most, if not all African cultures, it may be assumed that people often perform these rituals in order to prevent the feeling of 'abnormality' associated with bereavement. Pang and Lam (2002) also found that rituals were experienced as comforting and were related to maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased.

4.2.3 Coping with death

When people are faced with situations that are stressful and that threaten their psychological well-being, they are sometimes told that they should cope with these situations. The same applies to a death situation, a stressful and painful aspect of life (Corr, Nabe & Corr, 1997; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). Death is considered heartbreaking and a threat to the psychological well-being of bereaved people, and coping with death implies a way of restoring the psychological well-being of the bereaved (Chan et al., 2005; Corr et al., 1997). Through language, death is constructed in such a manner that it becomes a threat because it disturbs one's state of

psychological well-being. Death is constructed as an 'enemy' that takes people away from their family members and unbalances the family. It is also considered to have the power to destabilise the community of which the deceased was a member (Selepe & Edwards, 2008).

Ways of coping are partly determined by where the person lives and the possibilities for interaction with other people in the same community. This implies that coping with the impact of death is socially constructed. It is also because there is no one way of coping with death. Among the Chinese, for example, there is a condolence statement which relates to coping with death that says "save the tears and accept the change" (Chan et al., 2005, p. 924). The underlying idea of this statement is that people are capable of feeling the pain of death of a family member, which can disturb the continuation of life. In order to continue with life, they have to somehow forget about the past and embrace the present.

Because grief is assumed to be painful and traumatic (Bento, 1994), people who experience it try to find strategies to cope with its impact, while others may try to find ways to avoid its impact. Some people seek to avoid it by focussing on their work, and so avoid confronting the reality of death. Others might escape grieving with tranquilisers, sleeping pills, or alcohol. Sanders (1992) maintains that using drugs masks the pain and offers a temporary or anaesthetic relief. When the effect wears off, the pain resurfaces. The literature on grief discourages the use of drugs as it is seen as a way of postponing dealing with the feelings of bereavement (Fulton & Metress, 1995). By engaging with work and drugs, people may construct a different reality in which they can cope better with the implications of loss. They may accept that grief is painful and traumatic, but do not want to construct themselves as 'abnormal' by feeling the pain and trauma.

Because grief is socially constructed, there is no worldwide standard for determining the right way to cope with grief. In many cultures, people cry when a death occurs as this is experienced as a way of resolving problems (Steeves, Faan & Kahn, 2005). However,

Gumede (1990) highlights that in Zulu culture, crying aloud is considered to be for young people only. People cry when a young person dies, but when a great-grandparent dies, people are not allowed to cry because it is believed that that person is a living ancestor. Gumede further indicates that when a king dies, weeping and wailing aloud is compulsory. In the past, people found with dry eyes would be accused of a lack of sympathy for the monarch and were summarily dispatched to death. The whole nation had to show an outward and visible grief at the demise of the deceased. However, even within cultures where there is a great deal of patterning to the emotional expression of grief, some people do not follow the pattern. What emotions are felt, how they are expressed and how they are understood is usually a function of cultural and/or religious beliefs. Parkes et al. (1997) report that in cultures where death is perceived as being caused by someone, grief may include a great deal of rage and determination to identify the attacker, and a desire for revenge.

As indicated above, grief is constructed as being painful and traumatic. When people come to terms with grief, they also have to come to terms with the rituals and symbols that surround death (Bento, 1994). In the Tshivenda-speaking community, such rituals will involve, among others, cleansing, burial, seclusion, consultation with the sangoma and removal of hair. Although there are rituals that require coping strategies to deal with the experiences, “some rituals and symbols are soothing and can help ease the journey” (Bento, 1994, p. 37). Each society has specific prescribed rituals that are designed to help families resolve their grief (Cook & Oltjenbruns, 1989). According to Rando (1985), these rituals need to fit the preferences of the particular family and are designed to help the family accept the reality of loss, express feelings related to the loss, and accomplish the tasks related to grief. Coping with grief also involves “accepting a life where a loved one is no longer physically present” (Bento, 1994, p. 37). Death confers a different status on an individual in the community. For example, the death of a husband changes a woman’s status from being a wife to being a widow. This status affects one’s acceptance or rejection by the society, and therefore, may require various coping strategies.

4.3 DISCOURSES ON BEREAVEMENT AND MOURNING

Lalande and Bonanno (2006) maintain that people react to loss in different ways, which implies that there is no particular way to react to loss. Since grief is constructed as “psychologically traumatic” (Bento, 1994, p. 37), and since dealing with it demands a great deal of energy (Rando, 1993), some people interpret appropriate responses to grief differently from the norm. Constructions of death may be appropriate or inappropriate in societal terms. This section addresses the different discourses that contribute towards the way people, especially the bereaved, may construct bereavement and mourning. It also explores socially prescribed mourning behaviour. The following are some of the notable discourses identified in the literature:

Discourse 1: Grief and mourning decline in a steadily decreasing fashion over time

This discourse implies that time is a healer. This is a highly essentialist discourse, which denies that the pain of death is socially constructed and depends on both the mourners and how their culture constructs the mourning period. There is no one single factor that determines healing; people are different and they mourn differently. Although some people recover from the death of a spouse within a year or two, others will continue to suffer distress and depression for many years after the loss (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001), and the intensity of these reactions are not universal (Bonanno & Field, 2001). This discourse is, therefore, somewhat unrealistic, since people may still cherish the memory of the deceased and the role they played in their life long after their death; they may still experience sadness at their memory. For example, the death of a parent may prolong the child’s mourning period because of the deprivation of love, advice, guidance and a parental model (Aiken, 2001). For others, the prescribed mourning period might feel too long because they reconstruct their positions faster than expected.

Cultures prescribe the period considered acceptable for grief and mourning. However, there is no universal time frame. In some cultures, widows are expected

to mourn for a year (Fulton & Metress, 1995). Time does have an influence on the amount of support available to the mourner, and thus can be construed to affect mourning indirectly (Rando, 1993). However, it is primarily what we do and how we interact with others during that time that makes the difference. Within the context of grieving and mourning, time is personified and given therapeutic powers to contribute towards the healing of the pain caused by the death.

The length of the mourning period has the potential to cause conflict in different social relations. In the workplace, for example, the period of mourning is defined by the organisation's culture and policy, not the employees' culture (Bento, 1994). This policy specifies the number of days that employees may take off from work for mourning. Eurocentric employers may not tolerate long or recurrent absenteeism required by some cultural-religious groupings and the bereaved employees' might need to engage in proper mourning practices. Employers may also not allow mourners to dress in a special way, shave their heads, or indulge in self-mutilation.

If the mourning period and rituals are shortened or undermined, the bereaved may be left spiritually and psychologically bereft, and may feel guilty about ancestral displeasure. This may have a direct influence on the employee's mental state and his or her productivity in the workplace. Guilt that is attributable to ancestral displeasure may influence an individual's mental well-being negatively, and the performance or absence of bereavement rituals may thus have a snowball effect on both the bereaved and the workplace. Insufficient or inappropriate mourning may result in deterioration in job performance (Bento, 1994).

Some North American cultures consider it unhealthy for the bereaved to mourn for a long time. The grief process should be resolved as quickly as possible (Fulton & Metress, 1995). On the other hand, in some African cultures mourning the loss of a human being through death is expected to last a long time (one year) and should be publicly displayed. This includes wearing attire that symbolises mourning for a prescribed time (12 months). For example, women in some cultures wear black

dresses during the mourning period. Behaviour during the mourning period thus depends on one's religious-cultural background as it is the cultural heritage that defines prescriptions for what is regarded as appropriate behaviour subsequent to loss, and that distinguishes one from other members of society (Cook & Oltjenbruns, 1989; Guzana, 2000). Furthermore, although people are expected to behave according to cultural prescriptions, the religion that they practice may prescribe different ways of behaviour. Thus, one could conclude that prescribed attire and the period of mourning are socially constructed differently for different religions and cultures.

Discourse 2: Intensity and length of mourning are a testimony of love for the deceased

Losing a much-loved person is cited as one of the most shattering experiences in life (Fulton & Metress, 1995). This is because such closeness extends beyond romantic love, and includes familial relationships (e.g., between parents and children, siblings, and extended family members). Strong attachments between two people provide a sense of gratification, security, stability, and self-esteem, all of which may be shaken when the relationship is severed by death. The loss of such a mutually supportive relationship may threaten the existence of the bereaved, and cause them to question their reasons for going on with life (Fulton & Metress, 1995).

Other than love and a strong attachment, one could ask what else may cause a loss through death to be felt very deeply. One cause is dependency, where the bereaved was dependent on the deceased for his or her survival, financially or otherwise. Such dependency, which might be the result of lack of education, appears to make them feel less equipped to challenge their dominant counterparts (Ngcongo, 1993). Sometimes people mourn intensely because a particular death reminds them of their past dependent experiences where the husband used to provide for the bereaved (Fulton & Metress, 1995; Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007).

Discourse 3: To be healthy after death of a loved one, the mourner must put that person out of mind

This construction of bereavement implies that for a bereaved person to be psychologically healthy and live a healthy life, he or she should forget about the existence of the deceased. This way of constructing reality ignores the notion that once one is loved, a bond exists between the two people, and given the relationship that once existed, the survivors keep the deceased alive in memory. People remember their deceased loved ones especially when memories are triggered by other people or by events (Hedtke, 2002). For example, days that are associated with the deceased remind the survivors of their (deceased) existence. As a result, it is difficult to put that person out of one's mind completely, especially when that person was loved, even when people begin to establish new relationships, the fact that the deceased once lived amongst them remains a reality, though he or she is no longer physically there (Boerner & Heckhausen, 2003).

Discourse 4: All losses prompt the same type of mourning

Constructions of mourning that conceive of all losses being the same are unrealistic. The loss of a material object for example, is often different from mourning the loss of a human being or even a pet (Rando, 1993). Equally, mourning the death of a close relative may be different from mourning the death of a distant relative. That is because grief is determined by the level of attachment between people (Parkes, 2001). This implies that there is not necessarily a unified way of grief and mourning. Even though grief is considered a universal experience (Chan et al., 2005), grief is a unique and individual experience that each person might experience in isolation and in his or her shroud of pain (Maritz et al., 2008). However, among Tshivenda-speaking people, acceptance by the community is often determined by an individual's display of specific behaviours, irrespective of the personal experience of loss. Similarly, bereaved Shangaans have to cry to show that they are mourning (Ngubane, 2004).

Discourse 5: Bereaved individuals need only express their feelings in order to resolve their mourning

In traditional African cultures, especially among the Tshivenda-speaking people, men are discouraged from crying aloud as a sign of grief. The expression ‘*Munna ndi nngu u lilele thumbuni* (a man is a sheep, he does not cry aloud)’ specifically indicates that men should not cry openly. They are expected to be strong and heal without expressing their feelings openly. Constructions of gender in the Tshivenda culture that inform how men and women should express their emotions silences men’s experiences of grief because men are regarded as strong and any expression of grief portrays them as weak. This is also the case in Hong Kong among Chinese men (Pang & Lam, 2002).

In contrast, mourning women in cultures such as the Tshivenda and xiTsonga are expected to openly show “intuitive sensitivity and emotional expressiveness” (Hockey, 1997, p. 90) as an acceptable expression of grief. To show that they are mourning the death of a husband, they must cry (Rosenblatt, 1997). This is not the case with British women who, like men, are not expected to show extreme emotion at the time of bereavement (Hockey, 1997). This seems to suggest that it is not the way that we express our feelings that facilitates healing, but rather how different cultures (and religions) construct appropriate ways of mourning for men and women as, for example, men are taught from an early age that ‘boys do not cry’ (Maritz et al., 2008).

Discourse 6: Grief affects the mourner psychologically but does not impact on other areas of functioning

The construction of the grief experience in this way suggests that those who experience grief only experience it psychologically. Although one cannot rule out the notion that grief affects mourners psychologically, its physical and social impact should not be ignored. In an early study on grief, Lindemann (1944) argues that clinical observations of a large number of bereaved individuals showed that many of the symptoms expressed by the bereaved were physical in nature. For example,

feelings of tightness in the throat and lack of muscular power were extremely common. Some bereaved individuals distance or withdraw themselves from others (Kastenbaum, 1998). Lindemann suggests that it is not only the psychological state of a bereaved individual that is affected, but the person's whole system as well.

People appear to function as social, psychological and physical beings. They cannot comprehend the relationship with death by treating specific phenomena as if they exist in separate compartments (Kastenbaum, 1998). Thus, when people are affected on a psychological level, social and physical aspects of experience are also affected. Since the deceased and the bereaved (in the case of husband and wife) interacted on a social, psychological and physical level, the former's death is likely to affect the bereaved person socially, psychologically and physically. Consequently, the loss of a loved one may not only demand psychological support, but also physical and social support. When death strikes a Tshivenda-speaking family, community members visit the family to offer different forms of support to the bereaved (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). Offering such support may imply that a society knows that in times of tragedy support is needed and must be offered without invitation.

Discourse 7: When one mourns a death, one mourns only the loss of that person and nothing else

This suggests that people should mourn only the death of the person and not other things attached to that person. However, it appears that people not only mourn the loss of a person, but also register the secondary physical and psychological losses accompanying the loss. This entails grief and mourning not only for what one has lost, but also for what one never had and now never will have (Rando, 1993). Mourning in this context depends on issues such as the age of the deceased (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006), the role they played in the life of the bereaved and the loss of significant aspects of someone to whom the bereaved were bonded or developed an important and committed love relationship (Ross, 2002). For example, where the deceased was the breadwinner, the bereaved may mourn the absence of

financial support and the provision of other material resources one had or hoped to obtain from the deceased. This especially appears to be the case in societies where a man is constructed as being more powerful than a woman, and is seen as being responsible for her. She is then placed in a position of dependency on her husband or male partner and regards the husband as the one who provides her with the purpose and shape of life, which unfortunately disappear upon his death (Danforth & Glass, 2001). The possibility exists that women may be affected positively in situations where the breadwinner was economically stable and the bereaved inherits some means (Kastenbaum, 1998). But among many other things, they suffer due to the loss of the deceased's income.

Discourse 8: Losing someone to sudden, unexpected death is the same as losing someone to an anticipated death

Authors such as Fulton and Metress (1995) argue that a sudden, unexpected death produces more severe reactions than an anticipated death. This is based on the assumption that the grieving process starts before a person's death if that death is known to be imminent (Gunnarsson & Ohlen, 2006). Knowing that someone is going to die may prepare people for the death. Although death is constructed as something that takes away life by force, when people know that a person is going to die, they may search for meaning in preparation for coming to terms with the loss. Knowing that someone is going to die calls for gradual engagement with the reality that the bereaved will have to face. Sudden death is both frustrating and shocking as it takes people by surprise. In a culture that believes in performing certain rituals for the dying, sudden death deprives the culture of such an opportunity.

The construction of bereavement and mourning, according to the discourses highlighted in this section, is not helpful for mourners, and may make the experience worse than it needs to be. This is because mourners construct their realities based on situated meanings that originate from overall religious-cultural constructions. Mourners may internalise these discourses; caregivers treat mourners according to them; and family, friends, and society determine the type and extent of support offered based upon them

(Rando, 1993). It is, therefore, important to evaluate the religious-cultural constructions related to bereavement and mourning for the facilitation of healing. Some individuals may not find the prescriptions of religion and culture helpful, and perceive these even as intensifying their grief experiences. For example, when religious-cultural situated meanings deprive men of a public display of feelings on the death of a family member, men might feel guilty and may not be able to relieve their intense internal pain through expressing it visibly.

4.4 BEREAVEMENT RITUALS IN A TSHIVENDA–SPEAKING COMMUNITY

According to Pang and Chang (2002), different cultures have different death rituals and such variance reflects underlying differences in belief systems. In African cultures, when a family member dies, the bereaved family members and relatives have to perform certain bereavement rituals that reflect prescriptions of their cultures. As previously mentioned, before these rituals are performed, the deceased is considered to be neither among the living nor completely among the dead. It is only after performance of such rituals that the dead can actually join the ancestors (Vold, 2000). The way people mourn and perform these rituals is usually expressed in the funeral customs of different religious groups, both Christians and traditional Africans.

4.4.1 Meaning of rituals

Rando (1985) defines rituals as a “specific behaviour or activity that gives symbolic expression to certain feelings and thoughts of the actor or actors, individually, or as a group” (p. 104). This definition indicates that rituals are symbolic in nature, and that there are actors who are performing a particular task in ritual fashion. Bereaved people become actors and symbolise certain things by the performance of these rituals. Thoughts and feelings are translated and given symbolic meaning. When people perform bereavement rituals, they appear to symbolise the feeling of loss that requires them to behave in a specific way – to perform the rituals. They may also perform the rituals to show that they are mourning and that they are in pain. They might also believe that bereavement rituals will heal them from that particular pain. Van der Hart (1983)

maintains that rituals provide healing while Pang and Lam (2002) humanify rituals by maintaining that rituals comfort mourners.

Furthermore, rituals are assumed to affirm cultural values through people's utterances and actions in a given context. (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998; Taylor, 1980). Kollar (1989) maintains that rituals pattern life and the life cycle from birth to death. Thus, there are rituals that are performed after birth, during adolescence, when getting married, and during and after death. These rituals are performed through talk and action. Cook and Oltjenbruns (1989) agree that rituals symbolise transition, healing, and continuity. For a ritual to function successfully and have optimal value, it must have a particular meaning for its participants (Pang & Lam, 2002) and it must meet the needs of the bereaved family. When people do not know the reasons for participating in a particular ritual, for example, if the ritual is enforced merely as a cultural prescription, they are unlikely to benefit from it and may even experience it negatively.

Many traditional African societies assume that those who were socially related to the deceased person remain socially close to the world of the dead for a certain length of time. Only after a certain period (one year amongst the Tshivenda-speaking people) may bereaved people be allowed to be fully active members of the society again. This gives a calendrical nature to rituals. This means that rituals can still be performed in remembrance of the burial day or death day.

Although funeral rituals constitute significant actions about the death of a family member, there are a number of activities taking place prior to the funeral. These include submitting public notices of the death, viewing the body, selecting a casket and grave marker, and having a pre-funeral prayer service (Pang & Lam, 2002; Selepe & Edwards, 2008). Each of these activities serves a purpose in allowing the family to acknowledge personally and publicly that the death has occurred. The public notice or announcement of the death and the pre-funeral prayer provides an opportunity to reach out or call for support (Bolton & Camp, 1987; Selepe & Edwards, 2008). It may, therefore, be argued that the rituals are meant for both the deceased and the bereaved,

who must live in the absence of the deceased. Rituals carry meanings and functions for those who participate in their performance.

4.4.2 Functions of rituals

Attig (2001) argues that in bereavement we suffer because when we lose someone we loved, we experience loss of our wholeness. Since death is assumed to be painful, and causes disequilibrium to the bereaved as well as the community (Chan et al., 2005; Selepe & Edwards, 2008), performance of bereavement rituals is supposed to provide therapy to the bereaved family members. Thus, when people perform the rituals they expect the rituals to provide some benefit for them. It is further expected that through bereavement rituals, the bereaved will possibly come to cognitively accept the death of a loved one (Pang & Lang, 2002).

Aiken (2001), Fulton (1987), Pang and Lang (2002), Taylor (1980) and others have identified certain functions related to bereavement rituals. In traditional African religious-cultural practices, these rituals serve the needs of both individuals and the community. In addition, performing the rituals is not only considered beneficial for one's own healing, but also for assisting the deceased on his or her journey to the afterlife. The latter is discussed in more detail below.

4.4.2.1 Public display of grief

Most societies have rituals such as funerals, prayers and memorial services that serve as a public acknowledgement that a death has occurred (Cook & Oltjenbruns, 1989; Selepe & Edwards, 2008). When performing the rituals, bereaved people show the public that they are grieving, and they call for this to be acknowledged. It possibly means that rituals provide opportunities for a public display of grief. This is important because in communities such as the Tshivenda-speaking community, grief experiences need to be approved and validated by community members. The religious-cultural heritage of that particular community seems to prescribe actions and ways of interacting that inform forms of grief and approval thereof.

Rituals are the means by which the bereaved can express the prescribed and acceptable emotions that are considered to ease their pain (Myerhoff, 1982). In performing the rituals, the bereaved also call for community support and the acknowledgement of the process of mourning. These traditional mourning practices afford friends and neighbours an opportunity to express their condolences, while they also help the bereaved to come to grips with the reality of the loss. Rituals, therefore, allow supportive interpersonal interactions to occur (Corr et al., 1997; Wilson & Kneis, 1983).

4.4.2.2 Assisting the deceased to the afterlife

Many traditional African societies believe that the soul of the deceased must be assisted or allowed to pass from the land of the living to its final resting place in the land of the dead (Walter, 1997). As a result, they perform bereavement rituals as a way of assisting or allowing the dead to join the ancestral world. According to Wiredu (1989, p. 21), “funeral rites are performed for the purpose of ensuring that the deceased may be able to join the ancestral spirits.” According to traditional African beliefs, the spirit of the deceased cannot go to its destination before the funeral rituals have been performed (Wiredu, 1989).

Religious-cultural discourses that attach a value to ancestors prescribe the performance of rituals symbolising, among other things, the transition of the dead to the ancestral world. Assisting the deceased to join the ancestors implies that the ancestors cannot direct themselves to the ancestral world unless the rituals are performed. The deceased must join the ancestral world and fulfil roles that are considered by the living to be the responsibility of the ancestors. These roles include roles relevant for assisting the living in day-to-day activities, such as ploughing. Chinese people believe, for example, that if the rituals are performed according to the accepted procedure, the bereaved will receive material benefit from the deceased in the form of luck, wealth and fertility (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006).

Some bereavement rituals are silent, spontaneous, symbolic statements that represent unique feelings related to the deceased. These include tucking sealed letters underneath the casket pillow, a farewell salute, or, in Western culture, placing a single rose on the casket (Conley, 1987). For traditional Africans, some of the personal belongings of the deceased (e.g., clothes, utensils and dishes) may be placed in the casket. This is done in the belief that the deceased might need them as they travel to the world of the dead (afterlife). After burial, traditional Africans may also leave maize-seeds on the grave. This is a symbolic gesture that the dead should come to the ploughing fields and assist the seeds to grow so that people can harvest great quantities. The metaphoric gesture is that the body planted in the soil during burial will rise again like a plant rises from the seed (Fulton, 1992). This metaphor is also symbolic of the belief that the dead will rise again though in a different form after performance of the rituals, to assist the living to survive.

Christians believe that the moment people die they are called by God, and make the transition to the afterlife even before the funeral. As such, the rituals based on traditional African beliefs are considered unnecessary or even evil (Canine, 1996). From a Christian perspective, there is no need to assist the deceased to join the world of the dead, since once they are declared dead, their spirit joins the spiritual world and requires no further assistance from the survivors. While people in the Tshivenda-speaking community who maintain traditional practices see a need to assist the deceased to join the ancestors because they still have a role to play in their lives, Christians believe that they will reunite with the deceased in heaven (Chan et al., 2005; Pang & Lam, 2002). This implies that intervention in the deceased's life is not possible. Christians are assumed to rely on themselves and on God, without favours from the ancestors, while traditional African people are assumed to be weak and in need of favours or assistance from the ancestors. Christian missionaries taught that the performance of traditional African bereavement rituals was contradictory to the Christian belief system (Chavanduka, 1999) as it involved identifying oneself with ancestors and not God.

4.4.2.3 Assisting change of status to new roles

Since rituals are considered to be rites of passage (Littlewood, 1992), they provide “formal recognition of the transition from one stage in the life cycle to another and the changed status that transition brings” (Fulton & Metress, 1995, p. 462). They also help the bereaved to return to the community with a different social status (Pang & Lam, 2002). Funeral rituals that are performed socially confirm a change in status – for either the bereaved or the deceased (Pine, 1989). For example, the social status of being a husband or wife changes to being a widower or widow. The new status of the bereaved conferred upon them at the death of a family member also symbolises acceptance that the deceased will no longer be accorded the status of the living, but the “living dead” because they are believed to be living in a different state (Ngubane, 2004, p. 174).

As a symbol of accepting a new social status, bereaved people wear mourning clothes for a particular period of time. Such clothes call for acknowledgement, understanding and support from society. Mourning clothes carry a message of personal sorrow and an unspoken request for consideration from others (Sanders, 1992). A Zulu widow in mourning is expected to wear special mourning clothes for one year following the death of her husband (Carton, 2003). By wearing mourning clothes, the bereaved appear to accept that they are broken, and that society’s recognition can return them to a normal state of being. Such a request calls for proper concern for the bereaved from comforters; and the bereaved, being comforted, is expected to respond appropriately to those who help them. This kind of support gives the bereaved family permission, the time and the acceptance to feel what they are feeling (Sanders, 1992). These rules of behaviour or ways of acting are mediated by culture, which prescribes the appropriate behaviour in different contexts (such as the death of a family member). Should there be no prescriptions bereaved people may behave in a way that does not position them as broken or weak people who need support from others.

4.4.2.4 Provision of healing or therapy

Since death of a loved one is assumed to be painful and traumatic for the survivors (Bento, 1994; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006), death rituals appear to have therapeutic value in assisting people to recover and move on with life (Pang & Lam, 2002). Rituals are seen as the best entry point to facilitate healing (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). Performance of bereavement rituals appears to justify the abnormal state of health for people who perform them. This is based on the assumption that after performing the necessary rituals people will return to their normal state.

Van der Hart (1983) maintains that rituals provide healing, continuity, and balance if the griever believes there is meaning in them. This implies that the performance of bereavement rituals is a symbol that the actors are sick, that their life or normal functioning has stopped, or that there is an imbalance in their functioning. Van der Hart's (1983) and Walsh and McGoldrick's (1991) expressions appear to position people who perform the rituals as sick and in need of treatment necessary to cure their sickness. The state of being sick would appear different for the bereaved if they did not perform the rituals following the death of a family member. This may symbolise their acceptance of a different position – possibly that they are normal and do not consider the death to be painful or traumatic.

4.4.2.5 Purification of the mourners

Because there are traditional African cultures that believe mourners, women in particular, are polluted from contact with the dead, funerals and bereavement rituals are believed to help in the purification of those who are polluted (Carton, 2003; Goldberg, 1981). For example, women in the Tshivenda-speaking community who have lost their husbands through death have to perform purifying rituals because it is accepted that they are 'filthy' through their association with the deceased. The same applies to the Zulu widow who is seen as contaminated after the death of a husband (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). The implication is that when the husband dies, the wife becomes dirty. Purification, therefore, allows the survivor to become clean and live a normal life again.

In order to perform these rituals, a traditional healer is invited on the day after the funeral to come and cleanse the whole yard. This is done to prevent another death (misfortunes) that might be caused by lack of respect to the deceased (Aborampar, 1999). This ritual is called '*u bvisa madinga/u handulula*' (loosely translated as '*cleaning the yard*'), and is done in the belief that the family members have been symbolically crushed by a mud wall and need to be released. This imaginary wall surrounding the survivors symbolises their bereavement.

The environment of the bereaved is also believed to be contaminated and must be cleansed. In order to cleanse it, the faith healer will come and sprinkle holy water. The sprinkling of holy water around the kraal takes cognisance of the effects of death in the environment within which the deceased used to function and in which the survivors will continue functioning (Sanders, 1992; Selepe & Edwards, 2008).

The belief that people and their environment are contaminated by death seems to be informed by a religious-cultural heritage that constructs death as something that dirties people, who then need cleansing to return them to the previous state they occupied before the occurrence of death. I am saying so because cleansing after the death of a family member is not a universal behaviour, but is only relevant to some cultures, like Tshivenda, Zulu, and Shangaan cultures (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007; Selepe & Edwards, 2008).

4.5 GENDER AND BEREAVEMENT

Approaches to death and bereavement in the Tshivenda culture call our attention to the constructed category of gender. Gender is culturally produced or constructed and its "roots [are] in society and culture" (Guzana, 2000, p. 75). There appears to be a discourse that constructs men in the bereavement process as being stronger and women as weaker. The implication of this discourse, which is discussed below, is the essentialist notion of difference between men and women that is expressed in a stereotypical way when individuals deal with their grief. This section focuses on the

different rules that are made for men and women, the power of religion and culture in making these rules, and the constructions of bereavement rituals according to gender.

4.5.1 Different rules for men and women

There are certain socially constructed rules that apply to men and others that apply to women. These rules concern appropriate ways of action and interaction in different contexts. They also mediate the conception of men as active, instrumental figures and women as passive, nurturing figures (Thompson, 1997) who rely on the husband's presence and remittances for support (Sihlongonyane, 2004). Differences in these rules imply that men and women are different even in the context of death. Such differences appear to be largely related to male and female identity development in which boys supposedly separate and individuate more easily than girls. The male identity is embedded in values and attributes of individualism. The opposite becomes the case with women whose identity is embedded in connectedness, affiliation, and attachment. Women are also apparently more likely than men to think of themselves as someone's daughter, mother, wife, sister, friend, lover, and so on (Ross, 2002).

Historically, Tshivenda-speaking women were not allowed to go to school. As a result, many of them are not educated and remain housewives who are dependent on their husbands for their identity, finances and security. Husbands who received schooling or are employed hold all the power in the household and provide everything for their dependent wives. When the husband dies, the wife may become destitute, partly because of the loss of her husband's current and future earnings (Fulton & Metress, 1995).

Winbush (2000, p. 13) states, "African women traditionally are expected to be caretakers", and not the primary breadwinners. The construction of men's role as breadwinners (Moyo, 2002) makes women appear different from men and continues to influence women's perceptions of the grief experience. Since they perceive men to be breadwinners, the death of a husband leaves them destitute (Gunga, 2009). They construct their position in terms of an inability to do what is meant for men (being a

breadwinner). Such dependency appears to accompany a woman even after the death of her husband (Luginaah, Elkins, Maticka-Tyndale, Landry & Mathui, 2005) and immediately shifts to other people when the husband dies. Unemployed Tshivenda-speaking women commonly turn to their in-laws for the financial support that the husband used to provide. Women's position of dependency is maintained even after the death of their husband, and is influenced by the cultural norms that render women submissive to their husbands who are at the top of the hierarchy in terms of power and responsibility (Gunga, 2009). This power or control is transferred to the wife's in-laws upon a husband's death. A patriarchal discourse governs the marital relationship, which keeps a woman dependent on her husband. The construction of this position is likely informed by culturally prescribed rules for women and men.

As they behave according to the prescribed rules, men and women tend to express their emotions in the context of bereavement differently. Being feminine appears to "require intuitive sensitivity and emotional expressiveness, in contrast with masculine which is predicated upon rationality and emotional control" (Hockey, 1997, p. 90). In many African cultures, like those in South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire, women are expected to express their emotions openly (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007; Sassou, 2002). This is not the case with British women who, like men, are not expected to show extreme emotion at the time of bereavement (Hockey, 1997). The issue of emotional control is consistent with what is expected from Chinese men who, upon the death of their wives, will continue with funeral arrangements because they are expected to be strong (Pang & Lam, 2002).

Ross (2002) maintains that mourning and other responses to significant loss are different for men compared to women. Different expectations also influence the ways men and women grieve the loss of a spouse among the Tshivenda-speaking people. Women are expected to grieve openly, and portray themselves as weaker, passive and in need of support (Pang & Lam, 2002), while men, in turn, must hide their grief and appear strong. However, Cook and Oltjenbruns (1989) believe the construction that men's mourning should be invisible makes it difficult for those men for whom this

expression of grief does not come naturally. Although men are identified in cultural terms as being stronger and active, they may sometimes feel quite the opposite. However, they are not allowed to express these feelings. Because they have to appear stronger and active, men tend to be more publicly visible (Gunga, 2009), and participate more in making the necessary funeral arrangements than women (Pang & Lam, 2002).

The rules set for men and women lead people to perceive themselves according to those rules. They also perceive themselves according to how others perceive them (Winbush, 2000) and talk about them. The construction of women as weaker than men is socially and culturally constructed, and as such, they are more likely to accept the subject positioning of being weaker, and to behave as such. Because of this positioning, women are more likely to perform the prescribed rituals that men do not have to perform (Gunga, 2009).

In cultural contexts where women have been socialised into dependent social roles, some losses may act as a means to remove social constraints to growth and independence. For women in these social contexts, loss may in some ways be liberating – moving them from dependence to independence (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001). This appears to be possible for women who have a high level of education, are largely enlightened and economically stable (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007; Limann, 2003).

4.5.2 The power of religion and culture

Most traditional African women have had, and continue to have, far less power in decision-making than men (Winbush, 2000) as the cultural expectation of total subordination of African women to men exists that places women in a position that is in many ways inferior to that of the man (Sassou, 2002). As a result, both women and men construct men as decision-makers and their traditional roles as superior in a way that is normal (Gunga, 2009). A woman's respect for such roles appears to label one as a good woman (Chong, 2006). Tshivenda-speaking women are no exception. They live without power in relationships with men and are dependent on men who have the power to decide for them. Such lack of power for women is constructed in a way that even in

the context of bereavement, women expect other people to decide for them. Among the Tshivenda-speaking people, people who occupy positions of power tend to make decisions for women. Usually people who occupy positions of power over bereaved women are the in-laws, particularly the mother-in-law (Gunga, 2009), who would also have been in the same powerless position upon her husband's death. At an old age and as grandparent she earns respect and power, which approximates to that of men over her daughter-in-law (Ngcongco, 1993). In their study concerning Zulu widows, Rosenblatt and Nkosi (2007) found that in-laws use their power over widows to arrange the rituals and widows consider it as a form of support. In-laws have the power not only to oppress widows, but also to provide ritual support that is considered to benefit the widow.

However, at this point I cannot ignore the religious-cultural and historical factors that determine whether family members are placed in positions of power or powerlessness and authority or subordination. One religious-cultural and historical tool that underlies men-women inequalities is language (Ngcongco, 1993). The label given to women, '*musadzi*' in Tshivenda implies something powerless, voiceless and not worth respect. Such a label positions women in voiceless and they also accept being silenced. Chinese widows also perceive the word 'widow' to have negative connotations as it allows family members to look down upon the widows (Chan et al., 2005). Through accepting this inferior status, women and widows allow themselves to be defined by the dominant group (Guzana, 2000). Among the Tshivenda-speaking community, religion and culture position women in such inferior and powerless positions (Moyo, 2004). This is a historical phenomenon, and as such, women are accustomed to this definition.

The nature of some cultural prescriptions reduces women to perpetual minors with no say in decision making at home and in the society at large (Malange, 1992; Moyo, 2004). Such cultural prescriptions appear to ignore the constitution of South Africa that protects women's rights and gender equity (in the Bill of Rights, 1996). In defence of the self, some women may behave differently from cultural prescriptions. Instead of total silent subordination as prescribed and expected by culture (Sassou, 2002), they voice their frustrations.

In order to voice their frustrations against the dominance of men, traditional African women use language in situations that justify and support such form of communication. They ventilate their frustrations through singing and dancing (Moyo, 2004), whilst others reply with comforting lyrics, sometimes accompanied by solutions to problems and encouragement to tolerate difficult situations. Sometimes when they do not want the 'outsiders' to hear what they mean, they murmur and only the closest will hear (Guzana, (2000). Such behaviour is adopted because it fits with the self of a 'good woman' who lives according to how a particular culture defines her as powerless and voiceless or without freedom of speech.

In some African cultures, including Tshivenda culture, a woman is considered the property of the man and his family when the husband pays lobola to her family (Rakoczy, 2004; Van Schalkwyk, 2005). Upon marriage, she moves to her husband's family (Tertilt, 2005), where she loses her own name and is called by her child's name, i.e., as 'the mother of Muga' or in religious institutions she may adopt the husband's surname (Gcabase, 1995). Women live without agency or control over their actions and interactions, to the extent that they do not question their husbands or in-laws actions and decisions (Guzana, 2000). They become second-class citizens (Moyo, 2004). Should they lose their spouses, they will have minimal rights to property (if any) and other social goods. A lack of agency and control, and being construed as someone's property, implies a powerless position for women. The position of power is conferred, instead, on members of the family into which they married. Another implication is that a woman has identity and status in her husband's family only as long as he lives. Should he die, this sense of identity, belonging and status is lost.

The disempowered position that women adopt upon marriage remains with them even after their husband's death. Widows often experience less support from their husbands' families than they did before he died (Lopata, 1993). This is consistent with Van den Hoonaard's (1997) finding that when women are not with their husbands, they continue to be treated as second-class citizens. The treatment that widows receive shows how

women are marginalised when their husbands die, and that their identity is lost or dies along with the husband.

Women do, however, find ways to resist these gendered positioning. Although they are considered and expected to live as powerless and submissive to their husband's power, South Korean women consider such behaviour as a way of attracting recognition and appreciation from their husbands. Women's submissiveness in the Korean context appears to be a passive resistance to men's power. In a way such internal resistance enables women to feel 'superior' and somehow in power (Chong, 2006) as their husbands appreciate their submissiveness.

4.5.3 Constructions of bereavement rituals according to gender

In the Tshivenda-speaking community, like in Luo culture of Kenya, bereavement rituals seem designed for women, since only they are expected to perform these rituals upon their husband's death. Such rituals are prescribed by culture, and other people (elders) become the ones to observe that such rituals are conducted (Gunga, 2009).

Gender imbalances appear to influence women observing more rituals than men do (Fulton & Metress, 1995). When observing these rituals, women implicate themselves as being in greater need of assistance, which is received through performing the rituals. A further implication is that women have to submit to the cultural prescriptions because failure to observe these rituals may be accompanied by misfortunes, blame and loss of support and acceptance from the in-laws (Aborampah, 1999; Gunga, 2009; Sassou, 2002). Ironically, the culture that subjects women to a weaker position becomes the one that oppresses women upon their husband's death, and denies them many opportunities in life. Such culture places more restrictions on widow than on widower. Widows are subjected to cruel and humiliating rituals in relation to socialisation, dress codes, nutrition, personal hygiene and sexual activities (Sassou, 2002).

Due to gender imbalance, bereaved women in many traditional African cultures endure societal marginalisation, institutionalisation and isolation dictated by traditional and

cultural practices associated with bereavement rituals. They are expected to undergo seclusion rituals and experience general isolation from the society for a certain period, which is not the case for bereaved men (Gunga, 2009; Sassou, 2002). Zulu widows of South Africa are expected to sit in a specially designated area where people will come and pay condolences (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). The intensity and duration of rituals varies from one week to twelve months (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007; Carton, 2003). The prescribed seclusion ritual symbolises mourning the death of a husband; and if a woman is seen outside interacting with the society (during the seclusion period) it is assumed that she is not mourning and is then blamed for being the one who killed her husband (Sassou, 2002).

In addition to the seclusion ritual, some rituals diminish a widow's attractiveness by desexualising her through dress codes and placing taboos on her participation in social activities (Bremmer & Van Den Bosch, 1995). During the mourning period, widows are expected to observe a particular dress code (Sassou, 2002). Such dressing code appears to be a way to show the public the respect for the dead and proof of inconsolable sadness.

Traditional African women, particularly within the Tshivenda speaking community, upon the death of a husband, are denied freedom of association and choice as expected by the constitution of South Africa (Bill of Rights, 1996). They continuously find themselves in conflict with the quest for gender justice (Moyo, 2004). They are not allowed to marry again soon after a husband's death (Gunga, 2009). Conversely, men are permitted to choose and marry again soon after the death of a spouse since they are regarded as being stronger than women (Sassou, 2002), and their actions and movements are not restricted by widowhood rites (Owen, 1994). Should a widow show some interest in a man, she will be labelled a prostitute, branded as evil and suspected of causing her husband's death, since death in traditional African culture is mostly regarded as caused by witchcraft (Sassou, 2002). After observing a particular period of mourning, it is culturally expected for many African widows that they get a husband (chosen by in-laws) within the family of the deceased (Gunga, 2009), irrespective of the person's

sexual lifestyle. This practice may expose widows to the danger of contracting HIV in the process of honouring the cultural prescription (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007). Re-marrying in the deceased family also implies that death of a husband, for a wife, does not necessarily end a marriage (United Nations, 2001), and possibly that women lack sexual decision-making power (Moyo, 2004).

In many African cultures, for example, the Igbo of Nigeria, Akan of Ghana, Baule of Cote d'Ivoire, Luo of Kenya, and Shangaan, Zulu and Tshivenda of South Africa bereaved women as compared to men are the ones considered to be contaminated by the death of a husband and require purification (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007; Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007; Sassou, 2002; Selepe & Edwards, 2008). The purification or cleansing ritual is believed to wash away the deceased spirit and misfortunes associated with the death of a husband (Sassou, 2002). Cleansing is also considered to be a pre-requisite for incorporation into their society (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007) before which they are restricted to interact for a particular period depending on the culture (Bremmer & Van Den Bosch, 1995).

Given that cultural prescriptions for grief vary by gender, it is perhaps not surprising that, in a longitudinal study of well-being in widowed women, Bennett (1996) found that women experience lower morale and more personal problems than men do. This is possibly because women experience multiple losses upon the death of the husband. For those who were economically dependent on their husbands (Sihlongonyane, 2004) his death adds challenges that already existed when he was still alive. In addition to such losses, women who have lost husbands exchange their status as wives for the lesser status of widows (Chan et al., 2005). This may account for why Tshivenda-speaking women, and not men, are expected to observe bereavement rituals, which include remaining inside the house until the funeral is over, wearing black dresses for twelve months, purifying themselves, and so on.



4.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Researchers generally agree that bereavement rituals are important in processing the impact of death. They are considered to serve different functions and, in some if not all of the African cultures, failure to perform them is associated with misfortunes. Although people from different religious-cultural backgrounds have different perceptions of bereavement rituals that are informed by religious-cultural discourses, gender plays a particular role in how people perceive and perform these rituals.

Chapter 5 addresses the research methods employed in this study.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I address the research journey employed for this study and focus on the ways and means adopted to reach my destination and achieve the research goals. Social research is usually embedded in a specific paradigm or mode of investigation. In this regard, the social sciences use, amongst others, positivist, interpretive, and social constructionist paradigms when conducting research. Each implies different thought frameworks and procedures (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006).

I adopted the social constructionist paradigm as my theoretical framework, with the aim of showing “how versions of [the] social world are produced in discourse, and to demonstrate how these constructions of reality make certain actions possible and others unthinkable” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p. 7). The focus was on the discourses that informed widows’ perceptions of bereavement rituals in a Tshivenda-speaking community, and the choice of discourse analysis seemed justified in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the multiple realities constructed in the face of the death of a spouse.

5.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to analyse the discourses of Tshivenda-speaking women about bereavement rituals. In view of this overall purpose, I set four objectives to be explored with regard to the discourses that informed:

- the perceptions of traditional African and African Christian women regarding bereavement rituals within their respective religious-cultural models;
- the functions and meanings of bereavement rituals and the process of grieving that traditional African and African Christian women experience when faced by the death of a husband;

- the situated meanings that are attached to places, bodies, and institutions relevant to bereavement rituals as perceived by Tshivenda-speaking women faced with having to perform bereavement rituals when a spouse has died; and
- the contradictions that emerged in the constructions of bereaved Tshivenda-speaking women.

In order to achieve the objectives I also explored how the participants talk about their experiences of loss at the death of their spouses. The focus, however, was on the participants' construction about the rituals accompanying their husband's death, and on gaining an in-depth understanding of their constructions of bereavement rituals required by the religious-cultural communities in which they live.

5.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

Before considering the research approach adopted for this study, the paradigm (social constructionism) and methodological approach (discourse analysis) underlying the study are briefly discussed. Social constructionism accepts that there are multiple realities constructed in the interaction between people, and allows for the investigation of participants' perceptions from their own perspective (Burr, 2003). This fits well with a qualitative methodology, as will be indicated in this section.

The general objective of this study was to explore a particular aspect of action and experience in real life (namely, perceptions of the performance of bereavement rituals) and find a means to understand these social actions in terms of a specific context (the death of a spouse) rather than attempting to generalise to a theoretical population. In this instance, attempts were made to capture the meaning that evolved from within, and the structures of what people said about what they did (Parker, 1994). It required exploratory skills to gain an in-depth description of the special context.

As Leedy (2000) explains, qualitative research is typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and

understanding the phenomena from the participant's point of view. Qualitative research is concerned with meaning, sense making and subjective experience rather than “imposition of pre-conceived variables” (Willig, 2001, p. 9). The focus was on the participants’ perspectives of the topic being studied (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), the language they used to give meaning to their perceptions of the phenomenon (Storey, 2007), and how knowledge and social action go together to construct reality.

Another important consideration was the notion that social processes in the interaction between people sustain knowledge. Dyer (1996) argues that by using a qualitative approach, a researcher can capture information that might be difficult or impossible to express by quantitative means. For example, the way Tshivenda-speaking women perceive the performance of bereavement rituals requires an in-depth approach that would allow the participants to express their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation instead of merely responding to pre-determined categories that the researcher could have collated in an instrument such as a self-report questionnaire.

Adopting qualitative methods for investigating the topic of this study, therefore, would give me an opportunity to understand the discourses that informed women’s perceptions of the performance of bereavement rituals and to understand how they constructed their realities of bereavement given the religious-cultural meanings underlying their perceptions. In a constructionist paradigm, qualitative methods such as discourse analysis have become common practice (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). Discourse analysis enables the constructionist researcher to identify how versions of the social world are produced in discourse (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006), and to describe as best as possible the socially constructed realities that emerge in the day-to-day lives of participants.

The constructionist approach furthermore concerns itself with the holistic notion of human experiences and social phenomena as entities to be explicated and understood in their entirety (Burr, 2003; Mouton, 1988; Mouton & Marais, 1991; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Schurink (1998) agrees that qualitative research and research based in the

constructionist paradigm is not aimed at predicting human behaviour by means of natural laws (cause-effect), but rather focuses more on social action and social processes. Thus the notion of an external, objective reality is discarded in favour of understanding the multiple realities co-constructed between participants in a conversation in the here-and-now. One of the researcher's main concerns should, therefore, be to discover the meaning that participants attach to their everyday lives when they construct specific meanings in a specific setting. There is no single narrative of grief, but a panoply of perspectives within which any individual is positioned. Each person constructs a unique response to bereavement that distils the meanings of loss currently in his or her family, community or culture (Neimeyer, 2001).

5.3.1 Discourse

An examination of humans as social beings gives researchers an understanding and appreciation of the importance of language. Life in interaction with others would be very difficult without language. The existence of language makes it feasible for human beings to socialise, interact and communicate. Language is an important means of doing things (Potter, 2001). The term 'discourse' refers to a form of language use, or to ideas and philosophies. As a form of language use, discourse attends to who is using the language (author), and how, why and when the discourse is produced as a communicative event – a verbal interaction (Van Dijk, 1997). This implies that there is an interaction between the speaker or author and the audience or listener.

According to Burr (2003), a discourse refers to “a systematic, coherent set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (p. 202) In these instances, linguistic building blocks like words, idioms and/or repertoires are used to construct discourse (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Thus people who use language produce their own version of a particular event. It follows, therefore, that when Tshivenda-speaking women talk about bereavement rituals, they produce their own version of these rituals. By extension, when other people talk about bereavement rituals, they may produce a different version of

bereavement rituals. Thus, any version of events is but one of a number of possible versions that different people can construct about that particular event (Coyle, 2007).

Discourse also involves performative qualities, which are what people are doing with their talk and what they are trying to achieve (Willig, 2008). Similarly, when Tshivenda-speaking women speak about a topic such as bereavement rituals, they become both the authors and the audience; they are doing something to achieve something. The language that the participants use about bereavement rituals is, therefore, an important element of understanding what they are doing with their talk. This is because language is used to perform particular social functions which it achieves through a variety of rhetorical strategies (Coyle, 2007). Hence Wiggins and Potter (2008) refer to discourse as action-oriented. As participants talk about their events, they either convey a message of blaming, justifying, inviting, complimenting, and so on.

Willig (2008) consider discourse as constructs of an object. In this instance, researchers are also reminded of the way in which our conversations and interactions create a reality. Discourse thus becomes a way of conveying the message that a family member has died, as well as the realities constructed in the face of death. It also becomes a means towards understanding the ways in which Tshivenda-speaking women construct bereavement rituals and the associated rituals, as well as the situated meanings attached to these rituals.

Furthermore, discourses and the way in which they are used in conversation reflect the norms of the society and the strategic processes that justify and sustain these norms (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Hence, Neimeyer (2001) argues that individuals make meaning by drawing selectively on a fund of discourses that precede them and that are consensually validated within their cultures, subcultures, communities, and families. Therefore, what people say is meaningful beyond their intentions (Parker, 1996). However, language users do not passively reproduce the ideologies of their society. There is a dialectic relation between users and the meanings they create in the context. As active human beings we are able to contribute to or change the context in

which we speak, and the power of discourses about death and bereavement can be obeyed and reproduced or challenged; and by so doing, we create new meanings (Van Dijk, 1997).

Neimeyer (2001) maintains that human beings are (co)authors of their life stories. In those stories, there are things they want to achieve (Eatough & Smith, 2008). They try to compose a meaningful account of the important events of their lives. In the process, they revise, edit and dramatically rewrite these stories when the presuppositions that sustain these accounts are challenged by unanticipated or incongruous events. That is because our current socio-cultural environment that is ever-changing (Rosenblatt, 2001), shapes everything that we say, for example about bereavement. This implies that when people are faced with significant loss they experience a challenge in their sense of narrative coherence as well as to the sense of identity for which they are an important source of validation (Neimeyer, 1998).

Since life events are not static, Wiggins and Potter (2008) maintain that discourse is situated within a specific environment in which words are understood according to what precedes and follows them. This implies that our talk is dependent on a particular occasion, situation and interaction (Taylor, 2001; Wooffitt, 2005). Thus, participants' talk is relevant to the death of a husband and bereavement rituals.

5.3.2 Discourse analysis

Sometimes we hear and say things that we consider to be common sense. Some discourse analysts call these sets of terms or phrases interpretative repertoires or metaphors. Interpretative repertoires can be identified and explicated through discourse analytic studies (Potter, 1996). What is considered in a society to be common sense is part of the ideological basis of the community (Van Dijk, 1998). To analyse discourses, we have to suspend our common sense knowledge and "render the familiar strange" (Gill, 1996, p. 144). In doing this, our eyes are opened and our minds become alert enough to think about and understand language usage in a new way.

Going further than systematic descriptions of how language constructs reality, discourse analysis can also build theories to explain relationships between language used and the beliefs and interactions that underlie discursive practice (Van Dijk, 1997). Stubbs (1983, p. 1) defines discourse analysis as "(1) concerned with language used beyond the boundaries of sentence/utterance, (2) concerned with the interrelationships between language and society, and (3) as concerned with the interactive and dialogic properties of everyday communication". According to Coyle (2007), language in the form of discourses constitutes the building blocks of social reality. Discourse analysis, therefore, focuses on language and examines how people use language to construct versions of their own world.

As ambivalence and paradox is part of society, it is also seen and heard in discourse. In contemporary society, which is changing fast, these contradictions and ambiguities are expressed in language (Parker, 1990). In the present study, I focused on how African Christian and traditional African women used language to construct versions of their world, specifically with regard to the performance of bereavement rituals. This was done through a discourse analysis of texts based on their conversations about the topic.

5.3.4 Credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research

A limitation of qualitative research is that it does not meet the requirements posed by positivist approaches for controlled verification of the researcher's detachment from their object of research and interpretations. Whereas this may be a concern with positivists, the constructionist paradigm is not interested in generalisations of human behaviour. Rather, the main concern for constructionists employing qualitative methods is to understand phenomena within a particular socio-cultural context (Schurink, 1998).

The constructionist paradigm considers that people's thoughts, feelings and experiences are produced by systems of meanings that exist at a social level (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). These meanings are furthermore considered to be valid local knowledge systems that inform how people live their lives with a sense of community. It is this focus the present study intended to pursue in an attempt to elicit

the discourses informing the ways in which traditional African women and African Christian women constructed their perceptions of and talked about bereavement rituals.

Although verification in discourse analysis might be impossible, validation is important. Interpretations should be subjected to a process of continuous re-evaluation and reflection until the most appropriate and plausible interpretation is obtained. No matter how difficult it is to verify the truthfulness of interpretation, the researcher had to attempt an interpretation that is more probable than any other (Duncan, 1993). Such interpretation may still not be considered final because it only stands until interpretations that are more plausible arise (Duncan, 1993; Parker, 1988).

In order to ensure credibility in discourse analysis, it is important to continuously reflect upon the main objectives of the study and the procedures followed to answer the major research question. During my data collection, I had to guide the participants to remain within the domain of the topic under investigation. During the data analysis and interpretation, it was also my responsibility to remain within the scope of the study so that I did not miss the situated meanings, and so that I could represent the voices of the participants as truthfully as possible. There should be congruence between the data and the language used by the participants, and the report should be plausible within the context in which the study was conducted.

Transferability is another vital aspect in guaranteeing trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. According to Golafshani (2003), transferability concerns the degree to which findings can be applied to other contexts or groups. Qualitative researchers have to collect and report sufficient detailed descriptions of data (often referred to as 'thick descriptions') to allow the reader to make a judgement about transferability (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Therefore, I included in this thesis a chapter detailing the first level of interpretation (Chapter 6) and the transcriptions and translation of the focus group interviews (Appendix B).

In qualitative research, the process is never objective (Lal, 2001). This is possibly the reason why Marshall and Rossman (1993) say that the rationale behind confirmability is whether the data will help to confirm general findings. Babbie and Mouton (2001) state that confirmability concerns “the degree to which the findings are the product of the focus of the inquiry and not of the biases of the researcher” (p. 278). Since the qualitative researcher is closely involved in the process (Patton, 2001), it is necessary to build in various measures that can promote the credibility and trustworthiness of both the data and interpretation (Visser, 2001). By including the transcripts from the focus groups (see Appendix B) and detailed information about how the research was developed (in this chapter) a confirmability audit trail is presented "to enable the auditor to determine if the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and if they are supported by the enquiry" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 278). More will be said about this in section 5.5.3. Furthermore, I used non-probability sampling techniques (purposeful sampling and snowball sampling) which enabled me to enhance the relationship between the participants and myself (a detailed discussion follows in section 5.4.1). This presented me with the opportunity to double-check the data and interpretations with the participants (Tellis, 1997).

This section indicated how various measures were considered in this study to ensure credibility and trustworthiness in discourse analysis. The following section reports on the process of collecting the discourses that are necessary for analysis.

5.4 COLLECTING DISCOURSES

Interviews are considered a valuable tool for collecting data for discourse analysis (Potter, 1996). Because an interview is a social situation in which conversation takes place through language, the researcher can explore the participants' interpretative practices and situated meanings to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Interviews allow the interviewer an opportunity to listen closely to the interviewees' life experiences (Reinharz & Chase, 2003). The participants used their day-to-day terminology or language to describe their perceptions

of the bereavement rituals, and the interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue. This seemed appropriate in order to make it easier for them to express their viewpoints (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, I looked for participants who were willing and capable of providing rich information regarding the performance of bereavement rituals in their native language. These participants were also able to reflect upon the effect of such rituals on their own lives. I particularly looked for women in the Tshivenda-speaking community who considered it their responsibility to comment on social practices and religious-cultural models operative in their community. More will be said about the selection of participants in the section that follows.

5.4.1 Selecting participants

Discourse analytical studies normally use a small number of participants in order to gather in-depth information about the phenomenon under investigation. Whereas large samples could result in the analyst facing a large number of transcripts that might be difficult to make sense of, a small sample of texts or interviews generally produces quite a large pool of information (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Taylor, 2001). According to Potter and Wetherell, a sample of 100 texts would add to the labour involved without really producing anything more significant than a sample of ten texts would have produced. Willig (2008) adds that, since one of the primary goals of discourse analysis is to understand the transcripts under investigation and not to make generalisation to a particular population, broader samples might not serve any meaningful purpose.

I therefore adopted a purposive sampling approach for selecting 24 participants for this project based on my judgement that a participant complied with the purpose of the study and the phenomenon under investigation (Strydom, 2005b). I selected the participants and made personal contact with women in the Tshivenda-speaking community that fit the criteria set for inclusion in this project. 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 analyse (Noy, 2009). The following criteria were relevant:

- The participants should have lost a husband through death. Among the Tshivenda-speaking people, only women are expected to mourn the death of their husbands and to complete the mourning period prescribed for them by the culture. Thus, only widows were selected for participation.
- Furthermore, in the Tshivenda-speaking community where I conducted the study there were people who belonged to the African Independent Churches, a mixed belief system including both Christian and traditional African practices, those who belonged to the African Christian church who considered themselves 'born-again' Christians, and traditional Africans with no particular religious affiliation except for their indigenous religious-cultural practices. Thus, widows adhering to these different belief systems were included (in six groups) in this project in order to gain an understanding of how the religious-cultural discourses informed the meanings they attached to the bereavement rituals.
- The participants should be able to speak Tshivenda fluently. This is also my native language and the language in which I conducted the interviews.
- The participants should be 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).

I also employed the snowball method to locate and recruit participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). I did this by following the daily death announcements on the local radio station in order to identify prospective participants who fitted the above criteria. From these reports, I identified six widows whose husbands had died prior to the set date for data collection, and who represented the 'born-again' Christian Church, the African Independent Church and the traditional African group. I obtained their contact details from the announcements, and asked these widows if they would be prepared to participate in the research. If they assented, I allocated each of them to a separate group and asked them to suggest other people whom they knew were qualified to join

the group. The effectiveness of snowball sampling is that people who have had similar life experiences tend to know each other (Kelly, 1999). This also ensures that the participants were comfortable discussing the topic with each other. This helped me gain more in-depth information from their conversation.

The participants were organised into six groups according to area of residence (villages) and difference in religious affiliation. The interviews took place in the local school classroom to avoid expenses of travelling to a distant area. Each group consisted of three to five participants who ranged in age from 38 to 68 years. Altogether, I interviewed 24 participants in the six groups (see Table 5-1). Focus group discussions were conducted to provide in-depth accounts of their perceptions and to obtain the textual data for this project.

Table 5-1 Group arrangement for focus group discussions

Group	Number of participants	Age range of participants	Religions*	Geographic location
Group 1	5	38 to 50 years of age	AC, AIC, TA	Phiphidi
Group 2	5	48 to 58 years of age	AC, AIC, TA,	Lwamondo
Group 3	3	38 to 57 years of age	AC, AIC, TA	Ngudza
Group 4	3	47 to 57 years of age	AIC, TA	Tshitereke
Group 5	4	53 to 68 years of age	AC, AIC, TA	Itsani
Group 6	4	58 to 68 years of age	AC, AIC, TA	Tshikhudini
Total	24			

*AC: African Christian, *AIC: African independent Churches, *TA: Traditional African

5.4.2 Focus group discussions

Given the low level of education and literacy of the Tshivenda-speaking women in the Thulamela Municipality, it would have been unrealistic to attempt to obtain their discourses regarding the performance of bereavement rituals in a written format. In view of this, I used focus group discussions and later transcribed and translated the conversations for analysis purposes. Transcribing was done because in discursive research the primary source is always a paper copy of the original recording (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Coyle (2007) maintains that the focus group interview is the preferable

method of collecting data for discourse analysis. Focus group interviews have the possibility of minimising the researcher's influence on the participants' discourses. This can occur in face-to-face interviews between the supposedly knowledgeable researcher or interviewer and the conversation partners (Morgan, 1997).

The focus group interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, which is a relatively well established method in the social sciences and in psychological research, as an effective means of collecting data (Essed, 1991; Levett, 1989). Greeff (2005) argues that researchers use semi-structured interviews to gain a detailed picture of participants' beliefs, perceptions or accounts of a particular topic. Focus groups allowed for inter-subjective perceptions and meanings shared by participants to emerge in a conversational setting. The sharing of viewpoints and meanings is common among the Tshivenda-speaking community and conversing on a topic such as bereavement rituals would thus not have been strange to the widows participating in this project. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews in a focus group setting were focused and discursive, and allowed the researcher and participants to explore the topic while co-constructing perceptions regarding the performance of bereavement rituals.

Since the participants were invited to participate in a focus group discussion about their personal perceptions regarding bereavement rituals, focus group interaction allowed me 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). Berg (1998) argued that interaction between group members largely emphasises the participants' viewpoints. Focus group interviews were particularly appropriate since they allowed me to explore multiple viewpoints and accounts of the participants on the topic being studied. Furthermore, the group interviews promoted self-disclosure among participants and provided ample opportunity for efficient and suitable exploration and discovery, context and depth interpretation (Greeff, 2005). Chong (2006) argues that small group interactions, as in a focus group, provide collective opportunities for release, emotional ventilation, and mutual consolation. This implies that when women shared their

experiences in a group setting, they also benefited from emotional support from one another.

Finally, another advantage of conducting focus group interviews was that I could gain access to multiple realities among the widows whom I might previously have thought of as a homogeneous group. As indicated earlier, participation was based on certain criteria for inclusion and the participants shared certain characteristics that could have made the widows seem homogenous. However, they came from different families and accepted different religious beliefs. This alone could influence whether or not they shared a common base of perceptions (Kelly, 1999). Such differences would become apparent in the conversational setting.

5.4.3 Procedures for focus group discussions

Given that the nature of the present study was exploratory, I decided to focus on the six groups indicated above (see Table 5-1) because they produced enough material for discourse analysis (Coyle, 2007). Saturation was achieved when participants could no longer provide new information, but started to repeat what had already been said in other groups. Each group participated in one discussion session, and the duration of the sessions was determined by the amount of information given by the respondents. Overall, I allowed them to continue talking until I was certain that the saturation point had been achieved (Ambasa-Shisanya, 2007). Typically, a session would last for one and a half hours.

In order to ensure maximum group participation, and given the culture of Tshivenda-speaking women, I adopted the guidelines highlighted by Morgan and Krueger (1998). This involved showing interest in the participants and positive regard towards them. I acted as a facilitator rather than a participant, and was ready to hear views that are not pleasant. Because the groups were formed on the basis of acquaintance, the group members knew each other beforehand and thus felt less intimidated and restrained in discussing issues that were related to the loss of a loved one. Geographic location or

membership of a particular community thus influenced the compilation of the group and the variance in group size.

Prior to the start of each focus group interview, I provided a short briefing of approximately five minutes in order to reduce any uncertainty that the participants might feel, and to acquaint the widows with the objectives of the study, the interviewing situation, and the audio recorder, which was used for analysis and archival purposes. The briefing did not include any specific information that could distort the outcome, but gave participants an opportunity to feel free and at ease, and to open up with one another during their conversation on the topic.

Because the interviews were semi-structured, I used an interview guide (see Table 5-2) to guide the discussion. The questions were introduced as a way to elicit and maintain the discussion of the topic under consideration. Though I was interested in participants' spontaneous conversation rather than fixed responses to pre-determined questions, the interview guide and questions directed the process in such a manner that the broader objective of this study could be achieved. Therefore, I elicited conversation on the following topics:

- General experiences of losing a husband
- Perceptions regarding performance of bereavement rituals
- The way the widows coped with death and bereavement rituals

Table 5-2 Interview guide for focus group discussions

In Vhavenda culture, after the death of a family member there are bereavement rituals that people are supposed to perform. What I would like to know from you is how did you experience grief after the death of your husbands.

- How did the death affect you as an individual?
 - How did the death affect you as a religious person?
 - How did you cope with the death?
-

Since there are different bereavement rituals that people perform, how do you perceive those rituals in relation to your cultural and religious affiliation?

- What do you think about these bereavement rituals?
 - How did you cope with these rituals?
-

Subsequent prompts and inputs were ensured based on the participating widows' responses, and when more in-depth responses were required, I asked the 'why' question (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). For the most part, I was motivated by the need to understand the way in which the participants' frame of reference, and their religious-cultural background, informed their perceptions about the bereavement rituals that they had to perform after their husband's death.

At the end of the session, I summarised the main points of view for verification and expressed gratitude for the widows' participation. I also asked them one last question that Morgan and Krueger (1998, p. 31) believe is important in this kind of research: "Have we missed something?" This allowed the participants to raise issues that came to mind during verification time. Throughout the interviews I gave participants enough time to talk about their perceptions. I appeared ignorant and showed a lack of understanding concerning the situation around death and bereavement rituals, thus creating a setting in which they could help me grasp even the most basic and obvious aspects of the topic (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).

5.4.4 Ethical issues

Ethical considerations were taken into account to ensure that the study was conducted in an appropriate manner (Babbie & Mouton, 2001), and to protect the rights and the welfare of the respondents (Wassenaar, 2006). Throughout this study, I have made reference to 'participants' rather than 'subjects' in order to emphasise that I have no rights over the people who contributed to the research process (Taylor, 2001). I 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, I gave each woman the information leaflet and explained it to them (see Appendix A). The widows thus had an opportunity to make an informed and voluntary decision to participate and were not forced, deceived or coerced in any way (Neuman, 2000; Strydom, 2005a). To ensure that they decided to participate in the study without any force and deceit from the researcher, they signed an informed consent form (see Appendix A).

I also assured the participants of the confidentiality of the project. This encouraged them to join the focus group interviews. The widows were assured that whatever they said and discussed during the interview would not be discussed outside the session or disclosed to unauthorised individuals (Strydom, 2005a). All information was considered confidential, and participants were encouraged to participate freely without prejudice and constraint. Permission was also obtained for recording the interviews prior to the commencement of the focus group session.

Considering the sensitivity of the topic under investigation, I also engaged in a debriefing session as soon as the interviews were completed. This gave participants the opportunity to work through their experiences (Strydom, 2005a), and assisted them through any possible emotional harm that could have been caused by the discursive process. Furthermore, the debriefing allowed me to clarify and correct some misunderstandings that might have occurred during the discussion (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). For participants who required additional therapy, an arrangement was made with a professional therapist who was informed of the study prior to the interviews and volunteered to help in case there was a need.

5.4.5 Transcription and translation

Transcription is a way by which material becomes data in a form of a document for discourse analysis (Taylor, 2001). After the focus group interviews, I transcribed all the interviews verbatim, in Tshivenda, to avoid loss of any valuable material and to produce the textual data for analysis purposes (see Appendix B). During transcription, I tried to produce a detailed transcript because “it is good methodological practice always to

produce as detailed a transcription as possible” (Wooffitt, 2001, p. 328). An English-language professional then translated the transcripts into English. For fear of the possibility that the translation could miss some of the discourses, I translated the English texts back to Tshivenda as a way of checking if the meaning had not been lost in the translation process. Because I had the advantage of sharing the same language and culture with the participants, I could translate back to Tshivenda with greater ease and could ensure that no meanings were lost through translation. This provided me with rich textual data of the conversations, and insight into the ways in which the participating widows spoke and co-constructed realities concerning the bereavement rituals required of them by their religious-cultural affiliation.

5.5 ANALYSIS

The analytical procedure employed for this study was guided by methods and procedures of discourse analysis (Gee, 2005; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006; Thompson, 1984). According to Mouton and Marais (1991), analysis can be regarded as the process whereby a phenomenon is broken down into its constituent parts in order to gain an understanding of it, and to transform data into findings (Patton, 2002). Potter and Wetherell (1987) indicate that this stage in discourse analysis is "like riding a bicycle" (p. 163), and it implies skill to execute proper analysis and interpretation of discourses that inform perceptions and beliefs.

Parker (1990) and others have elucidated various means to identify discourses. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006) argue that discourses manifest in text, and could be identified using cultural competence and critical distance. These authors believe that there were no hard and fast rules for identifying discourses and analysing texts. However, there are guidelines proposed by Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006) and Thompson (1984) that could guide the process and that provided me with a framework for analysing the text. Interpretations were guided by the six building tasks proposed by Gee (1999, pp. 92-94).

5.5.1 Unit of analysis

Given the main objective of this study, the source of data for discourse analysis was the interview transcripts from the focus group interviews. The textual data that emanated from the translated transcripts served as comprehensive units of analysis for identifying the discourses pertaining to bereavement rituals and organising these into a coherent system of meaning. The textual data provided me with the situated meanings, other discourses, objects and subjects, the historical basis, and power relations of the widows' perceptions and constructions regarding bereavement rituals in a Tshivenda-speaking community. The analysis, therefore, relied on the translated transcripts of the conversations about the topic gathered in the focus group sessions.

5.5.2 Analytical procedure

Considering that there is no specific method of discourse analysis (Coyle, 2007), Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that the method best suited to a particular study is the one devised specifically for it. However, different methods have been found particularly valuable for providing clues for how to go about the process of observing the critical components of discursive practices (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006; Thompson, 1984; Wetherell & Potter, 1988), and could be adapted for use in the present study. The analysis of the participants' discourses on performance of bereavement rituals was thus conducted within a framework that involved identifying discourses and the function or role they played in the construction of realities pertaining to these rituals.

Before describing the analytical procedure, it is appropriate here to consider two important points with regard to the use of discourse analysis (Thompson, 1984). As also highlighted by Duncan (1993), the first point concerned the "inescapable situation" (Thompson, 1984, p. 133) of that which formed the object of analysis and interpretation. Thompson insists that discourse was "already an interpretation" (p. 133), and that it is constantly interpreted and understood by human agents who routinely employ various interpretative procedures in order to make sense of themselves and others. Therefore, to analyse discourse is "to interpret a pre-interpreted domain" (Thompson, 1984, p. 133), in order to produce an interpretation of an interpretation. The widows' perceptions

of bereavement were thus their interpretations of the performance of bereavement rituals, and I could only interpret what they had already interpreted.

The second point concerns the creative character of discourse analysis (Thompson, 1984). Thompson argues that the analysis of discourse can never be merely an analysis, but that it has to be a synergistic production, a creative projection of the possible meaning of discourse (Duncan, 1993) in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Thompson (1990) concludes that based on the “object of analysis and the kind of information that will be available to the researcher” (p. 281), the object of analysis must be carefully scrutinised to gain such an understanding.

Levett (1989) furthermore explains that adequate analysis can only come about through extensive background reading and theoretically informed thought. In essence, the skills required for analysing data must be acquired before attempting to tackle the transcripts. Billig (1988) also states that the textual data are “not the starting point: the analyst will already have built up a knowledge of the topic before starting the search required for understanding the particular text” (p. 207). Therefore, I started this study by analysing discourses on the topics of grief and bereavement in the existing literature (see chapters 3 and 4). It became clear that there was no short-cut or mechanical procedure for doing discourse analysis (Billig, 1988; Duncan, 1993). Instead, as the analyst, I had to be prepared to read as extensively as possible so as to “gather up clues which can nudge the search one way or another” (Billig, 1988, p. 207).

In the present study, an analysis of discourses on perceptions of performance of bereavement rituals involved reading and re-reading the transcripts (Taylor, 2001) so as to break them into smaller meaningful units and then sifting out the repeating and contradictory themes that emerge (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). According to Taylor (2001) discourse analysis is extremely labour-intensive and as Levett (1989) indicated, it requires much time, patience and flexibility on the part of the researcher. The main consideration is to locate broad recurring patterns of talk or themes, rather than focusing on every word, as would have been the case in a linguistic and semiotic

analysis (Levett, 1989; Taylor, 2001; Thompson, 1984; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). This involves identifying terms, phrases or metaphors linked to the concepts of death and bereavement rituals in terms of either similarities in structure and content or differences and variability in what has been said. Finally, in the analysis I was particularly concerned with the situated meanings of the religious-cultural models operating in the discursive practices of Tshivenda-speaking widows and their perceptions of bereavement rituals.

5.5.3 Identifying discourses

For discourse analysis to be meaningful, it was important to identify discourses within the textual data. I focused on how African Christian and traditional African widows used language to construct their perceptions of the performance of bereavement rituals. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006), amongst others, suggest that in order to identify discourses in a text, it is to the advantage of the discourse analyst if she is immersed in the culture that is studied. In this regard, I had the advantage of being familiar with the traditional African Tshivenda-speaking widow's way of communicating when mourning. I knew, for example, that it was different from the way she communicates when she is not mourning. Ways of communicating were structured by discourses that I could recognise only by being a member of that particular culture (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006).

Although it was important to understand the culture behind the text, a discourse analyst also has to distance herself from that culture. In the analytical process, I had to extract myself from "living in culture to reflecting on culture" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p. 330). Parker (1992) refers to this as striking a critical distance from the text, and as a discourse analyst, I had to reflect on the text with the aim of identifying the discourse within the text. 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.

In order to identify discourses that operated in the conversations of the Tshivenda-speaking widows, I followed the “tricks” suggested by Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006, pp. 331-340), which involved identifying:

- (a) the binary oppositions that would alert me to the kinds of discourses at play in the text;
- (b) the recurrent terms, phrases and metaphors that were present in the text; and
- (c) the subjects that were spoken about in the text.

Identification of discourses in the text was a first step in analysing the discourses. Each discourse has a way of speaking that includes the content of what was said as well as how it was said (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Only after clearly noting the major discourses could I search for the functions of these discourses in the text, and explicate the broader context within which the texts operated. Finally, it was important to put the discourses into context by questioning the religious-cultural models that informed the participants’ perceptions of bereavement rituals in order to gain a deeper understanding and organise the discourses as a coherent system of meaning.

5.5.3.1 Organising discourses as a coherent system of meaning

Discourse as a coherent system of meaning involves grouping statements in the conversations and giving them certain coherence insofar as they refer to the same topic (Parker, 1990). As interpretive repertoires, these statements refer to recurrently used systems of terms characterising and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). For example, in talking about the effects that death has had on them, the participants could interpret the feelings and emotions associated with the death of a spouse in terms of the ‘death is painful’ discourse. Although Parker (1990, p. 194) observes that speakers are often not “self-conscious about the language they used”, it was possible to find instances where the terms chosen were commented upon and the discourses unfolded in the ways of speaking about death and bereavement.

5.5.3.2 Discourses as realised in text and the situated meanings

When realised in text, Parker (1990) asserts that a discourse answers the question about the location of the conversation. This opens the field of meanings to which discourse analysis could be applied “beyond spoken interaction... and written text” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 7) by looking at the effects of the discourses at work in the text (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). After identifying the discourses at play in the textual data I, therefore, had to look for the functions performed by these discourses. This was done by linking “accounts to actions” (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006, p. 333) and “elaborating discourses that go beyond individual intention” (Parker, 1990, p. 193) as a system of statements that constructed the topic under investigation in a meaningful manner (Parker, 1992). Apart from describing the situated meanings in the text, I had to involve myself in a process of exploring the implications that the transcripts evoked. Consequently, I interpreted the meanings from a broader perspective than the text itself by also attending to the discourses on the topic in the current literature and my own knowledge of the religious-cultural models informing the texts.

5.5.3.3 Discourses referring to other discourses

When analysing for discourses in textual data there was a need for objectification and for uncovering the layers of reality that the language referred to (Gee, 1999; Parker, 1990; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The discourses were sets of meanings that constituted an object and were related to other discourses. Parker (1992) indicates that in practical terms, discourses determine what could be said by “providing the spaces—the concepts, metaphors, models, analogies—for making new statements within any specific discourse” (p. 13). Saying something about something else is a manner of using one discourse to describe another. Therefore, I had to be on the lookout for how a Tshivenda-speaking widow would, for example, speak about losing her husband to death as being a painful experience (discourse about death and dying) that qualified her to perform the bereavement rituals (discourse about religious-cultural requirements). By analysing the language-in-use and other non-language aspects, the words, phrases, statements and metaphors

that participants used in the context of death (Gee, 2005) became a means of reflecting reality and identifying other discourses referred to in the conversations.

5.5.3.4 Discourses about objects and subjects

In discourse analysis, I should also be aware of the ways in which conversation partners become the objects of our discourse. Babbie and Mouton (2001) postulated that whenever we use a noun we are objectifying ourselves as a part of our world. The way the widows spoke about themselves, and allowed others to speak to and about them determined who they were, and created their situated identities within the larger community (Van Schalkwyk, 2005). I had to be aware that when the widows were talking about performing the cleansing rituals, they were also objectifying themselves in their world as persons who had lost a loved one.

Talking about bereavement rituals and about the performance of these rituals furthermore rendered the widows as subjects within the discourse. Although the widows might have independent realities outside of the discourse, they were given another reality in the discursive practice of the conversation about the object (the bereavement rituals) (Parker, 1992). A widow was speaking, for example, about her own perceptions of bereavement rituals in a way that others could relate to. She gave an impression (representation) of herself as a subject constructed within the expressive sphere where she expressed her own attributes and responsibilities (Parker, 1990). As a discourse analyst, I needed to ask in what way the discourses that emerged in the textual data were calling attention to this subject and object positioning of the participants who engaged in the conversation about a specific topic.

Furthermore, discourses refer to ways of “perceiving and articulating relationship” (Parker, 1992, p. 8), and include perceptions of others who are not present at the time of the conversation. The relationship (roles, positions), with its concomitant knowledge and belief systems, affect and values, was particularly relevant to understanding the discourses at work in the Tshivenda-speaking widows’

perceptions of bereavement rituals. For example, within the religious-cultural model of African Christian and traditional African peoples of Venda, women had certain role definitions in the context of family and community and different role definitions in the context of being widowed or saddened by their husbands' deaths. Hence women might take any number of object and subject positions in any number of discourses. It was, therefore, important that I indicated the roles that were present in the discourse about bereavement rituals and "think about what each role would or would not be able to say in the discourse" (Parker, 1992, p. 9). For the bereaved women who participated in this project, such roles could include women, depressed, grieving, widow, and so on; and it determined her right to speak from a specific role position. A woman might have more freedom to say what she thought as a woman, but not as a widow who was still within the mourning period.

5.5.3.5 Discourses as historically based

Placing a discourse in the context of its current functioning would also be necessary for me to trace "the origin and evolution of a discourse" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 498). By "looking at how and where discourses emerged, and looking at how discourses changed over time and told a story about the way in which they referred to objects which were usually always there" (Parker, 1992, p. 16), I would be able to find the historical specificity that informed the knowledge of the participants in this project regarding bereavement rituals. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006) refer to the place where the discourses emerge, and the places, times, artefacts and institutions that are relevant to the topic under investigation.

Although it was essential to identify the discourses that were embedded in the text and the functions, they were performing in participants' perceptions about bereavement rituals, it was also necessary to contextualise their constructions of their realities appropriately. I assumed that the widows' perceptions of bereavement rituals were situated within the particular religious-cultural world in which they lived. This could be done by separating the text from its context and considering death as a context in which the communication was located. Thus, the religious affiliations of

the widows, the cultural prescriptions they had to abide by, and the entire death system (Kastenbaum, 1998) entered the discourses performed in the conversations about bereavement rituals.

5.5.3.6 Discourses as reproducing power relations

Discourses are also embedded in power relations evident in the context in which they function. In this regard, I (as the analyst) had to be aware of the cues provided by the textual data about the nature and relevance of social goods and the distribution of these, once a woman was widowed. I had to look for gains and losses of power, status, aspects of gender, and the social networks operating in the text. I also had to look at who wanted to promote and who wanted to dissolve the distribution of social goods on behalf of the bereaved woman. For example, power relations in a traditional African culture could be identified between the bereaved woman and her in-laws. In the context of death and bereavement, the in-laws were the ones with power, and were thus the people who made decisions on behalf of the bereaved woman. In the analysis, I had to be aware of how the discursive practices represented this reproduction of power relations.

5.5.3.7 The dimension of interpretation

Parker (1994, p. 2) defines qualitative research as "the interpretative study of a specified issue or problem in which the researcher is central to the sense that is made". Qualitative research is interpretive in the sense that the final product is an interpretation of the realities co-constructed in the research setting. The term 'interpretative' also refers to the aim of qualitative research, which is not to explain human behaviour in terms of universally valid laws, but rather to understand and interpret the meanings and intentions that inform everyday human and social action (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006; Willig, 2001).

Rigorous and systematic analytic procedures in a scholarly study inevitably culminate in interpretative explanations and descriptions of what was investigated (Thompson, 1990). In this regard, a creative reconstruction of the phenomenon

analysed or an interpretative explanation was required to complete the process. As indicated above, I adopted social constructionism as the theoretical framework for this study, and adopted discourse analysis as a method to analyse the discourses that emerged from the conversations with bereaved Tshivenda women. Interpretations were thus built upon the process of identifying patterns and themes within the discursive forms of the conversations on the participants' knowledge and constructions of bereavement rituals.

According to Thompson (1990, p. 289), discursive forms are “constructions which typically represented something, referred to something, said something about something.” Gee (2005) argues that in order to interpret the whole picture the discourse analyst needs to cover the whole range of the six building tasks involving semiotic building, world building, socio-culturally-situated identity and relationships, politics building, and connections building. The convergence, coverage, agreement, and language details in these questions will ensure validity of my particular interpretation even if other interpretations could be possible. In the process of interpretation I, therefore, endeavoured to capture the whole picture and referential aspect of the religious-cultural discourses that informed the perceptions of Tshivenda-speaking women on the performance of bereavement rituals.

However, due to the basic openness of discourse analysis, there may never be a single interpretation. Intrinsically, discourse analysis could reveal differing perspectives and understandings on the part of those who perform it; and discourses could be interpreted in different ways (Thompson, 1984; Walters & Williams, 2003). It is also not easy to verify that a particular interpretation carries any specific truth. Nonetheless, truth or any kind of final word on bereavement rituals in a Tshivenda-speaking community was not the purpose of this study. Rather, my interpretation as represented in the next chapters represents merely a re-interpretation of what has already been interpreted by the participants themselves (Thompson, 1990). It is my interpretation of the discourses that have

been pre-interpreted by the participants in their constructions of their social world and in the face of bereavement practices.

5.6 REFLEXIVITY

It is important to consider the concepts reflexivity and self-reflexivity in qualitative research for the reason that it adds credibility to qualitative research. Reflexivity is considered “an acknowledgement of the role and influence of the researcher on the research project. The role of the researcher is subjected to the same critical analysis and scrutiny as the research itself” (Carolan, 2003, p. 8). This definition questions the way that I as the researcher affected the data I was gathering and the critical analysis of that role. It suggests that reflexivity centres on the researcher being part of the data, rather than distant to it (Carolan, 2003), and that separation between the researcher and the discourse analytic research is impossible (Taylor, 2001).

Carolan (2003) suggests that as it applies to qualitative research, reflexivity allows one to understand more clearly the deeper meanings of the phenomenon under review (in this case, perception of bereavement rituals) and the particular lens through which the researcher views that phenomenon. By reflecting back on how the researcher influenced the research, it makes it easier to understand how the focus group discussions operated and how participants used language to construct their reality, given their social history and culture.

From a discourse analytical perspective, the researcher as interviewer plays a crucial role in how interviewees reflect and construct realities through language (Gee, 2005). As the researcher/interviewer, I therefore had to reflect continuously on my position in the project and the relationship that evolved between the participants and I. In reflecting on this position, certain aspects were considered significant since they played particular roles in influencing the research process.

Although there were several axes of similarities between the research participants and myself (see the discussion below), there were also differences that are important to bear in mind when considering the presentation of my study. For example, I was the youngest person present during the focus groups; I am not a widow and my academic and research experience is not comparable to that of the participants. Such differences gave the participants the freedom to express their perceptions of bereavement rituals knowing that I would learn much from their experiences, as I have not had to face the death of a spouse and its accompanying events. I only witnessed my mother performing bereavement rituals upon the death of my father. In terms of similarities, we shared the same gender and ethnicity. This significantly promoted the flow of the research process, particularly data gathering, interpretation and analysis. Below I expand on some of these similarities and differences in general, and specifically how the identity of a researcher is relevant to discourse analytic research (Taylor, 2001):

- **Family background:** Taylor (2001) maintains that the researcher's identity influences the selection of research topic. The researcher becomes interested in conducting research that "chimes with her personal interests, sympathies and political beliefs" (p. 17). When I was 18 years old, my father passed away and my mother had to perform traditional Tshivenda bereavement rituals. Young as I was, I could not understand the value of the rituals. I also felt my mother was taken away from the natural environment where we could easily access her because she was closed in the house from the day my father passed away to the day he was buried. Part of my need to study this topic was the experiences I had during this time and trying to understand them. My experience of losing a father and remaining with a mother in our Tshivenda family, and witnessing her performing the bereavement rituals, provoked and sharpened the interest to do this study and the approach that was chosen. Although I did not fully understand my mother's position and her feelings at the time, my experiences also helped me to understand the meaning the participants attached to their experiences.

- **Gender:** The gender of a researcher is relevant to data collection and can affect an interview in several ways (Taylor, 2001). The gender of an interviewer may act as an advantage or constraint when a male interviewer interviews male participants or female interviewer interviews female participants. This study included women for the reason that in the Tshivenda culture they are the ones expected to perform bereavement rituals after losing a husband. The same is not expected from men. I shared the same gender (female) as the women who participated in this study. That was an advantage because as a woman myself, I could understand the consciousness of other women much better. Burr (1998) suggests that “only women can effectively perform feminist research” (p. 142). As a woman, I found it interesting to conduct a study about women. It helped me understand what other women go through in their social and personal life, especially after losing a husband to death. A further advantage of being a woman in this study is that “women have historically used conversation with other women as a way to deal with their oppression” (Madriz, 2002, p. 839). As such, it might have been difficult for the participants to express their positions and experiences openly in the presence of a man, especially in a culture that is dominated by a patriarchal discourse, as the Tshivenda culture is. It might be interpreted to mean allowing a man to enter into their private lives while knowing that he would never experience this kind of situation in his own life. During the focus group discussions, the participants even stated that I would need to lose a husband to truly understand their position. My gender gave them the sense of the possibility that one day I would experience what they went through.
- **Age:** At the time of the interviews, I was 32 years old and much younger than any of the widows who participated in the project. The age gap between the participants and myself had a particular implication for how I was perceived and the obligation participants felt to share their knowledge (wisdom) with me. Taylor (2001) argues that some participants feel at ease with an interviewer who appears younger or older. This is possibly because a younger person will learn from a group of older participants and an older person will be perceived as knowledgeable of the content and the process. In my case, I was expected by the participants to listen and learn,

and fortunately, this complied with the basic nature of focus group interviews (Morgan, 1997). For example, Phophi (G6, TA) addressed me as her “*grandchild*” -- a common way for an older person in the Tshivenda culture to address someone much younger. As the “grandchild” I was regarded as one who did not know much, did not have enough experience, and needed to be taught the lessons of life. This is expressed in the Tshivenda saying ‘*Mukegulu ha shaiwi,*’ meaning that we need older people to teach us about life. Some of the participants also spoke to me as though they were speaking to an ignorant person who needed knowledge and lessons about their culture. For them I was a representative of the ‘young generation,’ and they doubted whether I would perform the rituals should I lose my husband. They saw it as their responsibility to educate me and encourage me to appreciate the culture and make sure that it was perpetuated.

- **Ethnicity:** Carpenter (1999) argues that the information and thoughts shared by interviewees often depends on whether the interviewees position the researcher as “one of them or a visitor/researcher” or as an “insider or outsider” (p. 7). Although I did not share their situation, I was from the same ethnic group and spoke the same language (Tshivenda) as the participants in this project. As such, I had historical and cultural specificity of knowledge about the rituals practised by Tshivenda widows. Taylor (2001) maintains that it is imperative for the researcher to understand the language and references used by participants so that he or she can easily understand the local idioms. The shared ethnic background and language implied that the participants could freely express themselves to someone they could associate with, and I would be able to understand the meaning of their talk. Mutshekwa (G5, TA), for example, addressed me in a particular manner, as “*my child*”, which in the Tshivenda culture indicates her sense of responsibility to share the wisdom of her age with me. She wanted to alert me to what our culture would expect of me should I lose my husband. The participants accepted my position as a person who shared the same culture and felt an obligation to give me as much information as they could so that I could learn from their accounts, as a child in this

culture should learn from the elders. The participants considered me to be an insider rather than an outsider.

Another advantage of sharing the same ethnic group as the participants was that we spoke the same language. Speaking the same language made it easier for me to communicate my expectations during the focus group interviews. I could also better understand their language and the interpretations they presented of their experiences and perceptions of bereavement rituals. This was what is regarded as knowledge sustained by social processes (Burr, 1995). Being of the same ethnic group as the participants made it possible to understand the world as they constructed it. This is because our ways of understanding the world, as taught in our culture, were a product of social processes and interactions.

- **Marital status:** Another aspect that may have influenced the outcome of the project was my marital status. I am not a widow, and this might have influenced how the participants saw me and how they spoke to me in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. However, being married at the time of the interviews was advantageous. For example, I could relate quite well to the participants' experiences of family responsibilities and the distribution of power relations. In a Tshivenda-speaking community, women are mostly deprived of exhibiting any power and when their husband dies they are in an even weaker position of power due to the superiority of their in-laws. Knowing that I was married enabled the participants to talk more openly with me about their husbands' responsibilities and the dilemmas they faced upon their death. My married status also allowed them to regard me as the ignorant one who had no experience of what they were going through. They were consequently more inclined to give more detailed explanations and rich information so that I could learn. My lack of experience, thus, helped me to gain more and better data.
- **Academic and research experience:** Based on previous training and qualifications, particularly my training as a researcher, I could gain the confidence of the

participants. They valued my experience in conducting research, and it elevated their status as participants to be part of a project that could have an impact in the academic community. The participants valued the opportunity to contribute their knowledge. For example, Betty (G5: AC) indicated “*I just want to value your studies ... I know it is sensitive that some people ...think you are getting into their private life.*” I thus managed to achieve what Stake (1994) considered as being a “guest in the private space of the world” (p. 244) and being an insider who shared their situation and interest (Taylor, 2001).

These combinations of experiences and background uniquely qualified me to undertake this type of study and informed my stance in reading and interpreting beyond what was said within the Tshivenda cultural background.

5.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter described how the research was conducted. I adopted a qualitative approach because it allowed for rich and in-depth data collection in order to explore the constructions of the participants on the topic of bereavement rituals. I highlighted the procedures I followed for purposive and snowball sampling, and selecting and grouping the 24 participants. Although I did not include a large number of participants, this was not necessarily needed given the quality of information that I could elicit from the purposive selection of bereaved women in a Tshivenda-speaking community. The use of focus group interviews for data collection was also explained. The focus group strategy elicited rich data about bereavement rituals, co-constructed in social interaction. For the data analysis, I opted for discourse analysis as a suitable method for a social constructionist study. I explained how the discourses were identified and organised, as well as how I interpreted the situated meanings of these discourses.

According to Wetherell and Potter (1988), the research approach employed in this study had three critical advantages:

- (a) The procedures were sensitive to the subtlety and complexity of discourse as it deployed in a natural setting.
- (b) It was sensitive to linguistic nuances and contextual characteristics of the discourses, which would have been nearly impossible to recover using traditional analytical methods. The discourse analytic approach provided a systematic procedure even though findings were always open to evaluation and criticism.
- (c) The procedures employed in this study made it easier to identify and understand the various discourses through which the phenomenon was reproduced in the discursive space.

In the next chapter, the themes and patterns that emerged from the textual data are presented.