



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

**A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BEREAVEMENT RITUALS IN A TSHIVENDA
SPEAKING COMMUNITY: AFRICAN CHRISTIAN AND TRADITIONAL AFRICAN
PERCEPTIONS**

BY

MAKONDELELE SARAH RADZILANI

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SUPERVISOR
DR C. WAGNER

CO-SUPERVISOR
DR G.J. VAN SCHALKWYK (University of Macau)

Student: Makondelele S. Radzilani

Student number: 22258002

Abstract

The aim of this project was to identify discourses of traditional African and African Christian women in a Tshivenda speaking community regarding the bereavement rituals performed after the death of a husband. Six focus groups were held with women who had lost their husbands to death. The verbal data were transcribed verbatim and translated from Tshivenda to English. I used a social constructionist paradigm to identify how Tshivenda women construct meaning about the bereavement rituals. The discourses that informed the construction of bereavement rituals were analysed to identify the situated meanings that emerged from the social reality during the performance of the prescribed cultural rituals. Certain discourses were found to be common to most of the women from both Christian and traditional African religions.

The abnormality discourse was prevalent in informing the way that the participants, irrespective of their religious affiliation, constructed their grief experiences and bereavement rituals. They used language that implicated them as not normal and in need of healing (through performance of the rituals) for the injury caused by the death of their husbands. The power/patriarchal discourse informed the way participants used language to describe themselves as subordinate and powerless in relationships, while positioning others as having more power. A gender discourse in their constructions, implied that they performed rituals not only for socio-political reasons, but also because they were women, wives and mothers. Nevertheless, some participants used language that represented them as dominant and responsible for their actions, while others resisted cultural and societal labels of a widow as passive and with no voice about what happens in her life after the husband's death. These participants accepted their gender stereotype, but enacted their freedom of action and interaction. These participants either performed the rituals because they were willing to or believed in their (rituals) role

and significance in their lives or they did not perform the rituals because they were in a position to resist cultural norms and other people's oppression.

A religious-cultural discourse emerged in terms of social relationships and structures of the wider culture. The language they used was informed by their religious affiliation and a collectivist culture. Lastly, minor discourses (fear, blame, religious and witchcraft discourses) informed the participants' description of other aspects of their experiences in ways that legitimised both the rituals and the participants' positions. The discourses should be considered to help sensitise and inform people about the impact of bereavement rituals on the psychological well-being of bereaved women. It is also important for people to understand the positions women are subjected to by themselves, by others and by their religious-cultural heritage. The present study showed that it is important to empower widows who identified themselves as powerless and not responsible for their actions regarding bereavement rituals. They should be encouraged to re-construct their positions and their notions of issues like responsibility, power and womanhood that can assist them to understand the positions that they could accept or deny before and after the death of their husbands.



KEYWORDS

Traditional African

African Christian

Bereavement rituals

Social Constructionist paradigm

Culture

Religion

Death

Discourse analysis

Perceptions

Women



DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, hereby submitted as requirement for the DPhil (Psychology), is my own original work and has not been previously submitted by me for a degree at this or any other University. All materials have been fully acknowledged.

Makondelele S. Radzilani

Date

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, I explain the rationale for this study and give an overview of the thesis. Starting with the background to the study, I outline the significance and objectives of the study, and discuss the theoretical framework in which it was undertaken. For clarity, the concepts 'traditional African' and 'African Christian' are defined as they apply to this study. Finally, I provide an outline of the organisation of the whole thesis.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Although it is an expected and irreversible part of life, death is one of the aspects that appear to have a negative impact on the lives of family members and close relatives. The death of a loved one can activate a complexity of emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and changes like no other experience in life. After the death of a loved one, people grieve their loss, try to make sense of it, and find it necessary to reorder their private worlds and their meanings in a completely new way (Richards, 2001). Like any other stressful life event, the death of a family member requires different coping mechanisms for those who remain. Individuals from different religious and cultural backgrounds all experience the impact of death in the family in one way or another. However, members of different religious groups deal with this event in various ways. Such ways of dealing with the impact of death are socially constructed and cannot be regarded as universal.

Among the mechanisms for dealing with the traumatic event of the death of a husband is the performance of bereavement rituals. Traditional African people, particularly within the Tshivenda speaking community, have prescribed cultural ways of performing these rituals. Typically the performance of bereavement rituals was not supposed to be negotiated. It was understood that they were part of mourning and that all people would

follow the prescriptions imposed by their culture. This seems to have changed since Christianity came into existence in Africa (see section 3.2.2.2).

Present-day Tshivenda-speaking people subscribe to different religious beliefs. In the same community, there are people who adhere to various traditional African practices as well as those who have adopted Christian practices in relation to death and bereavement. In some of the traditional African cultures, the belief in ancestral spirits forms the core of their religion. It is believed that there is a connection between the living and the dead (Ngubane, 2004). The relationship between the dead and the living is still maintained and the ancestors are believed to take away the dead. Even though that person has died, it is believed that he or she will always visit those who are still alive and communicate with them (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). There is a belief that the completeness of life for the individual is not attained in isolation and apart from the others, but is something communal and possible only in a network of mutual interdependence. However, in Christian beliefs, the link between the dead and the living is constructed differently; the dead cannot be contacted directly; the living are linked through God or Jesus Christ and will be reunited with the dead at the resurrection still to come (Pang & Lam, 2002). Zulu people who confess to be Christian are known to have a dual affiliation that includes belief in the influence the ancestors on the living and in the trinity (Ngubane, 2004). As a result, Christianity did not necessarily end traditional practices for Zulu widows. Those who do not observe traditional cultural practices are from churches or doctrines that strongly prohibit them (ritual practices) (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007).

There is no literature from a psychological perspective that exists on the subject of bereavement rituals concerning Tshivenda speaking women. Lack of information could lead to misunderstanding of the meaning as it relates to death and bereavement rituals that particular people construct within their culture. Current literature on the topic of bereavement mainly deals with other African cultures (e.g. Guzana, 2000; Ngubane, 2004; Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007) and Western ways of coping with death (e.g. Chan et al., 2005; Corr et al., 1997; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). The available literature

concerning this area of study may leave people with the assumption that Tshivenda speaking women construct the meaning of death and bereavement rituals in the same way as other cultures.

Furthermore, Western therapeutic strategies deal mainly with the affected individuals but not with how the relationship with a deceased person might influence their coping mechanisms. As an academic from the Tshivenda-speaking community, I see this study as necessary to identify discourses and explore how meaning is constructed within the context of death and bereavement rituals when a woman has lost her husband. In this regard, I consider it significant to look at the ways in which the religious-cultural discourse informs African Christian and traditional African women's perceptions of bereavement rituals and the way in which they construct realities after the death of a spouse (See section 1.4 for contextualisation and definition of the concepts 'African Christian' and 'traditional African' as they apply to this study). I have chosen religion and culture as discourse markers because they, in particular, inform daily practices and meaning-making, including performance of bereavement rituals in a local context.

Death appears to be one of the most certain methods by which the ancestral spirits reveal themselves to the living among most African people (Gumede, 1990). Soon after a family member has died, Africans start performing various bereavement rituals as a way of dealing with the grief and at the same time honouring their ancestors. There are rituals that have to be performed before a burial and others that are performed afterwards (Vold, 2000). With the entrance of Western ideologies and the European Christian missionaries, some of these rituals are no longer performed in the same way that they used to be practised in the olden days. Honour and respect of the dead is disturbed by urbanisation and adoption of burial administration in which, instead of paying last respects for the dead at home, family members have to go to burial firms for that purpose (Ngubane, 2004).

Considering that Christian and African traditional beliefs are different, the present study aims to explore the discourses on bereavement rituals in these two religious groups.

The focus is on identifying discourses that inform how widows construct meaning after losing a husband and perform bereavement rituals prescribed by their family and cultural heritage. Although the two groups (African Christian and traditional African within the Tshivenda culture) might construct their experiences differently, both have a common aspect to deal with, namely, the death of a spouse. Because Christian beliefs appear to be Western-based, their ways of coping with bereavement will be influenced by the Western culture whereas traditional Africans will be influenced by their own culture (Chavanduka, 1999). The widows may even have dual membership of these two religious-cultural groups, accepting both African traditional and Christian religious practices. This is particularly relevant when a Christian woman chooses to return to her African traditional practices when dealing with bereavement, and is thus seen to be violating some of her Christian practices.

It is hoped that this project may contribute to a re-construction of self-identity for the community (women) in which it is embedded. Such an exercise may lead to a reassessment of Tshivenda culture or norms, and an examination of areas of life that were considered evil soon after the arrival of missionaries in Africa. Hopefully, such a reassessment may reinstate those cultural values and beliefs for the benefit of those who still perceive them positively, without judgement for those who perceive them negatively. That is because in the same community there may be women who perceive the cultural values negatively and those who perceive them positively.

This is part of the rationale for conducting a study of this nature. In exploring the social construction of bereavement rituals, the historical and cultural values that underlie the psychology of bereavement in a Tshivenda-speaking community may also be examined.

The position of psychology in Africa is “predominantly a Euro-Americocentric science” (Viljoen, 2002, p. 529) and there appears to be a marginalisation and under-representation of African indigenous psychology. To counter this under-representation and marginalisation, studies that reflect the position of African indigenous knowledge

are important. This study may add to the body of knowledge representing African indigenous psychology and how culture and religion intersect, especially with regard to the position of women in a culture dominated by patriarchal discourses. Since women have “historically used conversation with other women as a way to deal with their oppression” (Madriz, 2002, p. 839), a study of this nature will allow the participants (women) to group together and share their constructions of the performance of bereavement rituals, as informed by their belief systems and culture.

The focus of this study is on women only because they are often labelled as emotionally weak in relation to bereavement. They are also seen to use passive ways of coping, whilst men are labelled active in dealing with death (Littlewood, 1992). Men are considered to respond to death in an active way that involves responding positively and constructively (Thompson, 1997). Among the Tshivenda-speaking community, women are not only considered emotional, but they are also expected to perform bereavement rituals, which is not the case with men. When a husband loses a wife, he talks, gives instructions to others and is visible with no difference in attire (Guzana, 2000). This discrimination might be because women are constructed according to the discourses that regard them as either weak or passive. Bereaved women and their caregivers might internalise such discourses and provide support based on these. Also, other community members may determine the type of support they offer based on these discourses (Rando, 1993).

As religious-cultural heritage prescribes performance of these rituals, I consider it imperative to explore how women construct performance of these rituals. This is because the way bereaved women are constructed according to particular discourses plays a role in the way they construct themselves and their situation. In my reliance on the narratives of the participants, the study is based on the assumptions in the next section.

1.3 ASSUMPTIONS AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The theoretical framework that informs this study assumes that the performance of bereavement rituals is a social action, and that social processes emerge as a function of culture and social history as people construct meaning from their experiences (Burr, 2003). Therefore, Tshivenda-speaking women's perceptions of bereavement rituals are likely influenced by their culture and their religion. I assume, therefore, that a cultural-religious discourse informs the way in which they perceive the beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours, artefacts, and symbols related to the death of a spouse and the performance of the relevant rituals. Furthermore, I assume that the situated meanings are socially constructed within the context of everyday life. For African Christian and African traditional women, mourning the death of a spouse and the construction of their realities concerning the bereavement rituals are intermingled with their submissiveness to the dominant patriarchal and oppressive norms that prevail in this culture.

Although authors like Parkes, Laungani and Young (1997) challenge the use of rituals by psychologists to support survivors in times of crisis and loss, I also assume that the research might reveal some valuable information and understanding of bereavement rituals and how these assist bereaved people in a particular African community. I assume that the findings will inform different people – religious leaders, counsellors, social workers and others – of the immense therapeutic value that bereavement rituals have for bereaved African people who believe in the significance of the rituals in their lives. In so doing, they may assist in facilitating rituals that promote the healing process and not minimise cultural beliefs. Assisting people from an African background using only Western therapy strategies might not be sufficient or effective for people who believe that when one individual is psychologically affected, then the whole family is also affected (Viljoen, 2002).

This investigation will hopefully enable people to view rituals in a different manner and appreciate their value in the healing of the individual and the community who believe in their role after the death of a husband.

The present study, therefore, focuses on the particular ways in which African Christian and African traditional women construct their perceptions of the performance of bereavement rituals. Tshivenda-speaking women who accept either the Christian or the African traditional belief system, and who have buried a husband, were considered for participation in this study. I believe that these widows can offer some insight into the perceptions of and the role that can be accorded African bereavement rituals. The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the discourses pertaining to the way Tshivenda-speaking women construct performance of bereavement rituals.

In order to explore the perceptions and constructions of bereavement rituals, I will be searching for a greater understanding of and answers to the following research questions:

- How do Tshivenda women, who have lost a husband through death, construct their experiences of grief, given their respective religious-cultural backgrounds?
- How do bereaved Tshivenda women construct their experiences of bereavement rituals implied by their cultural affiliation?
- What are the functions and meanings that traditional African and African Christian women mourning the death of a spouse attach to bereavement rituals prescribed by their cultural affiliation?
- What situated meanings are attached to places, bodies and institutions related to bereavement rituals as constructed by Tshivenda women adhering to the traditional and/or Christian belief systems?
- What subject positions did the bereaved Tshivenda women enact when grieving for a deceased husband?
- What contradictions emerge in the constructions of bereaved Tshivenda women in their respective traditional and Christian backgrounds?

1.4 'TRADITIONAL AFRICAN' AND 'AFRICAN CHRISTIAN' GROUPS

I highlight these groups because I want to contextualise them as they relate to this study, considering that they might hold a different meaning for people who are not familiar with Tshivenda culture. People from different cultural and historical backgrounds may understand them differently. I cannot ignore that, because of diversity of knowledge even among the Tshivenda-speaking people, there might be people who understand these groups differently. In addition, the meaning of these concepts might change. I have specifically defined the group of participants in terms of their home language by using the term 'Tshivenda-speaking'; and I have avoided using the term 'black' that might lead the focus of the study in a different direction and involve various additional cultural and political elements (Ndletyana, 2006).

The Tshivenda-speaking community subscribes to different religions, chiefly, traditional African religion and African Christian religion. These are the major religions that inform the way Tshivenda-speaking people attach value to their culture, religion and its practices, particularly those related to bereavement.

These two groups – followers of traditional African religion and African Christians – were decided upon for the purpose of this study only and they are subject to re-construction. These concepts may be considered or constructed in different ways. I decided to use this distinction to categorise the participants for the study. 'Traditional African women' in this study refers to a group of selected women who follow traditional African religion and practices in the Tshivenda culture. This is a religion that adopts African religious-cultural practices. 'African Christian women' refers to women who have adopted Christianity, but are also living within the African culture of the Tshivenda-speaking community.

The way we perceive reality is a result of the construction of such reality through interaction between people, through language. The perceptions that the two groups have regarding death, dying and bereavement rituals are influenced by religion and culture, hence the religious-cultural context adopted in this study. Thus, what people

believe to be real in their daily interaction and practices appears to be the result of religion and culture. For example, both groups that the present study is interested in, believe that there is life after death, albeit in different forms. Such belief in life after death gives people hope for the future.

In situations where cultural norms are dominant, individuals who have different religious backgrounds live in conflict because of clashing norms, which may exist between the cultural demands and their religious expectations. For example, within the Tshivenda-speaking community, where people are either traditional Africans or African Christians, culture demands that individuals perform rituals that may, in some cases, conflict with their Christian practices and expectations. One such conflict exists in the performance of the bereavement rituals as prescribed in traditional African culture. These rituals, when performed by widows, subject them to positions they either accept or reject. Despite this, traditional African widows may perform such rituals because they are prescribed and the widows believe that failure to perform them might bring misfortune (Ray, 1976). Failure to perform the rituals is just another way of deviant behaviour towards grieving. Rosenblatt (2001) regards such behaviour a cause of ill-health, insanity, misfortune, supposedly caused by the gods, or the deceased coming back to take the life of someone in the community.

However, it is also important to consider that although conflicts exist between the beliefs of the two religions, they are not necessarily considered as two discrete or polarised positions. This study rather considers how the two religions inform people's talk and interactions.

1.5 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS

The thesis consists of eight chapters. The current chapter introduces the reader to the process followed in the study. Here I discuss the background and the rationale of the study, the assumptions and purpose of the study, and the questions that focus my search for alternative understandings of women's constructions of bereavement rituals.

Chapter two addresses an overview of the theoretical framework that will guide my interpretations. This theoretical framework is social constructionism; and it allows for the use of a discourse analysis methodology when analysing the participants' talk. The discourses identified from literature (chapters two and three) are also highlighted.

In chapter three, I examine the religious-cultural worldviews informing perceptions about the concepts of death and dying, particularly how these operate in traditional African context. I also discuss the way culture and religion are constructed. Within religion, in the Tshivenda-speaking community, I discuss the beliefs, religious practices, religious objects and places, values and morals and religious officials and leaders as they play a role in how people construct reality. The chapter also addresses the way Christianity was introduced to the Tshivenda-speaking community, and its effect on the way people perceive and construct death and bereavement rituals. The religious belief that death is a continuation of life is also discussed. I first focus on the construction of death as the end of a particular form of life and as a rebirth. The chapter furthermore addresses the definition of the two groups that were considered for this study, namely, "traditional African" and "African Christian". I also conceptualise the religious-cultural discourse, and its social construction. In addition, I define a model presented in the form of a diagram, indicating the different probable discourses as they tie in with the religious-cultural discourse. The ways in which people construct death as 'good', 'wild' and 'caused' are discussed.

Chapter four concerns bereavement and bereavement rituals. In this chapter I consider the social construction of bereavement and grief as they contribute towards the performance of bereavement rituals. Some of the discourses regarding bereavement and mourning are explored. I also report on the bereavement rituals in the Tshivenda-speaking community, their meanings and the functions rituals have in people's lives. Issues of gender and bereavement as embedded in culture are also discussed.

In chapter five, I address the research approach and method that I employed in this study. The chapter focuses on the definitions of 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis'. It

also explains the way credibility can be ensured in a study of this nature. I discuss the procedures for collecting data, and highlight the way in which the discourses were identified. This includes the procedures followed in selecting participants, data gathering and the process of discourse analysis. Issues concerning reflexivity and advantages of the research approach adopted for this study are also discussed.

Chapter six addresses my interpretations of the texts provided by the Tshivenda-speaking women in their co-construction of their experiences of bereavement and bereavement rituals. In this chapter I interpret and analyse the way traditional African and African Christian belief systems in the Tshivenda culture inform the constructions of bereavement and the performance of bereavement rituals in the context of multiple realities. I also give an interpretation of the contradictions that emerge in the constructions of the bereaved Tshivenda women, and the subject positions that they enact when grieving for a deceased husband.

In chapter seven I present an analysis of the discourses obtained from the participants. It is in this chapter that I interpret the discourses on bereavement rituals as the main focus of the study. Gee's (1999) six building tasks that guide discourse analysis are considered for the purpose of analysis. The participants' discourses are then analysed in terms of Parker's (1990) criteria of identifying discourses in a text.

As the final chapter, chapter eight presents a reflection of the whole process and the shortcomings encountered in the course of the project. I also offer a conclusion based on my analysis of the discourses and present recommendations for further exploration.

1.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter highlighted the background of the present study and provided the justification for undertaking such an exploration. A more in-depth focus on the theoretical framework adopted in this study follows in chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to analyse the discourses pertaining to the way Tshivenda-speaking women construct performance of bereavement rituals. Therefore, a theoretical framework that considers performance of bereavement rituals as a social action is needed. This framework adheres to postmodern paradigms that regard the nature of reality as being socially constructed. For the purpose of this study, I have adopted a theoretical framework that emerged from a postmodern stance, namely, social constructionism, which assumes that performance of bereavement rituals is a socially constructed reality. Therefore, I cannot deny that multiple realities of performance of bereavement rituals could also exist. In this chapter, I first focus on where social constructionism originated and then address its nature as it is relevant to this study. The discourses that were identified from the literature chapters are also discussed in this chapter.

2.2 THE ORIGINS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Like many theories, social constructionism originated from various sources and disciplines. Literature reports a gradual emergence of alternative approaches to the study of human beings in Britain and North America a few decades ago. These approaches arose in critical psychology, discursive psychology, discourse analysis, deconstruction and poststructuralism. What appeared to be common to these approaches is now referred to as social constructionism. Social constructionism is a theoretical orientation that underpins the approaches currently offering radical and critical alternatives in psychology and social psychology, as well as other disciplines in the social and human sciences (Burr, 2003).

In light of the origins of social constructionism, the factors influencing its emergence deserve attention. It is important to consider that these influences, and the history of social constructionism, are just one of many possible constructions of what was happening at the time.

Literature shows that sociology fundamentally influenced the development of social constructionism (Burr, 2003). Sociology emphasises the thinking that, through social interaction with others, people construct their own and others' identities and inner voices (Hoffman, 1993). The influence of sociology on social constructionism may be traced back to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) book entitled *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (Liebrucks, 2001). These authors' account of social life argues that it is through social interaction and practices that human beings create and sustain all social phenomena. This occurs through externalisation, objectivation and internalisation.

In "*Introduction to social constructionism*", Burr (1995) argues that when people externalise, they get involved in some activity; they create some artefact or practice. For example, they may have an idea about a phenomenon like death, and externalise it by telling a story about such a phenomenon. As people listen to the story and retell it, the story takes a certain form. This is where its idea "becomes an object of consciousness for people in that society" (Burr, 1995, p. 10). This makes it appear to be something out there waiting to be known rather than something consisting of the constructions of people through their interaction. As a result, future generations end up internalising the idea that they found already in existence, and consciously understand it as part of their world. Keeney (1983) argues that one's knowledge is recycled in the (re)construction of the world. This involves how the social practices of people can socially construct the world. At the same time, the social world can be experienced by people as something that was there. Burr (2003) maintains, therefore, that social constructionism carries the status of an object.

Burr (2003) reports that social psychology emerged during the Second World War, at a time when psychologists wanted to provide the governments of the United States of America and Britain with knowledge that could be used for propaganda and to manipulate people. This occurred in a period when psychology was adopting the positivist methods of the natural sciences, that could not answer the *how* questions.

In the 1960s and 1970s, social psychologists were worried about the way psychology was serving the dominant groups and ignoring the voices of the ordinary people. To create a balance between the marginal and the dominant groups, a number of books that proposed alternatives to positivist science were published (Hibberd, 2005). These books focussed on the accounts of ordinary people and challenged the oppressive ideological uses of psychology (Burr, 2003). These concerns are apparent in social constructionism.

In psychology, social constructionism's emergence dates back to Gergen's (1973) paper "*Social psychology as history*". In support of Gergen, Burr (2003) argues that all knowledge is historically and culturally specific. As a result, people have to extend their "enquiries into social, political and economic realms" so that they can understand the evolution of current psychology and social life (Burr, 2003, p. 13). Gergen's (1973) paper also argues that there is no final description of people in a society because social life is not static, but always changing. That is also because meaning making is not static and fixed, but is fluid, provisional and context-dependent (Coyle, 2007).

The ideology that gives shape to social constructionism is postmodernism. Postmodernism arose as a rejection of the fundamental assumptions of the modernist movement that preceded postmodernism and that continues to exist parallel to it. The main tenet of modernism is to search for "the true nature of reality through application of reasons and rationality" (Burr, 2003, p. 10). This implies that there are underlying rules that inform our functioning in the world.

Postmodernism opposes the theories that consider the nature of life to be based on underlying structures (for example, Freudian psychoanalysis). Rather, it embraces the understanding that the social world is always changing, and that such changes depend on social relations. As in architecture, postmodernism's argument is that there is no good designer because it depends on people's interpretation of what they observe (Burr, 2003). One can argue that the way people construct their world cannot be judged according to how the previous generation judged it. Equally, today's standards cannot be used to judge the next generation. That is because grief and bereavement vary across places, times, and groups in terms of how and when, or even whether emotions are expressed (Rosenblatt, 2001).

Postmodernism also opposes the idea that social change is about discovering and altering the underlying structures of social life through the application of a theory or meta-narrative. Social constructionism shares this stance, and points out that the word 'discover' implies something that existed before (Burr, 2003).

The above section showed how social constructionism originated from several sources. Burr (2003) adds that social constructionism was influenced by the works of French intellectuals like Foucault and Derrida within the cultural backdrop of postmodernism, with its intellectual roots in earlier sociology and in the concerns of the crisis in social psychology.

2.3 THE NATURE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism accepts that there is not one truth or reality for any situation. Instead there are multiple descriptions or realities constructed in the interaction between people (Gergen, 1999; Rosenblatt, 2001; Willig, 2001). Rosenblatt supports authors like Gergen (1999) and Liebrucks (2001) who argue that the way people construct reality depends on the influences received from societal gatherings, history and interaction with others. In social constructionism, people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences are the products of systems of meanings that exist at a social rather than an individual level

(Terre Blanche, Kelly & Durrheim, 2006). As people interact with each other, they construct a particular reality about their world and attach meaning to it. Furthermore, social constructionism questions the value claims of what is real and what is perceived. It views knowledge as historically and culturally specific and sustained by social processes such as those in the Tshivenda practice of bereavement rituals. The performance of bereavement rituals is therefore assumed to be a social action and social processes emerge as a function of culture and social history as people construct meaning from their experiences.

Social constructionism gives voice to ordinary people who are usually excluded from mainstream research practices. In particular, women whose evidence was long being there that they were undervalued and anything associated with them seemed to be perceived negatively (De la Rey, 1992). Thus, similar to feminism that gives focus to women's lives and activities previously marginalised and subsidiary to men (Bryman, 2008) and promoting equalities between men and women (Ohara & Saft, 2003), social constructionism allows liberation and the practice of human rights that put men and women in the same position (Peltola, Milkie & Presser, 2004) where their voices can be raised and heard. As it is the case in this study, women are understood from their own perspective and context, through their use of language and voices as a form of social action through which they give meaning to their diverse and often anomalous accounts of their perceptions and experiences.

A social constructionist approach advocates that its adherents take a critical position regarding knowledge that is taken for granted (Burr, 2003); that is, knowledge about the world and our selves. This position influences me to be critical in terms of my own and the participants' perceptions of what appears to be real in the context of bereavement rituals and the practices surrounding them. It encourages me to challenge existing ways of viewing and understanding death and bereavement, and makes me question that understanding so that I may arrive at alternative interpretations. For example, why do bereaved women consider death as being painful and themselves as being in need of healing through the performance of the bereavement rituals? It is through questioning

not only the available literature on bereavement, but also the constructions of these bereaved women that an alternative understanding can be obtained and new knowledge added to the literature on bereavement.

More than a decade ago, De la Rey, Duncan, Shefer and van Niekerk (1997) maintained that the theory of social constructionism focuses on knowledge that has been given little attention or no attention at all. Consequently, social constructionism questions the notion of objectivity, an aspect that is emphasised by research perspectives such as positivism, which asserts that there are absolutes in life and focuses attention on the views of dominant groups in society at the expense of others. Social constructionism challenges the conventional idea that knowledge and understanding is based upon objective, unbiased observations of the world, and argues that knowledge is not coherent or logical (Potgieter, 1997). Rather, there are alternative interpretations that may be offered from groups that represent different cultures, religions and social histories.

Gergen (2006) advocates that all forms of knowledge and understanding are culturally and historically specific and relative. This makes the notion of truth problematic (Maze, 2001), and the ways in which participants in this study construct their perceptions of the world could never be considered new. The concepts used were there before, and they depend on the religious-cultural background that informs people's ways of constructing meaning. In this regard, it is likely that the way women talk about their husbands' roles in the family and their grief upon their husbands' deaths is influenced by their historical and cultural heritage. That is because people from different historical and cultural backgrounds might have their own ways of describing the feeling of losing a husband. The way in which I analysed the different discourses was also historically and culturally specific and relative, as the products of that culture and history (Rosenblatt, 2001). Because each woman and I, bring our own interpretations of our religious-cultural background as a frame of reference, we also add a unique element to the interpretation during the conversation.

Social processes are important in the way people co-construct their versions of reality. It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become constructed (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Although they come from the same cultural but different religious backgrounds, the participants may still share certain understandings of bereavement and bereavement rituals. In some instances, participants even contradict themselves or one another in their meaning construction because of their interactions in their different religious-cultural settings. The day-to-day interactions that take place between the participants and the people with whom they share religious and cultural views play a role in how they (the participants) construct reality. In particular cultures, individuals might have a common understanding of reality that is influenced by a culture that discourages discrepancies between individuals and collective ideals through collective culturally constructed voices (Hong, 2004). In particular, cultures that promote psychological interdependence (Neff, 2003), like Tshivenda culture. There are no essences inside people that make them what they are or dictate how they behave (Burr 2003). Therefore, perceptions of bereavement rituals have a distinct religious-cultural base, and are embedded in the social processes that prevail in the settings where these rituals are performed.

Social processes are embedded in social actions; and from the constructionist perspective, language forms an integral part of social action (Potter, 2001). Coyle (2007) argues that language performs an action. This implies that the use of language is more than just conversation; when people talk to each other, the world gets constructed in different ways. Such use of language becomes social action that constructs accounts of what the world is like (Edley, 2001).

Social action is not a static thing, but is continuous, socially constructed, highly contextualised, fluid and variable (Johnson & Meinhof, 1997). The way people construct reality invites different kinds of action and excludes others (Burr, 2003). This implies that the way participants understand the world they live in and the way they talk about their experiences (social action), particularly concerning bereavement rituals, represents their way of making sense of the world and constructing knowledge. White (1995) argues

that the rituals that people create around death and grief are reflections of what people think and meanings produced in language. In support of White, Edley (2001) maintains “reality is the product of discourse” (p. 437). Talking about death gives shape and moulds the experience into what is considered normal or pathological (Hedtke, 2002).

Therefore, in speaking (such as a conversation on the performance of bereavement rituals), women are performing an action. It is an action that is simultaneously informed by the way they talk about the topic and the multiple religious-cultural models that form part of their particular communicative community. These models are situated meanings that provide a backdrop to their talk, and their talk becomes a way of perpetuating and sustaining the religious-cultural values embedded in their perceptions of bereavement rituals. Because each woman brings her own religious-cultural background as a frame of reference to the conversation, she adds a unique element to the conversation. The way the participants construct the topic in their conversational practice also reveals social representations and norms that accompany any particular language and communication, as well as a socio-culturally shared knowledge (Van Dijk, 1997).

In this study, I looked holistically at the perceptions and experiences of bereavement rituals instead of pursuing an essentialist and realist investigation previously accepted in paradigms such as positivism. According to the social constructionist paradigm, I cannot define or discover the essences that make people what they are (Burr, 2003). This would imply categorising people in one way or another as bereaved or not bereaved, knowing and not knowing, and not acknowledging the impact of culture and history upon one’s psychology. Rather, social constructionism allows participants to give their views without any limitations based on particular ways of categorising their knowledge. It paves the way for exploring the multiple discourses that could have an impact on how they describe their experiences and construct knowledge.

Within the social constructionist paradigm, “knowledge is derived from looking at the world from some perspective or other, and is in the service of some interests rather than others” (Burr, 2003, p. 6). I decided to follow a constructionist paradigm because it

allowed me to investigate reality from the participants' perspectives, rather than from any predefined rules or categories as is the case in a positivist paradigm. Participants in this study could construct their realities concerning bereavement rituals from their own perspective. As such, I was able to gain a holistic version of participants' worlds. It also allowed the participants and I to co-construct multiple realities instead of absolute truths, and the outcome of this study should be considered in this light. The focus is not on a discovery of truths, but on discovering the multiple meanings of Tshivenda-speaking women regarding the performance of bereavement rituals prescribed by their culture.

Social constructionism is particularly relevant to the perceptions of participants who have lost their husbands through death regarding bereavement rituals. Although essentialists may debate the relevance of social constructionism as a theoretical approach to this study, based on their acceptance that there are absolutes and objectivity in life (De la Rey et al., 1997), I consider it relevant because it allows for and facilitates the exploration of discourses informing the performance of bereavement rituals from the participants' subjective position.

In a social constructionist paradigm, methods such as discourse analysis have become common practice. 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 focus on discourse assumes that the researcher considers talk and texts as part of social practices. This is also due to the argument that discourse analytic methods have been developed to encompass and address the active use of language (Potter, 2003). Discourse analysis allows the researcher to go beyond what is said (Papa, 2008; Willig, 2008), and also to read not only what the participants have said but also what informs their talk. Many researchers are involved in discourse analysis because it involves studying important and interesting things about human life (Potter, 2003).

For the purpose of analysis, the discourses in the current study were identified and analysed according to the six building blocks suggested by Gee (1999). In this regard, I focussed on semiotic building, world building, activity building, the socio-culturally situated identities and relationships that emerged, political building, and connection building. These building blocks were utilised to establish, firstly, the context of the discourses, and secondly to analyse the specific discourses embedded in the participants' constructions. This is elaborated on in the methodology chapter.

The following section addresses existing discourses in literature, which provide a frame for the context of this study.

2.4 THE RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL DISCOURSE

People's way of understanding and describing the world appear to rely on the beliefs and frame of reference they use to draw distinctions and interpret the world. These frames of reference are informed by culture and a specific time in history (Burr, 2003). In social constructionist terms, people's distinctions and frames of reference are represented in and developed through language (Sims-Schouten, Riley & Willig, 2007). The religious-cultural discourse is considered because it informs people's construction of reality in interaction with one another; it is through this talk and interaction that people create reality (Liebrucks, 2001). Religious-cultural discourses inform African Christian and traditional African women's perceptions and constructions of bereavement rituals.

2.4.1 Conceptualising the religious-cultural discourse

The religious-cultural discourse is employed in this study because there is a relationship between culture and religion in terms of how people construct reality. People cannot talk of religion without talking of the culture in which the religion is practised. This is because religion and culture are responsible for informing our ways of believing in and worshipping a supernatural power or God (Parkes et al., 1997). Religion and culture are also responsible for the way that we use language, and influence our interaction with people in different situations.

When a child is born into a family, religion and culture inform the way people react to the birth (Aborampah, 1999). When people get married, there are expectations regarding appropriate behaviours that are informed by religion and culture. People are expected to celebrate the birth of a child and the marriage of a family member. People celebrate because they believe this occurrence is a beneficial one; and a celebration is, therefore, relevant and appropriate. People are expected to mourn when there is a death in the family. Such behaviours are determined by both religion and culture: neither of these factors can be omitted. If people fail to comply with the religious-cultural prescriptions that should be followed in different situations, this might be construed as disrespecting one's culture.

Traditional Africans have particular religious-cultural practices and rituals of communicating with ancestors and paying respect to the dead, based on their belief that the dead can influence the present reality, and the lives of those who remain behind. These practices are believed to assist the deceased to join the ancestors, relatives and old friends who have passed away (Ngubane, 2004); to gain the deceased's goodwill; and to ensure that he or she will influence the lives of survivors positively (Opoku, 1989). Bereavement rituals are but one way in which traditional Africans honour the deceased. Christian bereavement rituals, however, are chiefly designed to comfort the mourners (Levine, 1997).

2.4.2 Social constructions informing the religious-cultural discourse

Mehta (1999) agrees that religion and culture play a role in the way people perceive death. Given the cues and clues that Gee (2005) suggests to recognise the situated meanings during discourse analysis, one can argue that our religion and culture guide us to attach meaning to death. A culture that believes in the influence of the deceased on the lives of the living will perceive death as a passage to another life, whereas a culture that does not perceive such an influence, or make any link between the dead and the living, will have different perceptions. The latter might perceive death as the end of life and not a continuation of life that involves ancestors and possibly, God.

The Tshivenda-speaking traditional community is an example of a community that believes in the power that a deceased has after death. This community believes that the deceased has to fulfil certain roles in relation to the living. Such belief is informed by religion and culture. African culture maintains that death is not the end, but is a continuation of life (Opoku, 1989). Therefore, the way people attach meaning to death depends on the culture and religion that are in turn socially constructed.

2.4.3 The model defined

The model adopted in this study is represented below in a diagram that reflects existing discourses in the context of this study and how they tie in with the religious-cultural discourse.

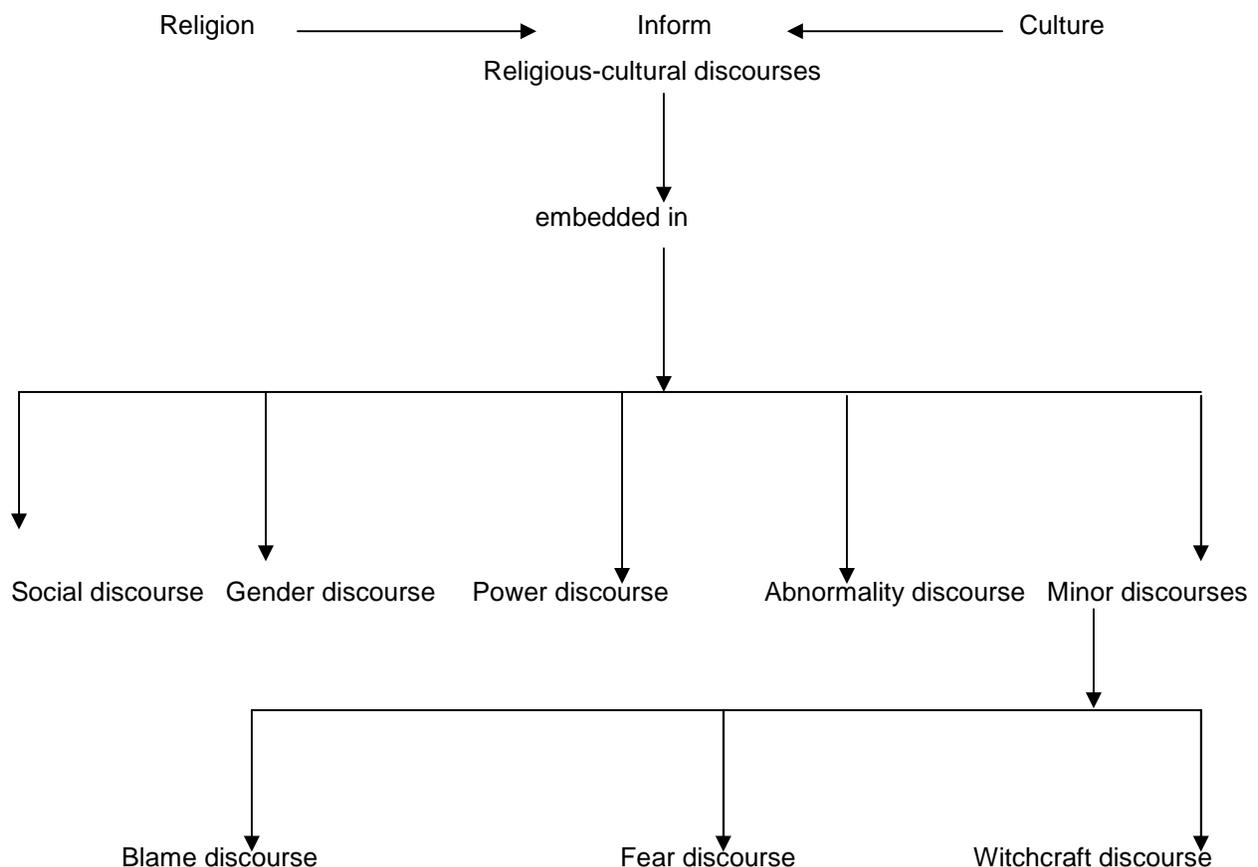


Figure 1. A model of religious-cultural discourses

For the purpose of this study, the model presented above maintains that religion and culture inform religious-cultural discourses pertaining to the death and bereavement rituals. The religious-cultural discourses appear to play a role in the way we believe, act and interact in our day-to-day life. This also includes the performance of bereavement rituals. The model implies that religion and culture, as they inform religious-cultural discourses, are embedded in social, power, gender, abnormality and minor discourses that are found within other discourses - blame discourses, fear discourses and witchcraft discourse. Thus, whether or not one will perform the bereavement rituals or not depends on one's interaction with others in relationships about culture and religion. The sections below (2.4.3.1-2.4.3.5) describe the various elements of the model.

2.4.3.1 Social discourse

Language is used to construct culture and religion, which involves people's behaviour in action and interaction with other people. As such, people cannot construct culture and religion without talking about the groups that are bound together in that particular religious-cultural setting. Such people can be the bereaved, community members, nurses and doctors in hospitals in the context of death (either wild or good, as described in chapter 3). They are found in homes, communities and hospitals. This implies that culture and religion are embedded in a social discourse that informs the way people act and interact in a particular way, in a particular situation.

Community leaders and elders often lead discourses on death, as they understand them in terms of their culture. Should death be constructed in a way that does not require social networks, people could possibly perceive it differently, *i.e. in a way that does not stress the bereaved or the dying person even when there are no family members involved.*

2.4.3.2 Power discourse

This discourse is embedded in the relationship between the bereaved and other people, such as a widow and her in-laws or relatives. The language used in some

definitions of culture constructs culture as prescriptive of how people should think and behave; and implies that people are powerless within the context of such culture and within certain situations. People allow culture to prescribe appropriate ways of interacting with one another. When behaviour is prescribed it implies that people have no choice to decide on a different way of behaviour, possibly because they might be blamed for not complying with the prescriptions, or because they might lose support from other people with whom they should interact and bond, given the context of such behaviour.

This way of talking about culture as having power possibly comes from cultures that are dominated by values that determine what is wrong and right, good and evil, and what constitutes respect, praise and blame (Mbiti, 1975) and cultures that discourage discrepancies (Hong, 2004) and encourage interdependencies (Neff, 2003). When living in such a culture, one is expected to do things in the so-called 'right and good way', and one should respect the cultural prescriptions to avoid blame and misfortune.

Constructing culture as having power tends to oppress those who might be interested in different ways of behaviour from those legitimised culturally. In order to gain favour and support from other people, they cannot use their own powers because these are suppressed by their culture.

Talking about religion as involving worshipping God and ancestors implies that there are some beings that have more power than others, and that those who do not have power should worship the ones who have power. In turn, the ones who are worshipped bestow certain favours on the worshipper. The one who has power becomes the authority figure in a person's life.

Religious leaders and officials are given power over other people, as they provide services, such as purification rituals. In the context of death should they not do so,

people would remain 'unclean'. Therefore, the religious officials and leaders have some kind of authority over the bereaved people.

Power is also given to the ancestors who are ascribed the role of blessing the ones who perform the rituals and punishing those who do not. People also accord the ancestors positions of authority and believe that, if they do not honour them, the ancestors have the power to punish them; conversely, if they are honoured they also have the power to bless. Thus, in a hierarchical order of existence, ancestors appear to occupy higher positions (authority position).

In terms of these religious and cultural discourses, bereaved women have a lower position in the hierarchical structure. They are expected to perform the rituals without any voice of consent or power. Only those who are in higher positions in the hierarchy have a voice and power. A positioning that implicates the bereaved as powerless may derive from a culture and religion that gives higher privileges to others (such as sangomas and faith healers). Culture and religion, as institutions that have prescriptive powers, are not easily opposed. The position of the bereaved would be different if they held a position equal to the dominant group. In this case, the dominant group is 'those who know better'.

2.4.3.3 Gender discourse

The word gender refers to "the social and cultural patterns associated with women and men" (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009, p. 136). This may imply that gender is not a biological category, but a socially constructed one. Thus, the way language is used to construct gender in relation to bereavement rituals implicates women and men as different (Ngcongo, 1993). Men are seen as stronger and superior, and women as weaker and inferior (Rakoczy, 2004). The position that women occupy implicates them as the ones who need rituals more than those who are stronger (men) and, therefore, do not need rituals as much. Women are positioned as subordinate not only because of cultural influences, but also because of the discourse that women are weaker. Such women, particularly from Tshivenda culture, explicitly position

themselves in relation to a stated position. The moment they take up a particular subject position in discourse, they have a particular limited set of concepts, images, metaphors, ways of speaking and narratives they can take on as theirs (Murakami, 2003). As they occupy this subject position they appear of less value and are deprived of human rights as per the Bill of Rights (1996). That is because our sense of who we are comes from our occupation of subject positions within discourse (Burr, 2003).

The language used to construct women as weak and in need of rituals may derive from cultural discourses that position women as taking a subordinate role in society in relation to men. Because of their position, women are also expected to express their emotions openly, for example, through crying (Rosenblatt, 1997). On the contrary, men are expected to control themselves, and never cry aloud or express their emotions (Maritz, Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2008).

2.4.3.4 Abnormality discourse

The way language is used in constructing death as being painful suggests that those who experience the pain of death are not in a normal state. They are represented as ill and devastated and in need of something that will help them return to their normal state. Hedtke (2002) argues that even when people give their condolences to the bereaved, they use language that represents the bereaved as ill and in need of healing. The bereaved widows also behave in a way that positions them as such by the way they dress (Carton, 2003). For example, in Tshivenda culture, widows dress in black for a period of twelve months. The construction of death as implying abnormality or an illness further legitimises the performance of bereavement rituals.

Also, the language used to construct death as good may signal that the good death can help people to stay normal even after the death of a family member because they will be able to perform the necessary rituals (Gielen, 1997). A good death is given a therapeutic role that can heal the bereaved from the illness caused by

death. On the other hand, the language used to construct a wild death signals this kind of death as unhealthy; and positions the bereaved in an abnormal state through being denied an opportunity to perform certain rituals.

The discourse on death that legitimises abnormality in bereaved people may derive from a religion and culture that consider death to be good only if it occurs in one's home, surrounded by people who share the same religion and culture as the dying person. Different authors (Van der Hart, 1983; Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991) construct bereavement rituals through language that implicates the people who perform the rituals as not normal and possibly in need of therapy. People are constructed as polluted or contaminated, and bereavement rituals are personified as something that can provide therapy or healing through cleansing (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). They are seen as serving the dead to avoid guilty feelings and misfortunes caused by disciplinary action from the ancestors (Ngubane, 2004). Religious leaders, sometimes also known as faith healers, are the ones responsible for the purification of the homestead. This procedure implies that the bereaved are dirty or ill, and that they need cleansing or therapy to help them return to their previous normal state.

The language used to construct bereavement rituals may furthermore come from religious and cultural institutions that prescribe the performance of bereavement rituals. These institutions consider the rituals to be important for both the deceased and the bereaved because they supposedly make people feel better or return to their previous normal state (through cleansing). Religion and culture appear to be institutions that highly esteem religious leaders and officials and their roles in the spiritual well-being of a community.

The language used to talk about bereavement rituals seems to imply that all practices related to bereavement rituals are meant to cure some form of abnormality in those who participate. This is because bereavement rituals are believed to help in chasing misfortunes away, providing therapy or healing and justifying emotional display. Bereavement rituals could be constructed in a way that does not subject

people to a state of being abnormal. It is possible to consider that the people who perform rituals are not polluted or somehow ill, and in need of cleansing and therapy. It seems that people may construct bereavement rituals as something that associates the bereaved with their culture and religion.

2.4.3.5 Blame discourse

The death of a loved one forces many grieving people to face head on the sadness, guilt, anger, or fear that follows a loss (Frantz, Farrell & Trolley, 2001). When death is constructed as unnatural and caused by some external agent, the implication is that there are people who can be blamed for the death, as well as people who do the blaming. The bereaved are the ones who must blame someone for the death. They might consult with the sangoma who has more insight into who should be blamed. The sangoma's role in this respect constructs him or her in a higher position in relation to the bereaved.

Constructing death in a way that gives a sangoma greater power may derive from a culture dominated by a discourse that regards death as unnatural. If death were considered natural, it is possible that there would be no social language that blames death on people. As a way of avoiding such sense of blame on either self or others, traditional Chinese, for example, believe that death is beyond human control (Chan et al., 2005).

2.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter discussed the importance of adopting a relevant theoretical framework (social constructionism) in the study of bereavement rituals, which are social actions. This theoretical framework was linked to a methodology (discourse analysis) that was chosen as it allows for discourses to be identified. The religious-cultural discourses discussed in this chapter were identified in the literature. This literature is examined in greater depth in the two chapters that follow.

CHAPTER 3

RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL WORLDVIEW

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As the focus of this study includes two religious world views with which the Tshivenda-speaking community is affiliated, the chapter unpacks the meaning of religion and culture as they relate to the discourses that inform the construction of death in relation to bereavement rituals. It is assumed that culture and religion play a role in how people talk about death and dying, as these are the institutions that call for the performance of bereavement rituals among most of the African cultures, particularly the Tshivenda-speaking people.

This chapter addresses the religious-cultural worldviews informing the ways people perceive and talk about death and dying. In order to address these worldviews, I first consider the way culture and religion are socially constructed and the role they play in informing people's everyday life, behaviour and interaction. Religions in the Tshivenda-speaking community, the introduction of Christianity among the Tshivenda-speaking people and the construction of death as the continuation of life are also highlighted. The chapter also addresses the meaning of the two groups (African Christian and traditional African) as they are constructed in this study. The way people construct death and dying is also discussed.

3.2 CULTURE AND RELIGION

This section addresses these concepts as they appear to play a major role in the way people talk about death and bereavement rituals. Culture and religion inform not only people's talk, but also the behaviour that is acceptable in different situations in their communities (Moyo, 2004). These two concepts also assist in recognising discourses that inform people's perceptions and constructions of reality.

3.2.1 Culture

Cohen and Swerdlik (1999, p. 5) construct culture as “the socially transmitted behaviour patterns, beliefs, and products of work of a particular population, community, or group of people”. Parkes et al. (1997, p. 10) construct culture as “ways of thinking and behaviour which distinguish one group of people from another and which tend to be passed down from generation to generation”. Culture appears to be networks of knowledge, consisting of learned routines of thinking, feeling, and interacting with other people, as well as a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world (Barth, 2002). Culture is seen as involving certain people (community members) in a particular institution (community or society). The way culture is constructed implies that there are people who have a common way of thinking and behaving that identifies them as belonging to a particular culture. What makes it unique, possibly, is that it is shared among a collection of interconnected individuals, who are often demarcated by race, ethnicity, or nationality; externalised by rich symbols, artefacts, social constructions, and social institutions used to form the common ground for communication among members (Hong, 2009). However, culture may undergo continuous modifications as aspects of the knowledge tradition may be falsified or deemed not applicable by a newer social order and reality (Hong, 2009).

The culture of a particular community, therefore, prescribes the members’ way of behaviour and thinking, which makes it possible for them to act and interact in a particular way in different situations. Those who behave differently from those culturally prescribed patterns come to be considered abnormal (Hedtke, 2002). This may imply that those who behave as prescribed for a particular situation will be considered normal. When people who belong to Tshivenda culture behave in an unacceptable way within their culture, they may be judged and possibly considered abnormal.

When people who belong to a particular group and culture are exposed to other and different cultures that can make them acquire the shared knowledge of those cultures, they are likely to behave in an abnormal way in relation to their own culture. Their behaviour might be influenced by knowledge that can be activated by certain contextual

cues that will subsequently affect the way they think and behave (Hong, 2009). However, it is through people's actions and interactions that they show to which culture they belong. As such, culture becomes the way things are done and the means with which such things are done (Ngubane, 2004) for that particular group of people.

The way people think about bereavement and bereavement rituals in a particular culture may be discerned in the way they act and interact, and how they use language in the context of death. That is because people's constructions of death are symbolised in their actions and interactions (Rosenblatt, 2001).

In cultures with an emphasis on embeddedness, people are viewed as entities embedded in the collective. Meaning in life is expected to come largely through social relations, through identifying with the group, participating in its shared way of life, and striving towards its shared goals. Embedded cultures emphasise maintaining the status quo and restraining actions that might disrupt in-group solidarity or the traditional order. Important values in such cultures are social order, respect for tradition, security, obedience, and wisdom (Schwartz, 2009).

Such shared knowledge, that influences the way things are done, constantly emerges and evolves as a result of socio-political and other changes in the society (Hong, 2009). Therefore, construction of culture may depend on the socio-political context. This may imply that culture is not static but may change as a result of socio-political changes and that it will always be relevant to the people in the present context. There are, however, authors like Ngubane (2004) who argue that it is only when so-called enlightened Africans want to compromise their authentic self and African values that culture will be referred to as dynamic. Ngubane's argument may imply that there is one particular African culture, which, because of civilization, modernity, progress and development discourses, results in its people being alienated from their socio-cultural background. Without taking a complete opposite stance from Ngubane, I can argue that there are multiple cultures in Africa that constitute an African identity. South Africa in particular is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country in which each tribe respects its own culture and

subjective identity. For example, Shangaans, Zulu and Vendas have their acceptable ways of expressing grief.

In a social constructionist paradigm “our subjective experience is provided by the discourses in which we are culturally embedded” (Burr, 2003, p. 59). This implies that the way we experience the world is possibly the result of how a particular culture defines such an experience. Culture provides people with language that they use to describe and construct their subjective experiences. Consequently, people from different cultures are likely to construct death differently (Rosenblatt, 2001). That is, even though grief can be considered universal, ways of reacting to the experience are shaped by one’s own culture through various prescribed rituals, beliefs, and family rules (Chan et al., 2005). For example, cultures may differ in whether people are expected to cry or show grief openly upon the death of a family member. Shangaans will cry heavily to show that they are mourning and the pain associated with the death of a family member is unbearable, whereas Zulus are not allowed to mourn death caused by an accident (Ngubane, 2004), possibly because such death is considered a wild death (Opoku, 1989).

Therefore, culture appears to be a container for many other abstractions that are based on inevitably selective observations made by certain people at certain times. Even if people can grant some sort of reality to a culture, a culture is inhomogeneous and complex, filled with contradictions and ambiguities, and is forever in process (Rosenblatt, 2001). It is not easy to hold onto a particular way to construct culture, but depends on people in a particular time and environment.

When we talk of culture as it distinguishes groups of people, we also need to talk about that which binds such people together, for example, religion. Religion merits discussion as it is one of the ways of giving meaning to living for people in their respective cultures.

3.2.2 Religion

Van Beek and Blakely (1994) construct religion as “a human interaction with culturally postulated reality” (p. 2) while Parkes et al. (1997) talk of religion as “that body of ideas which binds a society together” (p. 10). The way these authors talk of religion suggests that religion binds people in particular institutions (society) and people interact with what that particular culture assumes to be a reality. Pang and Lam (2002) argue that the variance in cultures and cultural practices reflect underlying differences in their belief systems. This may imply that people in each and every culture act and interact in a way that reflects what they believe in. Those cultural practices become an integral part of the practice of people’s faith as they define the moral standards that underpin that faith, belief or spirituality (Gcabashe, 1995).

The Collins Gem English Dictionary (2003, p. 486) defines religion as “a system of belief in and worship of a supernatural power or God”. This definition **seems to imply** that religion is relevant to those who believe in a God (for example, Christians) and those who believe in ancestral powers (traditional Africans). In the context of this study, I will discuss religion as it applies to these two groups. A detailed exploration of the meaning of these two religious groups as they apply in this study is addressed later in the chapter.

According to the above definitions, practising a religion appears to necessitate actions that need to be performed by actors (people). Such actions include the rituals involved in the worship of a supernatural power or God. There are actors who should perform particular actions (worship). Talking of religion in a way that involves worshipping God appears to imply recognition of some higher power that has control and that deserves obedience from people. It also implies that those who worship accept the position of being powerless and possibly in need of favours from this higher power. Religion appears to be the way by which people express their spirituality (De Veber, 1995).

There are two main religions that inform people’s construction of reality amongst the traditional African people in the Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Tshivenda-speaking

people, namely the traditional African religion and Christianity (Moyo, 2004). In the next sections I briefly highlight these two religions together with the bereavement rituals that are performed in each religion. I also give a brief background of the introduction of Christianity among the Tshivenda-speaking community because both traditional beliefs and Christianity play a role in how people construct reality about bereavement and bereavement rituals.

3.2.2.1 Religions in the Tshivenda-speaking community

Both Christians and traditional Africans engage in particular practices to satisfy their spiritual needs. There is a religious-cultural discourse that governs people's behaviour. Thus, although culture prescribes the way of living within a particular group of people, religion restricts their behaviour, in part because there are certain religions that undermine some cultural practices (Chavanduka, 1999).

This study is concerned with how Christian and traditional beliefs inform people's perceptions of bereavement rituals. Whereas in most of traditional African religions, people believe that the dead have a significant and long-lasting influence on the lives and behaviour of those that remain behind, Christians believe that only God can influence their lives and behaviour, and that the dead have no way of influencing the lives of the living. The core of the Christian faith is that there is life after death; that such a life is lived in heaven where people go after death, and life there is led by Christ (Ter Blanche & Parkes, 1997). Traditional Africans believe in life after death and the presence of ancestors who interact with the living (Ngubane, 2004; Opoku, 1989). The perceptions of these religious beliefs construct how people view death and dying.

Many traditional Africans believe that if the ancestors are not given their due respect through the performance of rituals, they might strike the family. However, this is a religious-cultural belief and is not universal. Thus, it is not everybody who believes that the ancestors can bring misfortunes as a consequence of not performing the rituals. For example, while knowledge about misfortunes that accompany the failure

to perform death rituals usually influences the behaviour of most traditional Africans, Christians' talk and behaviour are not influenced by this same fear of misfortunes. Possibly, their talk is influenced by their belief in Christ that brings about knowledge of life in heaven after death (Ter Blanche & Parkes, 1997) where they will reunite with the deceased during resurrection (Pang & Lam, 2002). Rather, their talk is influenced by their belief in Christ and the accompanying biblical promise of life in heaven after death (Ter Blanche & Parkes, 1997).

The nature of religion can be inferred from the following four aspects, as elucidated by Mbiti (1975): beliefs, practices, religious objects and places, and religious officials or leaders. No aspect on its own constitutes the entire meaning of religion, but all these parts must be seen as working together to give us possibly some sense of a complete picture of religion. Different people construct the meanings of these aspects as they interact with one another, as well as through their social language, which is underpinned by a religious-cultural heritage.

1. Beliefs

Beliefs are an essential part of any religion. They show the way people think about the universe and their attitude towards life and death. Religious beliefs are concerned with topics such as God, spirits, human life, magic, the hereafter, and so on. For example, a traditional African belief in many cultures is that death is not the termination of life, but a continuation of life in a different form in another world (Ngubane, 2004; Opoku, 1989). Such continuation of life invokes a certain type of relationship between the dead and the living. As stated by Ray (1976), after death, the soul of the deceased continues to remain in contact with the family left behind. Because of this belief, the performance of certain rituals is prescribed to ensure that the deceased does not become angry with the living.

The relationship between the living and the dead has powerful moral and psychological implications and plays a vital role in the everyday life of many Tshivenda-speaking people, and many other African societies. This is because

failure to honour the deceased might bring misfortune to the family. What is important here is not only the afterlife, but the way the deceased continues to be involved with the living (Rosenblatt, 2000). When the deceased is not honoured, for example, through failure to perform the rituals, this relationship may be disturbed.

2. Religious practices

Religious practices appear essential to any religion. Religious practices show how people express their beliefs in practical terms. They include praying or worshipping, making sacrifices and offerings, performing ceremonies and rituals, observing various customs, and so on (Mbiti, 1975). Prayers are regarded as ways of communicating with God who watches over people and consoles them when things are difficult and painful (Chong, 2006). The consideration of prayer appears to symbolise acceptance that a person is not well and needs divine intervention for his or her wellbeing. Religious practices found in Africa also include the performance of bereavement rituals when a member of the community dies. Such rituals include purification, since interaction with a deceased 'contaminates' a person and he or she needs to be cleansed with rituals that symbolise honouring the deceased, rituals that symbolise a change in status, and so on.

When religious practices are constructed as symbolising people's expression of their beliefs, then people are more likely to value and participate in such practices. In this way, religious practices often add value and a sense of fulfilment to people's lives.

3. Religious objects and places

Religious objects and places that people set apart as being holy or sacred are not used for common everyday activities, and have a particular religious purpose. There are many such religious objects and places. Some are constructed by people, but others are taken in their natural form and set apart for religious purposes. Some belong to private individuals and families, while others belong to the whole community. They include places like shrines, groves, sacred hills or

mountains and objects like amulets, charms, masks and many others (Mbiti, 1975). In the Tshivenda-speaking culture there are, for example, places called 'zwiendeulu' where only royal people are buried, irrespective of their religious affiliation, and where those who are not from the royal family are not even allowed to enter.

The importance attached to such objects and places in religious terms is derived from social interactions and history. As people interact, they decide to accept certain places or objects as important within the context of their religion. For example, a burial place is accepted for that particular purpose only. When people go there they are expected to engage in actions associated with death, such as performing the relevant burial rituals.

4. Religious officials and leaders

According to Mbiti (1975), religious officials or leaders are the people who conduct and facilitate religious matters such as ceremonies, sacrifices, formal prayers and divinations. In many cases they are trained men and women. They are deemed to know more about religious affairs than other people, and are respected by their community. Such people hold offices as priests, rain-makers, ritual elders, diviners, medicine men and women, and even kings and rulers. These officials may or may not be paid for their duties, but in most cases people give them gifts to show their gratitude. These people are an essential part of a religion and without them, religious-cultural activities would neither survive nor function properly; much of the religious wisdom of the people would be forgotten, and people would not benefit from it in practical terms (Mbiti, 1975).

These religious officials play certain roles in the community that other people relate to and identify with, depending on the situation. In the context of death and dying, elders and diviners are considered to have the power to facilitate certain rituals. The bereaved perform the rituals as they conform to the wisdom of their religious-cultural officials and leaders. Culture has given such officials and leaders power and

specialised knowledge and their prescriptions have to be followed to ensure goodwill both for the deceased and the community.

Both Christian ministers and traditional healers are seen as playing major roles in determining how people address the issues around death. For the purposes of this study, ministers are seen as representing Christian religious leadership and traditional healers as representing cultural leadership within the African religions as it relates to Tshivenda speaking people. These officials are seen as the authority in prescribing religious-cultural practices pertaining to death and bereavement. For example, Christian ministers facilitate the necessary prayers and traditional healers facilitate traditional African rituals.

In situations where a deceased was a member of the African Indigenous Church (AIC), a faith healer will come and sprinkle 'holy water' (tshiwasho) all over the homestead and kraals (cattle enclosures) (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). The sprinkling of holy water implies that the place is dirty and needs to be cleansed through the use of holy water. The water is given a role of returning the homestead and kraals back to the previous clean state that was interrupted by the occurrence of death.

In the event of the death of a spouse, it becomes necessary to purify the surviving spouse (widow) with holy water. The principal mourner is expected to wear funeral clothes for a period of 12 months (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). These clothes symbolise the acceptance of one's status (widowhood) that is occasioned by the death of a spouse. During this period, it is taboo to marry or have sex with another man because the widow is believed to be still mourning and in the process of purification. Purification, wearing of funeral clothes and avoidance of sex or marriage within twelve months are all symbols and cultural prescriptions that should be followed in the particular Tshivenda traditional African religion. These practices imply that a widow is ill or dirty and in need of therapy or cleansing.

During the death of my family member a ritual that concerns bringing the spirit of the deceased home was also performed. In this ritual, the traditional healer, together with the senior members of the family, killed a goat by drowning. This is done to show that the deceased's blood was never shed during his or her death. The goat is eaten by everyone (family members, relatives and the neighbours) symbolising the communal nature of the performance of the bereavement rituals. Furthermore, the whole goat is eaten on the same day as tradition prescribes and all the bones collected for burial in a corner of the yard. This small grave of bones symbolises the continual presence of the deceased in the family.

In the life of traditional African people, the deceased becomes another religious official who is always given high esteem as he or she intervenes in people's lives. The ancestors act as the official guardians of the social and moral order (Ray, 1976). The ancestors control social relationships pertaining to certain spheres, such as domestic productivity in the form of luck, wealth, and fertility (Lalande & Bonanno, 2006). The ancestors do not only give blessings to the living, but they also send misfortunes that are seen as punishment for a community's or family's failure to perform the necessary rituals (Ray, 1976).

Another unique characteristic of the Tshivenda-speaking culture is what Stayt (1968) calls the pivotal role played by diviners in the performance of death rituals. The diviner chooses the site of the grave and also indicates who among the survivors should be the first to dig the grave and touch the corpse. Religious leaders and officials are more highly esteemed than the bereaved. Respect for these officials derives from the religious-cultural heritage that expects people to rely on religious leaders and officials when the performance of rituals is necessary, for example, during bereavement.

When a family member dies in the Tshivenda-speaking community, after the burial, the bereaved visit the sangoma (religious official) to find out exactly what or who killed the deceased. This is done because it is believed that death is caused by

somebody who must be known to the family. Normally the sangoma will not give the name of the person who caused the death, but will give references that will identify either a member of the community or a close relative who the mourners will begin to suspect. It is believed that the person who is responsible for a person's death can never be a stranger, but is a close relative who understands the family background, and includes people who are usually close to the deceased. This behaviour in which someone is blamed for causing the death places the bereaved and those who have come to support him or her in a difficult position.

3.2.2.2 Introduction of Christianity to the Tshivenda-speaking people

European missionaries introduced Christianity to the Tshivenda-speaking people in the northern parts of South Africa in 1814. It nearly destroyed the indigenous religious-cultural practices of the Tshivenda-speaking people. Most Tshivenda traditional religious rituals, including those associated with bereavement, were regarded as evil and against the Christian faith. It was also believed that these rituals promoted and encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of worshipping God. Tshivenda-speaking people who became Christians were thus discouraged by the church from participating in African traditional rituals (Chavanduka, 1999). Other groups in South Africa resisted such attempts, for example, even though some Zulu people adopted Christianity their widows may still participate in their own traditional practices (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007).

Currently, many African Christians are members of a church and still participate in their African religious practices. The African Independent Churches (AIC) emerged as a result of this dual allegiance and allowed its members to participate in both Christian and African religious practices. For example, an AIC faith healer integrates Christian ritual with traditional African rituals (Selepe & Richards, 2008). Integration of the two religious practices suggests that its followers respect both religions and might feel guilty for not adopting both religious practices. For example, if people believe in the performance of bereavement rituals and they do not perform them, they may feel guilty and fear that they might be punished for not complying with the

cultural prescriptions. At the same time, they may also feel guilty for not praying to God in the moment of bereavement for He has power over human life and people should obey Him (Parkes et al., 1997).

Christians from the 'Born Again' churches (u bebwa hafhu) in the Tshivenda-speaking communities no longer consider it important to perform the culturally prescribed bereavement rituals since they are believed to contradict church doctrines. Their ministers, who participate in and lead the funeral services, continue to discourage these practices, particularly those prescribed by culture. This is due to the Christian belief that when a person dies, his or her spirit leaves the world of the living to go where God has 'called' him; for his or her death is believed to be God's will (Vold, 2000). Christians do not acknowledge any link between the dead and the living nor do they believe the dead has influence over the life of the living. They do not believe in a continued interdependence and communication with the ancestors as a way of gaining goodwill from those who are dead, unlike traditional African people. As a result, followers of 'Born Again' churches consider it primitive to perform traditional African bereavement rituals, which amongst the Tshivenda-speaking community are regarded as the best entry point for facilitating healing, should one lose a family member to death (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). One implication of the differences in beliefs is that Africans who follow traditional rituals are considered to be sick, weak, unclean and powerless in the context of bereavement, while Christians regard themselves as still clean, healthy and strong, even when a family member has died.

Aiken (2001) reports that the final ritual for Christians takes place either at a church, funeral home or cemetery. The coffin is often brought into the church or the funeral home for family and community members to pay their last respects. Christians regard this ritual as a way of saying goodbye, and it seems that people's relationship with the deceased ends with the burial because they do not expect the dead to fulfil any roles after death. The practice of paying last respects at the funeral home or church seems to compromise the traditional way of showing last respects

at the deceased's home (Ngubane, 2004), particularly in the hut he or she used to sleep in when he or she was still alive.

Christian mourning rituals can be divided into Catholic or Protestant practices. In the Catholic Church, mourning rituals involve candle lighting, incense burning, and the sprinkling of holy water, and in many parishes the priest encourages the family members to participate in the burial ritual as speakers and singers. This is followed by the committal service at the graveyard, where the priest blesses the grave and leads the mourners in prayer for the peaceful repose of the soul and the comfort of the survivors (Marrone, 1997). For Protestants, family and friends gather at the church or funeral home to console one another and pay their final respects to the deceased. The actual funeral service usually takes place on the next day when the minister conducts the service at the church or mortuary. The service includes hymns, prayers and readings from the Bible (Marrone, 1997). Those who are participating in funeral customs walk in a funeral procession wearing black clothing and assist in raising a mound over the grave (Fulton, 1992). In addition, prayers and hymns will also be sung at the graveyard before people finally take leave of the deceased. Black clothes in this context symbolise mourning and a call for sympathy from other people, and also provide justification for grieving the death of a close family member.

The section that follows accounts for the way people construct death as a continuation of life in a different form.

3.2.2.3 Construction of death as continuation of life

In this section, I will first discuss death as the end of one form of life and then focus on death as rebirth in the spiritual world. This discussion is relevant to the assumption that the end of life implies the end of a particular form of bonding and interaction between the dead and the living, whilst at the same time calling for a particular, though different, form of interaction and bonding.

1. Death as the end of life

The way people talk about religion as involving people's interaction and bonding implies that such an interaction is made possible in the presence of life. This means that when people are alive, they are able to interact and bond with one another. The absence of life (death) is defined as the absence of respiration, pulse, and heart beat, as well as the failure to respond to stimuli such as light, movement, and pain. A dead person can no longer engage in physical interaction and bonding with other people (Kastenbaum, 1998). Among the Tshivenda-speaking community, when someone no longer interacts with others or is in hospital and unable to speak that person is considered dead even before any medical declaration.

Constructing death as the absence of interaction and bonding with other people derives from a culture that seems to associate life with people in interaction, and from a religion that focuses on the connections between people. Therefore, the end of life in this culture is associated with silence, unresponsiveness, or the inability to interact and bond with others.

In order to continue bonding with the deceased, people tend to sense the presence of the deceased, communicate with the deceased, mentally relive the relationship, and dream of the deceased (Epstein, Kalus & Berger, 2006). Such ways of creating bonds with the deceased seem to play a role in comforting the bereaved.

2. Death as rebirth in the spirit world

The concept of rebirth seems to inform the way in which people perceive death from a religious perspective. Birth is associated with something new in our existence. When a child is born, people are excited about the arrival of a new family member. In some religions that accept life after death, the concept of rebirth seems to provide a context in which death is perceived as the continuation of life (Gielen, 1997). Although the deceased will never be seen in the same physical state as he or she was known during his or her lifetime, that person continues to exist in a new and different spiritual form. When the deceased continues to exist amongst the living in

a spiritual form, the significance of the deceased's life also continues to exist even when the person is not around (Hedtke, 2002). The family continues to refer to his or her life in connection with what they can see or remember.

For Christians, a deceased person who lived a good life goes to heaven. For Buddhists, the deceased are believed to continue the cycle of rebirth until they attain enlightenment (Chan et al., 2005). The construction of death as rebirth appears to justify the acts of worship that people perform in accordance with religious norms. Thus, people worship the ancestors for they know they still exist as a part of their lives, though in a spiritual form. This construction also justifies the performance of rituals that involve allowing the deceased to join the ancestral or spiritual world so that they can fulfil the ancestral roles for the benefit of the living.

From a religious point of view, death is constructed as a transition from one form of life to another (Backer, Hannon & Russel, 1994). Some religions (such as Hinduism and Buddhism) believe in reincarnation, in which the embodied self passes through childhood, youth, and old age, and assumes another body after death. The particular form in which the deceased is reincarnated depends upon their 'karma' or behaviour in their previous life (Backer et al., 1994). For the traditional African, death appears to represent a transformation from the 'flesh' world to the ancestral spiritual world. Religious-cultural discourse informs people's construction of ancestral life after death, and guides the way people perceive death as either a rebirth or continuation of life.

The following section explores social constructions of death and dying.

3.3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF DEATH AND DYING

This section focuses on the way people construct death and dying as a social phenomenon informed by culture and religion. Given the above discussions on culture and religion, one can assume that people's religious-cultural background plays a role in

their day-to-day perceptions. In this section, the literature reviewed informed the way that I identified constructions of death and dying.

3.3.1 Socially constructed perceptions of death and dying

As I have already argued, people perceive death in different ways depending on their religious affiliation and culture. The same applies to people from the same family who may perceive death, its impact and its meaning differently (Beck, 1999). The primary focus of this section is to show how perceptions of death and dying are socially constructed. The way that people socially construct their perceptions of death and dying plays a role in the performance of bereavement rituals. Such perceptions of death and dying are based on death as ‘good’ and also as ‘wild’.

3.3.1.1 Good death

The way people talk about death is neither uniform nor universal; rather, it is based on history and culture. It is also dependent on one’s religious affiliation. What is considered to be a good death in one culture might be different in another culture. The definition of a ‘good death’ might also differ in the same culture, depending on the time and context. Thus, history and culture mediate the social language that is used when constructing reality in different contexts.

Death is constructed as painful and fearful, irrespective of religion and culture. Constructions that consider death to be good may elicit surprise. When things are seen to be good, it suggests that such a thing is appealing to the people who experience it. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006) refer to this as the binary opposition that informs the discourses and the metaphor people express in their talk. People can refer to something as ‘good’ not because it brings happiness, but because it meets their expectations in that particular culture.

The perception of death as good seems to have two meanings. According to Howarth and Leaman (2001), these meanings are derived from two divergent Greek etymological sources. The first is ‘to die well’. This is linked to the debate on the

medical quality of the physical end of life, namely euthanatos. The second meaning is 'to die nobly', which means being prepared to meet one's death, in the social sense of being prepared to die. In addition, Opoku (1989) refers to a good death as death that comes after a person has "attained a ripe old age" (p. 19). Opoku's construction of good death concerns age. As long as a person is old, his or her death can be perceived as good. Opoku possibly also implies that the person's relatives or community expect that person's death.

A good death is also one that facilitates the ways in which the bereaved cope with the death of a family member. This kind of death can be simply described as an appropriate death, a correct death, a healthy death, a peaceful death, or even a happy death (Clinton, 1999). Hart, Sainsbury and Short (1998) talk about a good death as the kind of death that takes place as a public event, for example, in a dying person's home and where family members, friends, co-workers and even some members of the community have an opportunity to surround and support the dying person. With such deaths, family members also get an opportunity to perform necessary rituals that assist the dying person to make the transition to the next life happily and peacefully (Gielen, 1997). Naturally, in such situations the family members believe in the blessings and punishments associated with rituals. People who have a different construction of a good death may perceive it differently, and not in relation to the dying person's transition to the spiritual world.

In a good death, communal or social support appears to be very important to both the dying person, and those who will remain after his or her death. The person's social network, mostly family members, friends, co-workers and neighbours usually render such communal or social support. Among the Chinese, such social support is so important that if the son is not there during the father's death, such a death is considered a curse (Chan et al., 2005). Celentano and Sonnega (1992) refer to the categories of support as providing instrumental aid (assisting with the normal daily functions of life), socio-emotional aid (sympathy, affection and affiliation) or informational aid (giving advice, opinions and facts). Obviously there is a need for

all the above categories of support for a dying person, because an isolated person has a greater chance of dying a wild death (see 3.3.1.2 below), hence increasing the guilt feelings of the bereaved.

Weisman (1980) states that “it is reasonable to assume that ... the dying wants to be as autonomous as possible for as long as possible and then to be cared for in ways that do not corrupt or degrade their individuality” (p. 64). It seems important to involve the dying person in making decisions about their treatment and care because this reduces their feeling of helplessness. When a dying person’s integrity is recognised, this reduces depression and may promote a healthy psychological state, not only for the dying person, but also for the family members who are more likely to feel that they have done everything necessary to prepare themselves and their relative for the latter’s demise.

A quick and painless death, ideally in one’s sleep, is often touted as the ideal way to die. However, many traditional Africans prefer a natural prolongation of the dying process (without the aid of machines) so that they can make peace with their death, say farewell to friends and relatives, and give final instructions to immediate relatives. Celentano and Sonnega (1992) call this process a ‘good death’. Though it rarely occurs in modern cities where hospitals provide advanced care, death seems preferable when it occurs at home, where the family can provide comfort and an opportunity for the dying person’s spiritual needs to be met through the performance of the necessary rituals. Among the Tshivenda-speaking people, a good death occurs when a person dies at home in the presence of relatives and with the availability of necessary rituals that are seen to assist in the separation of the body and the soul, and which allow the individual to die peacefully.

In a good death, the dying person tends to act as manager of the ceremonies, presiding over his or her last days of life by conducting farewells, giving blessings and accepting pardons, and awaiting the end of life (Hart et al., 1998). The dying person tends to feel in control and is given respect, in accordance with African

culture that dictates respect for the dying and the dead. When such respect is offered to the dying, the relatives will then talk about such a death as a good death because they have also participated in the necessary rituals.

When death is constructed in terms of being good, both the dying person and those who remain, such as family members, fulfil certain roles. The family members do not only give support and care, but they also perform the necessary culturally prescribed rituals meant for the dying person. Such rituals do not only help the dying person to get to the spiritual world peacefully, but they also console the family members through the knowledge that they have completed the culturally expected tasks related to the dying process.

A good death seems to be more conducive to coping with death. Nowadays, however, instead of dying at home next to family members (as stated above), people very often die in hospitals (Backer et al., 1994) away from family members who should assist them during their last days. The good death, which seems natural, has changed and often little assistance is provided to relatives when their family member is dying.

The consequences of a good death appear beneficial not only for the dying person, but also for family members who will remain after his or her death. The family members need an opportunity to give support to their dying family member and to receive support from the community. As stated above, they also need to perform the necessary rituals that show care for the dying person. These opportunities are denied family members when a person dies a wild or a bad death (see the following section).

3.3.1.2 Wild death

The concept of a 'wild death' is associated with the forest or bush, or being separated from familiar surroundings and being unable to access something or somebody. A wild death is one in which a person dies away from family members,

and is associated with people who are inaccessible to other family members and relatives. For people in African cultures, a wild death is unnatural and traumatic.

A wild death occurs when an individual dies in hospital surrounded by machines and doctors instead of family members (O'Gorman, 1998). Such a death denies traditional African people the chance to offer rituals to dying family members who are surrounded by nurses and doctors, who may not be familiar with the dying person's culture. The doctors' role is placed at the centre stage of the life of a dying person, rather than the person himself or herself. A wild death occurs in isolation or in an alien institution where the individual waits to die (O'Gorman, 1998). When people talk about the death, they focus on where it occurred and who was present. People perceive death as being wild when family members are absent and the person dies away from the natural home setting that would have allowed for the performance of necessary rituals.

African culture emphasises the need for communal support when a person is dying. Dying in an institution does not allow for social support, and the dying person's process of socialisation is prematurely terminated. This causes stress, fears and anxieties not only for the dying person, but also for family members who remain at home while their family member is hospitalised, waiting for his or her death. Furthermore, this kind of death denies the bereaved an opportunity to perform the necessary funeral rituals, resulting in feelings of guilt. For these reasons, O'Gorman (1998) refers to this way of dying as a wild and unhealthy death, which among the Chinese, is associated with a curse (Chan et al., 2005).

From a traditional African perspective, a wild death is similar to a bad death that includes death by violent accidents, unclean diseases and suicide (Opoku, 1989). According to Opoku (1989), people who are believed to have died a bad death are capable of coming back and repeating what they have done (e.g. suicide) through someone else in the family. This is because in some African cultures it is believed that the spirit of the deceased is capable of coming back to the family and living in

another person or a newborn baby. The perception of death as wild is accompanied by fear associated with the absence of the necessary rituals that are needed to prevent misfortune (Ray, 1976) for the survivors.

In some of traditional African cultures (e.g., Tshivenda culture), whether a death is considered good or wild, it is believed that it is caused by someone. The following section focuses on the construction of death as caused by hostile people or elements.

3.3.1.3 Causes of death

A traditional African belief is that death is never natural. Instead, there is always something or someone who is to blame. It is believed that death came into the world at a very early date in the history of humankind and that every time a person dies this death is caused by something or somebody (Sossou, 2002). Such a belief qualifies traditional Africans to perform different rituals as a way of acknowledging the value of a deceased and identifying themselves with their cultural practices. The rituals associated with finding the cause of death were also developed to help the bereaved cope well with the death of a family member. It is through identifying these causes of death that one's experiences, reactions and coping with death are informed. Belief in such causes of death also informs the particular rituals that the family and community will perform.

In some African cultures, death is believed to have both physical and non-physical causes (Opoku, 1989). The physical causes include old age, diseases, accidents, or injuries. From an African perspective, however, physical causes alone do not adequately and exhaustively explain the phenomenon of death. The non-physical causes provide a more comprehensive explanation of death. Non-physical causes include sorcery, curses, witchcraft and other mysterious forces as well as summons from ancestors which occur as a punishment for not abiding by cultural practices. Africans believe that even if death is caused by illness, there is always something that facilitated that illness (Mbiti, 1975). That belief informs the role of sangomas,

who use their supernatural powers to identify and provide an explanation of who caused the person's death.

The way people talk about death as caused by both physical and non-physical forces assumes that there is one person who is more powerful than others. Those who appear powerful are able to make others feel responsible for someone's death. Such people who appear powerful and in higher positions that qualify them to blame others are sangomas and the bereaved members of the family. It appears to be in the nature of human beings that when they are hurt by the reality of life, they need an explanation that will ease the pain they are experiencing.

In contradiction to the belief that death is caused by someone, that leads to blame for others, Chinese people seem to avoid such blame by attributing the cause of death to pre-destined rules, sickness or evil spirits (Chan, et al., 2005). Chinese beliefs appear to imply that death is beyond human power and it cannot be blamed on human beings. Possibly, they understand that human beings are mortal and cannot survive forever.

3.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The chapter addressed the two dominant religions in the Tshivenda-speaking community in terms of their religious-cultural worldviews on death and dying. It was proposed that culture and religion play an important role in prescribing ways in which people should behave and interact with one another in different contexts. Culturally 'good and acceptable' ways of behaviour were explored, especially in terms of the performance of bereavement rituals. These rituals form the focus of the following chapter.

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.

CHAPTER 6

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TEXT

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the texts as presented in the transcripts of six focus groups with 24 Tshivenda-speaking participants. The participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The following questions (addressed in the form of the themes in the chapter) guided my interpretations, and connected with the objectives outlined in the previous chapter:

- How did Tshivenda-speaking women, who have lost a husband through death, constructed their experiences of grief?
- How did Tshivenda-speaking women construct their experiences of bereavement rituals imposed by their cultural affiliation?
- What subject positions did Tshivenda-speaking women enact when grieving for a deceased husband?
- What contradictions emerged in the constructions of bereaved Tshivenda-speaking women?

Based on the questions above and as a first level of interpretation, I identified themes and sub-themes that are discussed below in the analysis and interpretation of the textual data. This first level of analysis is necessary to identify the systems of meaning (Gee, 2005) that emerged from the conversations with the participants. At the second level of analysis (chapter 7), the discourses prevalent in Tshivenda-speaking participants' perceptions of bereavement rituals are based on this system of meanings and the underlying assumptions that informed these situated meanings.

6.2 CONSTRUCTION OF GRIEF EXPERIENCES

The first question for analysis dealt with the way in which Tshivenda-speaking women, who have lost a husband through death, constructed their experiences of grief. The

way the participants experienced grief varied and depended on how they perceived their loss (Rando, 1993). When asked to talk about their experiences and perceptions of death of their husbands, the participants in the six focus groups discussed issues such as pain, the difficulty of the experience as a whole, loss, separation from the loved one or companion, how they perceived the nature of death, family demands, and the need for social and family support. They also perceived their husbands' death as a transition from one state of life to another, both for the deceased and for themselves in terms of their changing status from wife to widow. A construct that became particularly apparent was the way in which the participants expressed their interdependence and the transition from being a wife to being a widow. Upon inspection, it became apparent that the transition itself was not of primary importance. Rather, the significance lay in how the transition served as a change agent in the participants' perceptions and socially constructed reality of death and bereavement rituals.

What I have learnt is that here in Venda, being a widow is like a sin. I believe that younger widows are experiencing difficulties. When a person has lost a husband, they do not mind that you are like anybody else and you still need a man's company. People think when your husband is dead you are wearing a blanket they will never wear. What people will always see is that this person does not have a husband (Muofhe: G4, TA).

When he was still alive, all family members were happy about me as their daughter-in-law, but that death changed everything. ... As a customary law wife, I had nothing to say. In fact, I was still in grief. I just thought I had to let them take what they wanted (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

... life can be complicated when you are a widow (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

Fulton and Metress (1995), Lalande and Bonnano (2006) and Rando (1993) maintain that there are different factors that influence grief. Such factors include age, relationship, availability of social support and nature or mode of death. The experiences

mentioned in the above quotes testify to this influence. For women in middle adulthood, loss of a husband occurred at a time when they were re-examining the direction and meaning of their own life due to transition in life (Danforth & Glass, 2001).

6.2.1 Reaction to the knowledge of death theme

The level of the pain these participants experienced was constructed in terms of their reaction to the knowledge of their husbands' death. The intensity of the pain seemed to be closely related to whether the death was anticipated or sudden. According to Fulton and Metress (1995) and Stroebe and Stroebe (1987), sudden and unexpected death produced the most severe reaction and resulted in a more difficult adjustment. The nature of the death determined the extent of the participants' traumatic response, how much it preoccupied their mind and whether it became an integral part of the grief experience. As Ndivhuwo (G3, TA) indicated, she "*cannot forget that accident*". Ndivhuwo's husband's death was a shock that was accompanied by disbelief, tears and frustration. This was possibly based on the assumption that the grieving process started before a person's death if that death was known to be imminent (Gunnarsson & Ohlen, 2006). However, when it was sudden it appeared to shock the bereaved and caused more pain that possibly would have been lessened should the death have been anticipated.

With a car accident, the person left home as if he will come home but never came back. That experience is shocking. I cried and thought of so many things. I cannot forget that accident in my life. It was even difficult to understand when people said God does his will (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

I was there when the doctor confirmed that my husband was no more. That was difficult to accept. ...I cried so bitterly. I asked the doctor, the why question, several times. I did not understand how a person could die in front of the doctor (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

The presence of medical practitioners reassured the participants since doctors were associated with healing. This, however, also added to the intensity of their grief experience when the medical practitioner failed to provide the healing they were expecting for their husbands. This suggested that medical practitioners were valued and given authority over life and death, a responsibility to heal the sick, and it was a disappointment when a person died in the doctor's presence. This implied that for some family members there was always an element of hope for recovery when a person is sick and in hospital.

That was a great shock to me. Since the day of the funeral I have not seen the coffin or the grave till today...I was wearing size thirty-six but I went back to thirty-two. That means I was troubled (Muofhe: G4, TA).

Rando (1993) indicated that grief was not only a psychological reaction to loss, but also involved a physical reaction. Although some participants expressed the pain of bereavement in terms of emotional outbursts such as crying and anger (e.g., towards God), other participants experienced the impact of the shock on a physical level (e.g., through weight loss). Thus, death was found not only to have a psychological impact on the participants' lives, but also a physical impact.

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

When I saw him sick, I just believed that whatever happens will be out of God's will. It is not that easy when you hear that one has lost a husband. It is difficult (Dorothy: G3, AC).

Even though issues of sudden and anticipated death were not relevant to some participants, others anticipated their husband's death. Such anticipation influenced the way they approached and reacted to the event. For Anna (G2, AIC), whose husband was ill for a long time, her anticipation of his death helped her to prepare for and deal

with it. She felt ready for it. A long illness allowed the participants to prepare themselves for the death and they experienced more restrained grief. Even though there were participants who contradicted findings from research by Parkes and Weiss (1983) that anticipated death does not prepare one, there were other participants who supported their earlier studies that claimed that anticipating the death of a loved one reduced the intensity of grief, and Fulton and Metress's (1995) assertion that an unexpected death produced a more severe reaction than an anticipated one.

Dorothy found that although her husband was sick, his death was still difficult to deal with. Dorothy believed that "*whatever happens will be out of God's will,*" and attributed the experience of grief to God's plan. In this instance, her construction of meaning of the grief experience as related to divine intervention possibly influenced the way she dealt with the pain of her husband's death and found acceptance in spite of her other difficulties. Her construction seemed to be informed by her religious-cultural affiliation that promoted the belief that a person's death is God's will (Vold, 2000), and that the person went to heaven (Ter Blanche & Parkes, 1997), and there will be a day for reunion (Pang & Lam, 2002).

6.2.2 Pain associated with multiple losses

The pain experienced by the participants was more than a mere physical pain; it involved intense emotional experiences of discomfort and hurt that were expressed in outbursts of crying and even anger towards God for allowing death to take away a husband, friend, and the father of their children. The participants attributed the intensity of their pain to the meaning that their husbands had in their lives, the nature of the husbands' death, and the various losses they had to deal with when their husbands died. Parkes (2001) argued that intensity of reaction to loss was rooted on the attachment and degree of dependency there was between the deceased and the bereaved.

Hei, death is painful, especially when you are a wife and your husband has died... You know what, when the nurse told me that my husband is no more, I

could not hold myself. I just cried, I just cried. It was so painful (Maria: G1, AIC).

I cried and thought of so many things. I cannot forget that accident in my life. It was even difficult to understand when people say God does his will (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

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

This study has found that grief experiences were associated with other losses that accompanied the death of a husband that added to the factors influencing the widows' grief. In their studies, Danforth and Glass (2001) found that widows did not only lose their husband, but also lost "the very purpose and shape of life" (p. 513), that possibly used to be defined according to the position and role the husband used to play in their lives. It was not only the loss of a husband, but several losses attached to his death that intensified their experiences and their perception of grief as painful. Such losses involved a loss of roles and meanings they attached to the existence of a husband, loss of a husband as a valued companion in all aspects of life, loss of position and status, loss of physical attachment, loss of emotional support for everyday family matters, such as raising the children.

Kastenbaum (1998) talked about death as having the ability to both unite and separate people. In this case, the dead united with the ancestors or God and separated from the living. The participants constructed their experiences of grief in terms of loss of a companion and felt lonely because the position that their husband used to occupy and the roles he played in the family were now empty. When family and community members that came to offer different forms of support leave, the participants needed to adjust to an environment in which the husband was missing (Papenbrock & Voss, 1990; Selepe & Edwards, 2008).

Participants varied in how they constructed the level of meaning that their husband had in their lives in relationship to the level of pain they experienced. To some participants, a husband meant the person who provided certain resources needed for survival, while to others he provided a sense of identity that disappeared when he died (Fulton & Metress, 1995).

Such a pain is different and goes very deep (Mutshekwa: G1, TA).

Mm..., but my problem was deeper than that. As I have already indicated earlier, it was deeper than just losing a physical contact (Betty: G5, AC).

Betty spoke of a depth in her relationship and the meaning that she attached to her husband that seemed to be different from the other participants. The depth of the meaning that she attached to her husband particularly intensified the pain that she felt after losing him. Similarly, Mutshekwa (G1, TA) felt that *"such a pain is different and it goes very deep"*, and reported that it was different from any other pain that people could feel when losing any other thing they might be attached to. The participants appeared to agree that losing something recoverable was different from losing a husband who could not be recovered. The participants possibly compared the husband's death with the experience of losing someone else, hence they talked about the depth and the difference of feelings.

With me, ...that's, mm, death is like a loss, losing something, losing something, mm..., something so precious to me, something that I valued so much (Betty: G5, AC).

He was like a friend to me. That means his death meant a loss of a friend, in fact, a very close friend. A friend I trusted so much (Salphina: G6, TA).

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

I knew I will miss him. In fact his death was a loss of someone I loved most
(Susan: G6, AIC).

The late was also old. It is just that parting with the father to your children is painful (Masindi: G2, TA).

The participants constructed their husbands as something of great value that was lost when they died. Having a husband was associated with companionship and somebody with whom family values and activities could be shared. In this regard, the participants' grief experiences showed that they were deeply attached to their husbands. The loss of such a valuable person left them devastated, knowing that they would miss him and the attachment they had with him. They would miss him not only as a companion, but as someone they shared their emotions with. This finding supported Parkes's (2002) argument that grief experiences were rooted in the attachment that people had with each other. It appeared that should they not have had a strong attachment with their husbands, the language used to construct their grief experience would have been different.

According to Fulton and Metress (1995), losing a supportive relationship influenced people to question the reason for continuing with life. Hence, Danforth and Glass (2001) argued that upon the husband's death widows lost the purpose of life. This was true for some of the participants in this study. Salphina (G6, TA) emphasised the meaning that her husband had, while other participants stated that they could not see any reason for living without their husbands. They constructed death as something that was able to cut a strong bond, which represented emotional dependency between the husband and wife. The participants accepted the dependency position to the extent that they did not trust their own capability to survive without their husbands. They positioned the husband on a higher authority level, possibly because of their religious-cultural background that valued the husband's authority. This dependency extended also to the physical needs of the participants.

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

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

In resistance of stereotypical discourses that informed widowhood, participants constructed grief experiences in relation to their physical and sexual needs that could no longer be satisfied. The attachment that satisfied their physical needs was gone, intensifying the pain of grief. Their loss brought a need for someone else who could satisfy their physiological needs. Overall, the loss of their loved ones created an imbalance in the family, and created frustration in the lives of the bereaved participants. This supports Chan et al. (2005) and Selepe and Edwards (2008) who maintained that death caused disequilibrium in the family and community.

6.2.3 The family responsibilities theme

Apart from the constructions of death as painful in relation to all the losses they experienced upon the death of a husband, participants also saw death as associated with additional family roles and responsibilities for them. Irrespective of religious affiliation, the participants constructed grief experiences as being associated with difficulties such as added responsibilities, financial and material burdens, and child rearing in the absence of a husband.

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

With the little that I have, I must see to it that I am taking children to school and also meet all their needs. As a result that adds to the pain of loss (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

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

When it comes to the issue of children, these children are difficult. If he were here I would tell him that this child is doing like this and the other child is behaving like that, and together we come with a way to discipline them. As a result, when I am alone it is difficult (Dorothy: G3, AC).

The participants who still had young children at the time of their husbands' deaths constructed the pain and difficulty caused by his death in relation to raising the children alone. Sharing the responsibility of child rearing with a husband appeared easier than having to do this alone. The participants found it difficult to raise children alone, particularly when it came to disciplining the children, meeting all their school and other needs. Raising children without a husband was reported to be much more difficult and added further stress and pain to the experience of grief. It is possible that the religious-cultural heritage that gave men authority over the family made it easier for fathers to discipline the children. When this authority figure died, mothers might find it more difficult to discipline their children. Thus, they experienced more pain as a result of the loss and having to take over those additional responsibilities that used to be their husband's.

In a traditional Tshivenda-speaking family, the husband would not only serve as a father, but also as someone to share responsibilities with (in relation to gender roles). Even though there is still a lack of literature to support this observation, in the researcher's opinion Tshivenda families were interdependent, with wives being expected to take care of the children when husbands were at work, and with wives expecting husbands to provide for them financially. Therefore, the death of a husband

shifted all of these previously shared responsibilities onto the wife, and could leave her destitute at the time of his death. Thus, grieving for their husbands not only involved the pain associated with loss of a physical person and emotional support, but also included having to deal with additional practical responsibilities, and for some widows, without financial resources.

It was a painful experience because the deceased was the only one working and he had just begun building our house. ...the relatives divided it (condolences money) amongst themselves and gave me just enough to buy food. You think that is not painful? (Rose: G1, AC).

With me it was so difficult because I was not working at all. The late was the one who was working (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

They say whatever amount is left should help raise the children. As a result, I always think, if he were around, he would provide this and that. I would not be suffering like this (Selina: G3, AIC).

Samuelsson, Redestad and Segesten (2001) argue that it was a traditional cultural role for men to be the provider for their families. In traditional Tshivenda culture, it was accepted that the husband would be the breadwinner, while the wife took care of the home and children. The family was, therefore, dependent on the husband to bring home money for all their needs. His death implied additional difficulties and challenges for those who now had to go without the much valued financial resources (Sihlongonyane, 2004). This finding also supported Rosenblatt and Nkosi's (2007) finding that upon the husband's death, a Zulu widow expressed grief feelings about poverty and lack of economic resources, rather than about the dead husband per se. The participants who were financially dependent on their husbands reported that the loss of their husband's income increased their stress and added to their experience of grief. The participants experienced this stress because they were never encouraged to be independent while their husbands were still alive.

Hey, you know what, what was most painful was that, there was money from condolences and burial societies left, the relatives divided it amongst themselves and gave me just little to buy food. You think that is not painful? It is very painful. Honestly, death is painful (Rose: G1, AC).

The participants had been financially dependent on their husbands, and this dependency continued even after the husband's death when in-laws and relatives took over the purse strings. As a widow, Rose (G1: AC) was without the financial stability she had as a wife and had now become dependent on others. The extended family used intimidation by "giving her little money," possibly to ensure that she would not walk away with the children and leave no legacy for her deceased husband's family. Having to beg for her family's survival exacerbated the pain of her grief, and their financial dependency kept these participants in a submissive position to their in-laws and relatives. It was possible they hoped that their in-laws would continue to support them financially. It appeared, however, that these experiences would have been different had they been working and were financially independent. Possibly, financial dependency might have contributed to how some women reacted to the knowledge of their husband's death (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007).

6.2.4 The need for social support theme

Fulton and Metress (1995) argued that the availability of social support was important in the grief process. Social support was known to facilitate emotional expression and the resolution of grief (Fulton & Metress, 1995). This might be in part because mourners were able to share their emotional distress with supportive others. Caring community members offered this kind of support during a time of bereavement. For example, in the Tshivenda speaking community, upon knowing that a person has died, members flocked to the family to offer different kinds of support (Selepe & Edwards, 2008).

...staying with other widows who understand what death is and what it involves... is also consoling, you know (Lucy G2, TA).

...The support I got from others who had had the same experience was helpful (Mutshekwa: G5, TA).

Other neighbours would come and share their experiences ... The fact that my relatives were supportive was one element that strengthened me. They would come and console me (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

Those people would share their own experiences to an extent that I sometimes felt like my pain was less compared to what others went through. I ended up accepting that my husband is dead and there is nothing one can do to change that (Salphina: G6, TA).

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

The participants agreed that their grief resulted in a need for social support. It appeared that participants needed social support from the people around them, that is relatives, friends, community members and church members. Such support was considered helpful in assisting participants to come to terms with the impact of losing a husband through death and to reconstruct their lives after their loss. The participants expressed appreciation for the support from other women who shared similar experiences, relatives, and church members, because such support altered their perceptions of loss. Some participants in this study also reported a lack of much needed support from their in-laws, who they found treated them as outsiders (this will be elaborated on later).

... just after the funeral all relatives disappeared and never came back. In situations where they came back, they had other things they were looking for. They never came to enquire about our state of health (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

One thing that is helping me most is that my relatives are supportive. They are always closer to me. Their support consoles me. They also help us with children's school needs and food. All these are helping us accept what happened (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

Relatives played an important role in supporting the participants. They provided support both during and after the mourning period, and the participants specifically expressed their appreciation for this support. Despite resenting the financial dependency on the extended family after their husbands' deaths, the participants agreed that support from their family and relatives were vital to helping them deal with the pain of loss, although they missed such support from their in-laws.

In order to cope with that death, I told myself, I have to focus on my work, my family and myself. I accepted that I am a widow and I have to live on as such. The other thing was that I avoided having a close friend. I learnt to live with single parents, young and old. That helped me to cope with the pain of death (Muofhe: G4, TA).

In their studies, Steeves et al. (2005) found that some participants enjoyed sympathy from church members and other people as it allowed them to express their sadness, while others avoided such sympathy. This might be because they did not want to share their emotions with others, but preferred to cope through directing their energy into their work (Sanders, 1992). Muofhe, for example, avoided previously formed close friendships and rather associated herself with single parents. This appeared to imply that she did not want to associate herself with married people who possibly still had their spouses as she could be perceived as a threat to their families. She might have avoided sharing her experiences with people who might not understand her position as a single parent.

In summary, the participants constructed their grief experiences in many different ways. For some, the focus was on their pain and loss, and the difficulty of having to continue

life without their husbands and to negotiate the change in their positions in society from wives to widows. This caused emotional turbulence that added to their grief. The grief experience included one's development – and adjustment and adaptation – from being a wife to being a widow (Rando, 1993). Others commented on the levels of the shock and pain suffered because of the nature of the death, whether anticipated or sudden. Some saw it as divine intervention and found solace in believing that “*whatever happens will be out of God's will*” (Dorothy: G3, AC).

Some participants indicated that the change of their position in society, from wife to widow caused emotional turbulence that added to their grief. Others commented on the added stress of having to deal with family responsibilities without the help of a valued husband, and the financial dependency on in-laws and relatives. Coping with grief also elicited a need for social support, as well as reliance on existing mechanisms for coping with issues such as work, children, and new friends (particularly those who had already lost their husbands). Adjusting to life after a husband's death required resilience in changing focus away from grief towards a reconstruction of life without a husband. For some people among the Tshivenda speaking community, it appeared that a way to facilitate reconstruction of the new self without a husband involved performing bereavement rituals, while for others performance of bereavement rituals seemed to be oppressive actions facilitated by others.

6.3 CONSTRUCTION OF EXPERIENCES OF BEREAVEMENT RITUALS

The second question of this analysis explored the way in which bereaved Tshivenda-speaking women constructed their perceptions of the bereavement rituals inherent in their religious-cultural affiliation. The participants in this study perceived and constructed bereavement rituals as serving a number of purposes for them. The participants talked about these bereavement rituals as culturally prescribed and as representing family values upheld by the elders (significant others). As such, they felt that they had no option but to perform them and to abide by cultural expectations.

Some of the participants considered the rituals to be therapeutic; and they perceived them as a way to “facilitate healing” (Imber-Black, 1991, p. 222), and as being helpful in restoring their quality of life and allowing them to function in society with a new and reconstructed self. Others perceived the rituals as depressing, and felt they promoted an oppressive inequality between themselves and other family members (particularly in-laws). In these cases, the performance of bereavement rituals seemed to be a practice accommodated in the family that valued performance of such rituals. The participants also perceived the performance of bereavement rituals as a means of respecting the deceased. In the Tshivenda-speaking community, the deceased should be respected through performing the rituals; and failure to do so might provoke the ancestors to bring misfortune to the family.

6.3.1 The theme of cultural prescriptions

In a Tshivenda-speaking community, the elders acted as agents of culture, and were the ones who perpetuated cultural and family values. Cultures have norms, values and attitudes that were considered important and were expressed in what the society conveyed to the younger generations through education and participatory actions (Cook & Oltjenbruns, 1989). This also applied to specific rituals that were designed to assist families in mourning and reconstruction of the self. A newly widowed Tshivenda-speaking woman was expected to accept and comply with the prescriptions of the rituals. Deviating from the bereavement rituals was considered disrespectful to the elders and the culture and could cause conflict (Goldberg, 1981). **Failure to perform the rituals might lead to blame being cast on the widow should anyone else in the family fall ill or die.**

Imagine if I said I do not want to perform those rituals. I think they would believe that truly I killed their son. Do not forget that to those people, they cannot trust me when I say I did not kill him. It is like in our culture, if a husband dies, there is always an element of doubt that the wife is innocent. To avoid that blame, you simply have to do as they tell you (Tshovhewaho, G4, TA).

Some of the participants felt that they had no choice but to perform the rituals. These participants indicated that they performed the bereavement rituals prescribed by their culture irrespective of whether they agreed with the practices or not. Performance of bereavement rituals was perceived as a way of complying with and honouring their Tshivenda culture, irrespective of their personal feelings or religious affiliation. By performing the bereavement rituals as a sign of respect to the cultural prescriptions, they also acknowledged that it was a way of accepting what others demanded because of the power given to them by the culture. It was also perceived as a duty to the husband's family values "*because they were things admired by the in-laws*" and because the widow had no legitimacy to oppose the in-laws, even if their religious beliefs differed from her own.

I had to do some of these things, not because of the belief I had around such rituals, but because the elders were expecting me to do them. ...when a husband is dead, it is difficult to decide what to do and what not to do. That is because as a woman you are married to this family. As a result you have to abide by the rules of the family (Sarah: G2, AC).

Although there were participants who felt performing the rituals was imposed on them, others felt differently. In their construction, performing the bereavement rituals elicited feelings of happiness or obedience at having fulfilled the expected cultural requirements, or guilt for betraying her religion. Some women feared that they would suffer should they not comply, despite feeling uncomfortable with participating in practices that their religious affiliation abhorred. There were also those who did not see a reason for or value in performing some of the bereavement rituals. Nonetheless, cultural prescriptions played a significant part in deciding whether the participants performed the bereavement rituals willingly or under duress, to please other members of the family.

I personally do not see any harm in performing the rituals when your husband has died. That is the same as birth rituals or adolescence rituals.

When we perform those rituals we don't ask questions. Because we know it is part of our culture. I think it is important to perform. Mm..., some people think they are evil. I do not see that. To me it is just honouring the deceased and the culture (Grace: G5, AIC).

...Actually I do not think what these others have done was wrong. It goes with what that particular family believed in. I know that with all that was done, it was meant to help the family recover from the pain of death. Otherwise it would take us long to cope with that death (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

In their constructions of the culturally prescribed rituals, the participants used language that seemed to defend such cultural prescriptions, such as phrases like “*it is our culture*”. It seemed that the participants’ culture was part of their lives to the extent that they could not separate their experiences and perceptions of the bereavement rituals from their culture.

Bereavement rituals are culturally based my child. When your husband is dead, our culture expects us to perform those rituals (Mutshekwa: G5, TA).

Whatever has to do with our culture should be followed (Masindi: G2, TA).

Mm... to me it was supposed to be done because it is our cultural rituals. That is what I believe in (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

Culture was given the power to prescribe better ways of behaving. As such, the participants would feel guilty for not complying with the prescriptions. The participants’ constructions of the bereavement rituals put culture in a position of authority. Possibly, this was the reason why Zulu women would feel that in-laws supported them through arranging bereavement rituals for them (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007).

6.3.2 The theme of perceived functions of the bereavement rituals

The participants in the focus groups agreed that bereavement rituals were culturally prescribed. They also elaborated extensively on the functions of these rituals in assisting them to cope with their pain and loss. In this regard, performing the rituals absolved them from blame from other family members, and from having to deal with additional stressors posed by discontented relatives and in-laws. Furthermore, they indicated that the healing value of the rituals rested upon discovering the origins of the husband's death, putting the deceased to rest, and protecting themselves against further misfortune.

1. Sub-theme: Avoiding blame and conflict

The participants reproduced the construction in the Tshivenda-speaking culture that the experience of grief might be transcended by blaming the death on a person. In many African cultures, death was usually seen as being caused by someone (Mbiti, 1975). Thus, when death struck the family, its members wanted to find out who was responsible for the death. Even though Maritz et al. (2008) maintained that the emotional response to grief included guilt feelings and blame, the participants believed that bereavement rituals should be performed to avoid taking blame for the death of their husband and to prevent conflict with the in-laws. Should a participant allow the conflict to erupt, family members and relatives would disown her, causing further loss and pain. It seemed that the participants performed bereavement rituals for fear of being marginalised by the dominant culture and relegated to the position of an outsider in the family. Such a position would mean that she would also lose her security of cultural and family belonging.

That is because the in-laws will think you are the one who killed their son. Even though they have seen that their son was sick, they could still think I am the one who transmitted the disease to him (Selina: G3, AIC).

It is very difficult, but we just tell ourselves that it is going to pass. We just accept. It is not like I performed such rituals because I believed all things

attached, no. I did that because I wanted to prevent conflict between family members and myself. I wanted everything to pass (Rose: G1, AC).

Relatives are troublesome sometimes, especially when their son has died. They sometimes think you are responsible for his death. Especially when you do not believe in their ideas about burying your husband (Avhasei, G5, AIC).

It is because death is so painful that one would like to know exactly what killed the person. Since these are our cultural practices, I think they should be done. We must respect our culture (Sarah: G2, AC).

It appeared that not all the participants would willingly have performed the bereavement rituals if it were not to satisfy the family, specifically the in-laws, who exerted a great influence on their construction of perceptions of the rituals. The most important role players in the participants' stories were the in-laws who had the power to either accept or reject them (the widows). The participants' construction of the performance of bereavement rituals showed that they wanted to be accepted in the family, hence they performed the rituals. They wanted to avoid feelings of guilt (Ngubane, 2004) associated with being blamed for being the ones who killed their husbands. They were aware that should they deny the performance of bereavement rituals, the in-laws would blame and reject them. This might leave them without the little supportive benefit they would receive upon performance of rituals. Lack of such support may aggravate the pain associated with loss.

It also prevents much of the pain people can cause you, you know. If you want to prevent that pain, you have to do as prescribed. Yes, I think it helps and saves us from a lot of things (Rose: G1, AC).

It was also apparent in their constructions of the pain that encountered upon their husband's death could be exacerbated by other people. The participants talked

about these people as possessing an authority, possibly accorded them by culture, which rendered them capable of causing the women further pain through blame and conflict. Although Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) maintained that self-blame, guilt, blame of others and anger were part and parcel of mourning, the participants in this study were afraid of being blamed by others and were prepared to go to some lengths to avoid it, possibly also to facilitate the healing process.

2. Sub-theme: Healing powers of the rituals

The participants constructed themselves as sick and in need of healing from the pain of death. The bereavement rituals provided healing for the ‘sickness’ of pain that they experienced on the death of their husbands.

I know that with all that was done, it was meant to help the family recover from the pain of death. Otherwise it would take us long to cope with that death (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

Yes, is it not that if my husband is dead I am dirty and I have to be cleansed (Rose: G1, AC).

According to Tshivenda culture, a woman who has lost her husband through death was considered ‘filthy’ and had to be cleansed. Through performing the bereavement rituals, the widow became clean again. The participants wanted to be cleansed from the “*contagion of death*” (Mutshekwa, G1, TA). Cleansing was one of the functions of bereavement rituals mentioned in past studies by Goldberg (1981), who maintained that bereavement rituals helped to purify the mourners who were regarded as polluted by contact with death. This was also supported by recent studies concerning Zulu widows who were considered contaminated by their husbands’ deaths and in need of being cleansed (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007) and Tshivenda-speaking people who should be cleansed upon their family members’ deaths (Selepe & Edwards, 2008). The implication was that, by performing the rituals, the participants accepted that they were filthy and wanted to be cleansed.

That is because when a woman has lost a husband and had children with him, she is filthy and has to be cleansed in the river. It is to clean that filthiness (Masindi: G2, TA).

The need for recovery from the impact of death put Christian participants in situations that contradicted the doctrines of their church. They accepted that they were sick to the extent that they performed the rituals even though these were against the principles and teachings of their religion.

If you want to heal quickly without any other problems just do it. It is true that the church might not allow that, but for the sake of my life and recovery I would just do it (Mercy: G1, AC).

Performing the rituals helped them to “*recover soon*” (Susan, G6, AIC) and restored them to a position of supposed well-being. Despite their different religious backgrounds, their cultural affiliation prescribed that these participants viewed themselves as unable to continue with a proper or normal life without their husbands, whose death left them ‘*dirty*’ and prone to misfortune. As if justifying the therapeutic nature of bereavement rituals, they talked of recovery in a way that allowed them to regain the healthy status they had had before the death of their husbands. It appeared from their constructions that healing was not only meant to heal the pain of death, but also the pain caused by people who marginalised them and subjected them to subordinate positions. Through the performance of the rituals, the participants felt that they could be restored to the status of being part of the family that they had when the husband was still alive.

3. Sub-theme: Putting the deceased to rest

The participants were unanimous in their perception that any form of bereavement rituals (both traditional African and Christian) provided a way of catering for the deceased and his life after death. The participants perceived the rituals as a means of keeping the deceased close to the family. For example, funeral rituals as part of

bereavement rituals were not only meant to express grief, but also to pay tribute to the deceased (Aborampah, 1999).

We have to bring him home because his blood would have been shed on the road. But there are other churches that do not allow this. They say it is a heathen practices (Dora: G1, AIC).

Although Dora (G1, AIC) belonged to the African Independent Church, she maintained dual membership through her belief that performing the bereavement rituals would keep the deceased close to the family, for the benefit of the family. Performing the rituals and allowing the deceased to rest close to home also kept him part of the family even after his death. This suggested that participants believed in life after death and that the deceased continued to fulfil certain roles for family members.

Similarly, Salume (G6, AC) maintained that when people died they went to heaven (Pang & Lam, 2002; Ter Blanche & Parkes, 1997). She also believed that there was life after death, and that this life involved adopting the roles of the ancestors. As a result, she maintained that her husband should be assisted to live well in the life after death. Hence, it was necessary for her to perform bereavement rituals.

In addition to keeping the deceased close to the family, the participants perceived the bereavement rituals as a method of allowing the deceased to rest well in the world of the dead and to allow him to join the ancestral world. This was in accordance with the cultural notion of ancestral honour (Gumede, 1990). As such, should the participants fail to perform the bereavement rituals they believed that the deceased might not rest properly and will haunt the family members (Ngubane, 2004).

Another thing is to allow the diseased to rest peacefully knowing that we performed that ritual (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

When these rituals are performed, we are saying to the deceased, go and join the others who have died before you... They also help us accept death quickly. When you know that your husband has rested well you do not worry. When they are not performed, you do not know if your husband has reached the resting world (Mutshekwa: G5, TA).

Although Anna (G2, AIC) accepted that her husband's death was a blessing since he was ill for a long time, she also believed that performance of the bereavement rituals allowed her husband's spirit to join his ancestors. Such constructions indicated that the participants believed that rituals assisted the deceased to join the ancestors (Vold, 2000).

We just go to the diviner to allow the deceased's spirit to join others (Anna: G2, AIC).

We had to perform those rituals because in our culture if you do not perform the necessary rituals you remain with the image (murunzi) of the dead person and that can bring misfortunes (Muofhe: G4, TA).

Similarly, Tshovhewaho (G4, TA) perceived the performance of the bereavement rituals as being "good for my husband's spirit". In this comment, and similar others from the participants, it was obvious that fear played a significant role in influencing the participants to perform bereavement rituals. Performance of bereavement rituals was thus more than just bringing the deceased home or allowing the deceased to join and live well with the ancestors, but it also addressed the participants' fears of what they might experience should they fail to perform those rituals. In this regard, performing the rituals seemed designed to not only cater for the deceased, but also for the participants' own well-being and protection.

4. Sub-theme: Protection against misfortune

According to Kyei (1992), Ngubane (2004) and Pang and Lam (2002) rituals were performed to protect the widow and widower from misfortunes, preserved the mental balance of the widow and widower and kept all bodily organs, genitals in particular, unimpaired. The participants in the present study reproduced the same constructions of the reasons for performing rituals. Failing to perform the rituals implied a disregard for the implications of the participant's relationship with the deceased. In addition, their status as widows placed the participants in need of protection. After the death of her husband, it was believed that a woman could also fall ill or die, or contaminate other members of the family. The participants who had no apprehension about their health before the death of their husbands felt at risk after their deaths. Complying with cultural expectations and performing the bereavement rituals gave them some form of security against such a hazard.

They do that to prevent the death from coming back and take another one. Mmm... to me it was supposed to be done because it is our cultural rituals (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

That is because if that is not done, I will not settle freely. I will fear that what ate my husband will come again and take someone else from the family... That also comforts my heart. My heart will also heal (Mutshekwa: G1, TA).

... we have to find out what killed him. If we do not do it, I think he will think we do not care about his death. That is when he would just torment you. If we know, it calms the heart... We are not only doing it for ourselves, the living, but also for the deceased (Masindi: G2, TA).

My understanding was, it was good for my husband's spirit. I just thought if, as a wife, I did not do those things, my life would not be safe. Even my family, including children, whatever we touch by our hands would not

prosper. That will be showing that his spirit is still lingering and he is angry with you. The best is to perform the rituals (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

The participants expressed fear of dire consequences should they not perform the bereavement rituals. These fears were either for physical reprisals from the family and relatives, which might cause her husband to become a 'wandering ghost', or fear of bewitchment, which could result in their death. Particularly those who adhered to the traditional African belief system perceived the bereavement rituals as a way of preventing misfortunes and protecting themselves from witchcraft.

In Tshivenda there are things called 'mafa' - contagion of death. ... You know what, don't ignore your culture. Aah, witches will play with you (Mutshekwa: G1, TA).

Without the performance of the bereavement rituals, the participants who believed that their husbands were bewitched felt that those who had bewitched the deceased would come and bewitch either them or another family member, who could then also die. Performing the bereavement rituals was a way of preventing misfortunes from befalling the family and protecting themselves from witchcraft. The bereavement rituals seemed to be given the role of a person who would be able to chase away the witches' evil deeds.

Since death is painful, people have to do what is supposed to be done when they feel pain; they have to do what should be done when there is death. And also, if a person does not believe on that, she may not do it, maybe misfortunes will not come to her (Mercy: G1, AC).

The need for protection after the death of a husband was influenced by the fear of possible misfortunes, which could arise due to failure to perform the bereavement rituals, fear of witchcraft, and a sense that the rituals would provide some kind of security for the widow. In compliance with cultural expectations, the participants

believed in the power of the bereavement rituals as a way of weakening the power of the witches and limiting the possibility of misfortune. The participants used words that put the deceased and the witches in the same position of doing harm (bringing misfortunes) to those who fail to perform the rituals. For example, “*witches will play with you*”, and “*he may come back and cause misfortunes to the remaining lives in the family*”.

6.3.3 The theme of agency and control

Despite the perceived functions of the bereavement rituals, the participants furthermore constructed several viewpoints regarding their personal involvement in the rituals. Many felt that it stripped them of any rights to choose whether to partake or not. Some practices were perceived as unhygienic and outdated, while others prevented them from dealing with their own grief by rather focusing on external circumstances.

1. Sub-theme: Unhygienic practices

Unhygienic practices made the bereavement rituals particularly depressing for these participants. Examples of such practices included being smeared with chyme (half-digested grass from the stomach of a ruminant) and swallowing small stones.

...because the elderly would smear me with chyme for the whole day and wash in the evening ... after that we had to swallow some small stones. ...If I had a choice, I would not do those things because I did not know how they prepared those concoctions. For health purposes I do not think I would perform those rituals (Muofhe: G4, TA).

Given the necessity for submissiveness in a royal family, Muofhe (G4, TA) had no choice but to perform the rituals. Other participants stated that the actions were not consistent with the self, for example, Mutshekwa (G1, TA) frowned when she said “*Haa-haa! That (ritual) is silly. But we just tolerate it you know. ...We just tolerate and wash because it is something that must be done... When you are the deceased’s wife? E-e! You have to do it*”.

However, no matter how unhygienic the rituals might be, the participants felt the need to perform the bereavement rituals to fulfil the expectations of their in-laws and of society. They had no power to oppose the practices that were forced onto them by either culture or family. The performance of bereavement rituals seemed to be informed by the socio-political background of the Tshivenda culture that removed the participants' agency and control over their life and actions.

2. Sub-theme: Relinquishing control

Because of their lack of agency on the issue of bereavement rituals, participants had to relinquish control over their actions and performed the actions that others imposed on them. They willingly or unwillingly gave up control over their own lives and their grieving process by following the prescriptions of the culture and the family. The participants felt that they had no control over what happened to them during the rituals and afterwards, but that they had to please others, particularly the in-laws.

I knew that that death would destroy me if I focus on what the in-laws were doing. I relied on what people were telling me as a way of coping with death. Acceptance was medicine to me. I cannot say I have recovered yet. It is just that when I remember how cruel my in-laws behaved towards me, I feel bad (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

In order to cope with that death I told myself, I have to focus on my work, my family and myself. I accepted that I am a widow and I have to live as such (Muofhe: G4, TA).

I found it helpful to accept that my husband is dead (Avhasei: G5, AIC).

I had to assess my coping tolerance pattern. I managed to know what could be the stressors and dealt with them (Betty: G5, AC).

Nonetheless, although some participants accepted the values and control embedded in the bereavement rituals prescribed by their culture, their personal resilience and internal coping mechanisms mediated the effects of this. Even though they might have relinquished control by participating in the rituals, their personal resilience was more useful in assisting them to cope, far more so than external events over which they had little control. Some of the participants viewed themselves as being responsible for how they coped with the death of their husbands.

6.3.4 The theme of detachment

A final theme about the participants' construction of bereavement rituals concerned the way in which they detached themselves from what was happening around them, and from their personal grief experiences. Instead of focusing primarily on themselves to find healing from the wounds caused by death, their actions and thoughts focused on appeasing other people, who would blame them should they fail to conform. The participants accepted the external events and actions imposed on them by cultural or religious prescriptions, and avoided dealing with their inner and personal pain experienced during the grief period.

The participants had to perform the rituals, which were prescribed as a matter of tradition and not necessarily due to their personal need, and they were obliged to accept them. Had they not been under an obligation to either their culture or the family elders, some participants, especially those from an African Christian belief system, would not have performed the rituals. In performance of bereavement rituals, Salume, in particular, accepted that she had no power over the dominant group (in-laws); should she had such power, she possibly would have behaved differently, in a way that was congruent with her religious affiliation.

All those rituals that are performed in Tshivenda, to tell the truth, they were all performed here. I had no powers to refuse them. No, that was because they were things admired by my in-laws (Salume: G6, AC).

.... But we just tolerate it you know. When the funeral is done, they will take a goat and kill it by placing the head in the water until it dies – ‘u ita tshidu’. That goat should not shed blood. They will then use its chyme to cleanse us in the river. We just tolerate and wash because it is something that must be done (Mutshekwa: G1, TA).

You have to do as prescribed... It is not like I performed such rituals because I believe all things attached, no. I did that because I wanted to prevent conflict between family members and myself (Rose: G1, AC).

Most of the things you do because the in-laws want you to do (Avhasei: G5, AIC).

...the in-laws did not even ask for my ideas about my willingness. I was just told what was supposed to be done and then I did everything (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

Although some of the participants felt that the bereavement rituals were inconsistent with their personal needs and did not experience them as meaningful in reconstructing their lives, they participated in these rituals for the sake of complying with family and cultural expectations. In the case of Grace (G5, AIC), there was a particular contradiction between the expectations and prescriptions of her church (AIC) and Tshivenda culture. In order to deal with such contradictions, the participants became detached while performing the rituals: “Yes, it is true. When your in-laws believe in bereavement rituals, whether you like it or not, you will do as they are saying.” Such detachment may have helped Grace to avoid guilty feelings that might be caused by behaving against one’s religion or sense of willingness. However, this sense of detachment silenced the participants’ voices and accommodated only the voices of culture, religion and family values in their performance of the rituals.

6.4 SUBJECT POSITIONS ENACTED WHEN GRIEVING FOR A DECEASED HUSBAND

For many cultures in Africa, a husband is considered a breadwinner and protector of the family (Gunga, 2009; Samuelsson et al., 2001; Winbush, 2000). A similar understanding was relevant within the Tshivenda culture that when women got married, they became dependent on their husbands for resources and security in the family. They acquired a position in the family and a sense of belonging. This disappeared when the husband died. This also implied that the woman's position in the husband's family was entirely dependent on his presence and her relationship with her husband in life. In addition, the husband's or his family's expectations also determined the couple's way of living. The position of wife brought with it familial and cultural expectations that prescribed a woman's behaviour. For example, wives lived under the authority of the husband (Stayt, 1968). When the husband died, the position and status of a wife were lost, and the woman then occupied a new position as a widow. This type of marriage contract appeared to play a role in disempowering and silencing widows' voices against family members' actions. Possibly, that was because they did not have equal ownership of the family's material possessions and so upon his death, the in-laws felt they should share the fortunes, if not claim it entirely.

When he was still alive, all family members were happy about me as their daughter-in-law, but that death changed everything. ... As a customary law wife I had nothing to say. In fact I was still in grief. I just thought I had to let them take what they wanted (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

The transition from being a wife to being a widow appeared to position the participants as 'outsiders,' which was problematic for people who had cultivated an interdependent self that promoted collective cultural voices (Hong, 2004). It was problematic because traditional Vhavenda people believed that a person could not survive well without other people, as expressed in the saying that '*Muthu ndi muthu nga vhanwe vhathu*'- implying that one is who she is because of other people (Moyo, 2004).

I also performed these rituals. In fact with me, the in-laws did not even ask for my ideas about my willingness. I was just told what was supposed to be done and then I did everything (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

A husband's death changed a woman's status as a wife and esteemed person in society (Guzana, 2000; Opoku, 1989). Because of this, the participants associated the loss of a loved one with the loss of certain options of behaviour that were associated with being a married woman. The family and community expected widows to behave differently from wives. Such a change of status and role in society was not usually for the better. Although the participants were accorded a role specially meant for women who have lost their husbands (as widow), they were also deprived of other roles and positions as defined by the dominant group (Guzana, 2000).

For Betty (G5, AC) the change in status from wife to widow meant that her means of transport changed. This was stressful for her as evident in her statement: *"When I get into someone's car I have to sit at the back and not in front. To me that was demotion"*. This change in seating arrangements implied that when she lost her husband she lost her previous position in society. Because she did not belong to the owner of the car and to show that she was a good widow she had to sit at the back. By acting in accordance with these expectations, she legitimised her lesser position in the family group and society.

Another thing was a means of transport. I knew that I have lost it. My husband was a driver and I could not drive by then. I had to become a pedestrian. That was painful. When I get to someone's car, I had to sit at the back and not in front. To me that was a demotion (Betty: G5, AC).

Chan et al. (2005) found that upon the husband's death family members looked down on the widows. Similarly, when the participants in this study became widows, they were positioned as 'lesser beings', and as people who could not make it in life without a husband. Even the participants themselves believed that they needed a man and the

resources that he would provide. Tshivenda culture subjected the participants to a position where they became destitute when their husbands died. The participants acquired a lower status as widows who could not do anything. By accepting and positioning themselves as people who could not do better when the husband died, the participants appeared to justify the lower and weaker position mediated by gender stereotypes and the religious-cultural heritage -- a position defined by the dominant group (Guzane, 2000).

Another problem is that friends can also distance themselves from you. They think because you are now a widow, you are capable of taking away their husbands from them. ... When you are a widow, people see you in a strange way, you know (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

The suggestion that widows might steal other women's husbands further positioned them as people who have lost value for the community. This societal perception might be influenced by the religious-cultural heritage that positioned a woman as needing another man should she lose her husband. This suggested that women were weak and could not conduct life on their own. The participants felt the loss of the position that they had held amongst their friends, as the latter now distanced themselves for fear that the widows might become sexually involved with their husbands. This was a type of social stereotyping that stated that a woman, who was single through divorce or bereavement was on the lookout for a new husband or companion. This stereotype seemed to be perpetuated by other women in the community.

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

The way the participants constructed their experiences and perceptions of the death of their husbands highlighted the issue of labelling that they were subjected to in society. In their perceptions participants thought that married women regarded widows as

having less value in society as they feared that they would steal their (married women) husbands away from them (married women). Although the participants were subjected to the position of a lesser being, without value in society, they nonetheless possessed an 'authority' that other women feared. This authority supposedly accorded them the power to sexually attract other women's husbands. Hence, they were considered threats to those who are married. Labelling contributed to the marginalisation of widows as single women at a time when their need for support from society was increased.

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

Furthermore, the loss of position as someone's wife subjected the participants to a position of oppressive inequality in relation to other community members and their in-laws. They constructed themselves as being different, and occupied a different, lower societal position (Chan et al., 2005). Other married women occupied higher positions that included respect and value. The participants' in-laws occupied a position that included greater power in decision-making. The participants then were obliged to do as their in-laws told them to do to preserve their tenuous position in the family group.

I had no powers to refuse them, no. That was because these were things admired by my in-laws. Should I refuse to perform those rituals it would not go well with them. As a result, they did all those things to me, during the funeral period (Salume: G6, AC).

Even though some widows were against the cultural prescription that they should observe the mourning period for twelve months before they could remarry, Tshivenda culture dictated that after the twelve months have elapsed, widows might take another man, who is usually a younger or older brother of the deceased. This suggested that

widows did not have agency and control over what happened to them and even to their property. This lack of agency or control intensified the participants' experience of grief. They forfeited even the little agency they had enjoyed when they were still wives, and they became objects about whom decisions were taken by others.

But in Tshivenda, a widow takes the whole year observing taboos. She is not allowed to do anything. I mean having a sexual relationship with another man. She is not allowed to have sex with another man before a year is over (Anna: G2, AIC).

That is the in-laws' responsibility. They will find you a new man. That man should be either a younger brother to the deceased or any other blood relative to the deceased. That widow is not allowed to marry any other stranger. The other thing is that in our culture she does not have the rights to love the man of her own choice; they will find her a relevant person. That is one thing you cannot refuse (Tshinakaho: G2, TA).

The above quotes suggested that the participants were frustrated with the way others imposed their power over them through the socio-cultural events that deprived them of personal control. They were deprived of control over how they behaved and their choices; and they had to allow others to take responsibility for the activities and behaviour related to their bereavement. It appeared that by observing the cultural prescriptions, they were never allowed control over their actions. They always remained the property of the dominant group.

As indicated in Rose's (G1, AC) quote, the family positioned the participants to be dependent for the rest of their lives. Giving her little money ensured that she remained dependent on the family, and thus would not walk out with the children, who represented the legacy of her deceased husband's family.

Hei, you know what, what was most painful was that, there was money from condolences and burial societies left, the relatives divided it amongst themselves and gave me just enough to buy food (Rose: G1, AC).

The participants' quotes suggested that if there were alternatives to their reduced status as widows, they would prefer to be positioned differently, and for their status not to be reduced. However, they considered their positioning to be beyond their control, and reflect what other people preferred. Possibly, that was the reason there were contradictions between their selves and their behaviour. The section that follows highlights the contradictions that were apparent in the women's constructions.

6.5 CONTRADICTIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF BEREAVED WOMEN

The transcripts suggested that participants, because of their belief systems from different religious backgrounds, had different understandings of death and what it meant to them. Therefore, in their constructions of grief, contradictions arose between the constructions of reality of the traditional African and African Christian participants. However, there were also similarities in the ways the two religious groups perceived and talked about the performance of bereavement rituals. Similar contradictions and similarities were apparent in Rosenblatt and Nkosi's (2007) study where some Christian women performed the rituals willingly, while others from the churches that strongly prohibited rituals would not perform the rituals.

Traditionally, while others (usually men and elders) arranged the funeral, the widow was expected to stay at home as a sign of grief and mourning (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). Contradictions emerged in the opinions of Grace (G5, AIC) and Mutshekwa (G5, TA). Grace felt distressed when she was not involved in her husband's funeral arrangements, while Mutshekwa understood it was culturally acceptable for a woman to stay home while others arranged the funeral. Grace and some of the participants in her religious group (African Indigenous Churches) constructed themselves as stronger than the way culture constructed them (as being weaker), whereas Mutshekwa accepted the

weaker position that her culture prescribed for her. Thus, culture positioned women, not because they were mourning, but because of their gender. The gender-related roles prescribed by culture denied the participants the opportunity to perform certain roles because they were meant for men (e.g., arranging the funeral). According to Martin and Doka (2000) gender played a role in influencing the way people grieved though it did not determine the grief patterns.

You were fortunate. I could not choose because I had no money. In fact, they did not involve me in any arrangement. I stayed in the house from the day we heard that my husband was dead until the funeral (Grace: G5, AIC).

Yes, in our culture, widows are not allowed to be seen out of the house before their husbands' burial. It is believed that they are mourning their husband. ... In fact, my husband had younger brothers. Those people would report the progress everyday. Why should I worry (Mutshekwa: G5, TA).

One would want to choose a coffin for her husband (Sarah: G2, AC).

Whether I choose it or not, it remains a coffin (Masindi: G2, TA).

In addition to gender, the participants' religious affiliation might be the other cause for the contradictory constructions. While Betty (G5, AC) claimed that "*losing a body was not that stressful or painful*", and "*that was because I had deeper understanding of death*," Mutshekwa (G5, TA), who had a different religious affiliation, contradicted the viewpoint with her statement that "*people will never be used to death.*" The way the two participants in the same group contradicted each other highlighted the role that religion played in the participants' perceptions of death. This was probably because different religions regulated the interactions between people within that religious group (Pang & Lam, 2002), which in turn informed the way people construct reality. It was possible that Betty's understanding of her husband's death was informed by her expectations of other

people (in-laws or church members), while Mutshekwa, who expected her in-laws to cause her pain, could not consider death to be understandable. While some of the participants were emotional about the role that their in-laws expected from them as widows, Betty used a number of cognitive statements in her construction. She took a position that gave her a sense of responsibility and control over what was going on in her life as a bereaved woman.

Mm... to me, in order to deal with them I had to know their roles to my husband. Whatever they were doing I had to take it as a way of grieving on their side. I understood they were experiencing their own loss. A mother was experiencing a loss of a son, a sister has lost a brother and a cousin has lost a cousin (Betty: G5, AC).

While Mutshekwa (G5, TA) perceived the rituals as “*cultural based*,” Avhasei (G5, AIC) stated that the performance of the rituals “*depends on families*.” She indicated that the performance of these rituals depended on whether the family believed in them or not. Grace (G5, AIC) said “*Personally I do not see any harm in performing the rituals when your husband has died*.” She justified the performance of the bereavement rituals as something that should be done. Her perception positioned the death of a husband as something that demanded the performance of bereavement rituals. Although there were participants who were not willing to perform the rituals, there were others who were willing to do so and understood their (rituals) cultural significance.

The nature of the support that the participants received from different sources was also differently constructed. The nature of support included both emotional and financial support, especially from relatives. Even though they missed material support, Zulu widows in Rosenblatt and Nkosi’s (2007) study appreciated the ritual support they received from the in-laws and therefore regarded those rituals as important to them. Tshovhewaho’s perceptions of family support were, however, not the same. It seemed that although her relatives accepted her in the family group and took care of her and her children financially because she performed the rituals, they did not provide emotional

support. Although she was more financially stable as a result, she nonetheless would have appreciated emotional support from the relatives.

... just after the funeral, all relatives disappeared and never came back. In situations that they came, they had other things they were looking for. They never came to enquire about our state of health. They do not care about that. Although I still have a child who is still going to school at the university, I can take him to school with no difficulty. There is enough money. Also the relatives contribute towards his schooling. (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

Some of the participants would have desperately welcomed such support, but did not receive the kind of support shown to Tshovhewaho (G4, TA). The grief experience of these participants seemed to be mediated by the physical, emotional or financial assistance they received.

Contradictions also emerged in the way that the participants used language to construct the bereavement rituals. Bereavement rituals were constructed differently even between participants from the same religious affiliation. This might be due to the meanings they attached to their cultural practices compared to their religious beliefs, as well as their interaction with other people in the context of bereavement.

Mm..., in other words what I can say is that bereavement rituals are part of our culture. Why do we have to see them as evil. To me, because I performed them, I think they are helpful (Salphina: G6, AC).

I refused to perform the rituals because I relied on prayers (Salume: G6, AC).

It is not like I performed such rituals because I believe all things attached, no. I did that because I wanted to prevent conflict between family members and myself (Rose: G1, AC).

Some participants perceived the rituals as forming part of the cultural prescriptions that they should abide by, whilst others conformed to them purely because of family expectations. That implied that culture and family (in-laws) were constructed as being powerful in determining the widows' participation in and construction of bereavement rituals. Avhasei (G5, AIC), for example, accepted that bereavement rituals were part of her culture, although she still maintained that she was forced to perform the rituals by her in-laws. This took away some of the decision-making rights she felt that she should have had. Had she had the power to choose and decide, she would not have performed such rituals even though they were part of her culture. A contradiction emerged in the way that she talked about bereavement rituals in terms of representing "our culture," and talking about them as something that other people expected her to do.

In fact, I participated in everything they wanted me to do. To me those rituals are part of our culture. In fact, when it is your husband who is dead, your choices are limited. Most of the things you do because the in-laws want you to (Avhasei: G5, AIC).

Muofhe (G4, TA) also contradicted herself in stating that her performance of bereavement rituals was an indication that she loved her husband, whilst at the same time stating that she "had to tolerate it." Having 'tolerance' implied that she performed the rituals under protest and not because she actually believed in them as an expression of love for her husband. The data suggested that even among the traditional African participants, bereavement rituals were performed not only for the value attached to them, but also to appease others.

We loved our husband, so we had to do everything that was supposed to be done in a royal family...I had to tolerate it (Muofhe: G4, TA).

A contradiction emerged in the constructions of Muofhe and Tshovhewaho (G4, TA), who were both from the same religious affiliation. Whereas Muofhe talked of "tolerating" the rituals, Tshovhewaho talked about the rituals as having "value" for her. Participants

from the same religion might have different perceptions of bereavement rituals, because of their family background or because of the people they interact with. Such contradictions implied that, not only do religious affiliations dictated the way that participants constructed the performance of bereavement rituals, but external influences might also play a role.

6.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The participants constructed the death of their husbands as an event that was painful and accompanied by multiple losses, including loss of position that the participants previously occupied. They were accorded a new, lower status that the participants constructed as uncomfortable. Irrespective of the participants' religious affiliation, the transition from being a wife to being a widow was constructed as legitimising the performance of bereavement rituals in order to be accepted in the community and the family. Oppressive inequality was constructed in terms of the distribution of power relations where the participants were silenced by their lack of power (including financial power). The in-laws became more powerful and dictated the participants' actions and interactions in relation to performing the bereavement rituals.

The following chapter reports on the discourse analysis of the participants' perceptions of bereavement rituals.

CHAPTER 7 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the discourses that I have identified from the group conversations. These discourses informed the way in which the participants constructed their realities about bereavement rituals in a Tshivenda-speaking community. In order to identify the discourses for analysis, I used the six building tasks suggested in Gee (1999), namely, semiotic building, world building, activity building, socio-culturally-situated identity and relationship building, political building and connection building; as well as Parker's (1990) criteria for doing discourse analysis. The building tasks implied that language was used to construct reality in the interaction between people (Terre Blanche et al., 2006), who related to each other and events taking place in a particular context. For example, the participants used language in a particular way to construct their perceptions of bereavement rituals within their cultural and religious context. The discourses in the participants' constructions ranged from an abnormality discourse, power and patriarchal discourse, gender discourse and religious-cultural discourse to other minor discourses that were found within broader discourses. Such minor discourses include fear discourse, religious discourse, blame discourse and witchcraft discourse. I considered these as discourses because they emerged from the way in which the participants told their stories using the social languages relevant to their situation as bereaved women and as members of a particular religious-cultural and ethnic group.

7.2 CONTEXT OF THE DISCOURSE – THE PARTICIPANTS' STORIES

7.2.1 Semiotic building

Gee's (1999) reference to semiotic building as "using cues and clues to assemble situated meanings about what semiotic (communicative) systems, systems of knowledge, and ways of knowing" (p. 87) was relevant in the participants'

conversations. The participants' construction of their perceptions was mainly conveyed by the way they used language. That is because language in discourse analysis does not reflect, but constructs social reality (Coyle, 2007). It is constructed of linguistic building blocks like words, categories, idioms, repertoires and so on (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Words such as pain, loss, devastation, disorientation and alone were used to describe the intensity of their experience. They even spoke of contagion with death. These words were symbols of speech that referred to other ideas such as death, defeat, damage, harm, injury, hurt, termination, failure, and ruin. Participants could have, but did not, use these words. Reasons for this could be because they did not think of them at the time, or because they did not interpret their experiences in these terms, or perhaps because these ideas were implied by the words they used.

...death is painful especially when you are a wife. ... You know what, when the nurse told me that my husband is no more, I could not hold myself. I was so disorientated. I just cried, I just cried. It was so painful (Maria: G1, AIC).

As others have said, death is painful. It is a loss of the person you love most. It is a loss one can never recover. It is not like losing money or something else. Those are easy to replace, but not a husband. If you do not know that person or is not your relative, mm, his death will not mean much to you. You will just feel pity for that family. But if it is your husband who has died, it is more painful than when your parent or in-laws have died. Such a pain is different and goes very deep (Mutshekwa: G1, TA).

My husband's death was a devastating one. It was in the morning when we woke up that he started complaining about pains in his stomach. When we took him to the hospital, in less than an hour he was testified dead. I was there when the doctor confirmed that my husband was no more. That was difficult to accept (Tshovhewaho, G4, TA).

Take it from me, a husband's death is different from that of a child. The pain of a husband's death is worse. I know that. When a child dies, you will know that you have other children, but when a husband dies it is over. There is no other husband. In fact if a child dies, you can get another child from the same man. There is no death as painful as the one of a husband. Death of a husband is so painful (Muofhe: G4, TA).

I felt that death is painful. Yes, especially when the person who has died is your husband. Yes, death is painful because it leaves you lonely. I found that the death of my husband was the most painful thing in my life that I don't think I will ever feel anything more painful than that (Salume: G6, AC).

In their stories, the symbols of speech that they chose represented a sense of comparison of their husbands' death to something else that they possibly have experienced or as a way to convince the audience (those in the group) about the level of pain they experienced after the death. Maria and Salume made use of the word "especially" and Mutshekwa and Muofhe used language that compared the husband's death to other losses – of either money or a child. It appeared they did not have any other way to make one understand the feelings they went through when they lost their husbands except through comparison of such death to other losses or deaths that someone who has not lost a husband could have experienced in her life. Muofhe repeatedly talked about the pain associated with her husband's death, possibly symbolising a wish for the audience to understand how painful it was to lose a husband.

While they were telling their story, those listening (including me as the interviewer) said "mm" and "ah" at intervals. These 'noises' were symbols of speech that were used in language to sympathise and to agree with the speaker's pain. The participants understood each other because they used the same words or social language to explain their experiences. They shared knowledge and ways of knowing because the ones listening and the one talking were all widows (except me).

Ah, witches will play with you (Mutshekwa: G1, AIC).

Eah, life can be complicated when you are a widow (Tshidaho: G4, AIC)

Mm, you know what, the best way to cope with that is to accept that your husband has died and that it is a custom that when a husband has died, the wife should stay in the house until the day of the funeral (Maria: G1, AIC).

In several instances, participants used symbols of speech that communicated to the audience that they carefully selected the words they used to construct meaning of their bereavement reality. The participants made use of the symbols like “*mm*” before they started a sentence. This may symbolise that they had a lot of words to choose from, but selected what would best construct their reality in the context of the research.

Mm, in our culture ... (Dorah: G1, AIC).

Mm, death is like a loss, losing something, losing something, mm..., something so precious to me, something that I valued so much (Betty: G5, AC).

Mm, to me death is like a bridge (Mutshekwa: G1, TA).

The participants shared knowledge about the death of a husband and they used language that symbolised that knowledge and their ways of knowing. They talked of the death of their husbands as legitimising the performance of bereavement rituals. They spoke of rituals as something that they understood to be part of their culture, and also as activities that others wanted them to perform. This was revealed in the way listeners would respond in their conversation as group members (for example, by saying “*yes, it is true*”). By doing this, the participant showed that she knew what the other group members knew. It was a sign of agreement with what was said and a way of symbolising the sharing of knowledge and experience of grief.

7.2.2 World building

The social construction of reality as world building implied “using the cues and clues to assemble situated meanings about what [was] here and now (taken as) reality, what [was] here and now (taken as) present and absent, concrete and abstract, real and unreal, probable, possible, and impossible” (Gee, 1999, p. 86). This concerned the way in which participants constructed their reality about bereavement rituals.

In their stories, the participants constructed the reality of bereavement rituals in a way that conveyed to the other focus group members that they had no power of influence, and were compelled to perform the rituals to appease others. The religious-cultural background that valued the rituals and gave authority to the in-laws over the bereaved women might inform such constructions.

I also performed these rituals. In fact, with me, the in-laws did not even ask for my ideas about my willingness. I was just told what was supposed to be done and then I did everything (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

They considered themselves in need of the rituals to overcome the grief they were experiencing and to heal the wounds caused by death. They also used words that defended the rituals as being part of their cultural prescriptions and what their in-laws wanted. The participants talked about the performance of bereavement rituals as if they were in bondage of some sort.

After all, these rituals are temporary. You do them once and then you live your life freely (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

Mm... I just told myself it will end and I will be free again (Maria: G1, AIC).

I know that with all that was done, it was meant to help the family recover from the pain of death. Otherwise it would take us long to cope with that death (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

The participants constructed a world concerning bereavement rituals that constituted different categories (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). These categories included *people* (family members, their husband, children, elders, etc.), *places* (burial place and the house), the *times* (when he was alive, now that he is dead, waiting period before the burial), *objects* (coffin, rituals, washing or not, the basket on the head, etc.), the *institutions* (marriage, family, church, religion, culture), and *God and ancestors* (God and ancestors took away the deceased, bridge to the afterlife). Below each element of the constructed world mentioned above is discussed separately.

7.2.2.1 The people

As participants talked about the pain and the loss that they experienced, they talked about other people and their roles in contributing towards the intense pain they felt. They talked about the role that the husband played when he was still alive as a father and a breadwinner and the one who disciplined the children. After the death of their spouses, participants had to take over these roles. Participants also had to perform the rituals that were regarded as important in their culture and by other people, such as their in-laws. The construction of the performance of bereavement rituals was related to the respect that should be given to the elders. The role of the elders was constructed as ensuring that the participants abided by the rules of their culture, notwithstanding the participants' reluctance.

7.2.2.2 The places

The participants talked about the house as a place where they should stay with a blanket covering the whole body. This legitimised their position as widows who respected the culture even when they felt oppressed and deprived of freedom of movement. The participants also talked of going to the river for cleansing. A river appeared to be a symbol of cleanness, implying that the participants were dirty and needed to be washed to return to the normal state that they occupied before the death of their husband.

7.2.2.3 The times

Bereavement rituals were also constructed in terms of times that were relevant. They talked about the way they were expected to do things, against their will, things that they would not do if their husbands were still alive. They also talked about the waiting period before the burial. That period was accompanied by staying in the house and receiving social support from other widows.

7.2.2.4 The objects

The objects that were relevant included the coffin and the basket on the head. They spoke about being denied the opportunity of choosing a coffin because they were mourning and because they were expected to stay in the house. They also talked about carrying a basket on their heads when performing cleansing rituals. They further talked about a blanket they were covered with during the seclusion period and the specific clothing they had to wear for a period of twelve months. Those were further signs that symbolised widowhood and mourning the death of their husbands.

7.2.2.5 The institutions – marriage, family, church, religion, culture

The participants talked about the families they had married into and their church as being responsible for providing the social support that they needed due to their widowhood status. Their need for social support legitimised their position of being emotionally broken and in need of repair. The family institution was put into practice when the widow was obliged to perform the necessary rituals to appease her relatives.

For a traditional African person, a family is usually regarded as the most important institution (Ritchie, 2001). It was in the family institution where they were united with the husband, occupied certain roles and status as husband and/or wife. It was in the family, culture and community where the participants could not do as they liked because there were certain norms, defined by the in-laws (as agents of culture), to guide participants' behaviour. The culture was constructed as the institution that

defined how people should behave before and after the death of a husband, and failure to behave accordingly would bring misfortune to the family. Participants talked about bereavement rituals as part of the culture that needed to be honoured.

Some participants constructed the bereavement rituals as activities they performed despite their holding different religious beliefs, while some participants believed they should be performed to avoid blame. Participants performed the rituals even when they knew such an activity was against their religion (Christianity).

I think the church and culture should operate together because when I have lost a husband, the church has not lost a husband. The church should allow me to do all that will heal my heart. (Dorah: G1, AIC).

Performance of bereavement rituals was not only because of oppression from the in-laws, but also because of an understanding of the nature and role of bereavement rituals in their lives. This implies that some participants took ownership of their actions knowing that they belong to and respected their culture.

7.2.2.6 God and the ancestors

The participants talked about God as the Supreme Being who took away the deceased to the afterlife. That was the life with God or with the ancestors. The participants' language placed God and ancestors in the role of guiding their performance of the rituals. They talked about praying and performing the rituals in ways that would appease the Supernatural Being.

7.2.3 Activity building

Gee (1999) referred to activity building as “using cues and clues to assemble situated meanings about what activity or activities are going on, composed of what specific actions” (p. 86). The implication was that discourses were action-oriented (Wiggins & Potter, 2008). The activity building that took place in the participants' stories was to talk about how painful their husbands' deaths were to them. It is possible that when they

talked about pain, they were appealing for sympathy from others in the group. That is because discourse is the primary medium for social action that in speaking we blame, justify, invite, compliment and so on (Wiggins & Potter, 2008).

Hei, I agree with all that others have said. ...what worried me most was that which was expected of me. Those things which they wanted me to do. Mm... you know what is supposed to be done when your husband has died in our Tshivenda culture? I think they also know [she was pointing at others]... Jo! As if you do not know. The relatives will expect you to stay in the house with those who have already lost their husbands. You will stay with those old ladies the whole week (Mercy: G1, AC).

I also performed these rituals. In fact with me, the in-laws did not even ask for my ideas about my willingness. I was just told what was supposed to be done and then I did everything (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

In their stories, they told me about the activities and actions that they were involved in through the use of action statements. They talked about their performance of the bereavement rituals that included divination, carrying the basket on the head, cleansing, sitting in the house, crying, feeling pain, choosing a coffin and worrying that the husband might not be buried properly. Their involvement in activities around the performance of bereavement rituals legitimised their position as widows who were expected to perform these rituals.

Furthermore, to show that they were not willing, but expected to do it (perform rituals) they used language that distanced themselves from the rituals. They referred to the rituals as 'those things'.

What worried me most was that which was expected of me. Those things which they wanted me to do (Mercy: G1, AC).

As they talked about performing bereavement rituals, they spoke in collective language using terms such as “we” and “us”, “they” and “others” to refer to those responsible for their actions and behaviour. The latter implicated them as women who did not take ownership of their statements and had no control over the events taking place around them, as well as who performed the rituals because others wanted them to do so.

I had to carry a shallow willow basket on my head. They smeared me with the chyme of the goat so that I could be taken out of the house. They took me to the river for cleansing by the old ladies. When we came back from the river we rested at a certain point. We rested while the shallow willow basket was still on my head (Masindi: G2, TA).

The participants in group five, however, accepted much more responsibility for their thoughts and perceptions about death and the bereavement rituals than those in other groups. These participants had more agency and control over events, although they did perform the rituals. They did not blame others (e.g., their in-laws) for their actions. Rather, they chose to perform or not perform the rituals.

My in-laws were trying to keep me in the house while they were preparing my husband’s funeral. I refused because I knew that staying in the house would mean they would have to choose the casket and tombstone for me. I told them, they could do all other things but allow me and my children to choose the tombstone and the casket (Avhasei: G5, AIC).

I just told myself he is dead. Even if I do not accept this death, I won’t change it. Acceptance is difficult but if you manage to accept, the burden, pain will lessen (Grace: G5, AIC).

Yes, in our culture, widows are not allowed to be seen out of the house before their husbands’ burial. It is believed that they are mourning her husband ...why should I worry? (Mutshekwa: G5, TA).

For these participants, performance of bereavement rituals was their choice. They accepted and understood the cultural activities and expectations. They performed the rituals because this was consistent with their needs, not because other people wanted them to do it. They possibly knew how they would benefit from such rituals. Avhasei “*refused*” to perform the rituals. This may imply that she was able to draw a line between the requirements and expectations of external environmental (other people’s needs) and her personal needs and how to satisfy them. She resisted other people’s influences over her life and actions.

7.2.4 Socio-culturally situated identity and relationship building

In this section the ways in which participants constructed their identities as bereaved people – as widows – and the relationships they built as a result of losing a husband are described. Socio-culturally situated identity and relationship building refers to “using cues and clues to assemble situated meanings about what identities and relationships are relevant to the interaction, with their concomitant attitudes, values, ways of feeling, ways of knowing and believing, as well as ways of acting and interacting” (Gee, 1999, p. 86). Burr (2003) maintained that “our identity arises out of interactions with other people and is based on language” (p. 51). It was through their interaction and communication with others that the participants constructed their identity. For example, the interaction they had with their husband, in-laws, relatives and community members contributed towards their construction of their identities as widows.

Burr (2003) argued that our identity is constructed out of the discourses that are culturally available to us, while Tesser (1995) contended that identity or the self is shaped by what happens and what is expected within the cultural and social context in which an individual lives. Romanoff (2001) maintained that narratives are the vehicle through which healing occurs and when telling their stories individuals work through the loss until the storyteller recognises a changed identity.

By using language in different ways, the participants socially constructed their widow identities in a way that legitimised the one speaking of grief and her sense of

bereavement. It gave meaning to their loss by valuing it and positioned the participants as victims, the broken ones, the ones who needed sympathy from others, and the ones who needed healing by others.

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

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

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

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

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

The participants, as bereaved widows, also elicited sympathy by explaining their feelings of guilt because their husbands died, and they were blamed of being responsible for the death. There appeared to be a relationship between husband and wife that was expressed through the feeling of guilt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everything they talked about was placed in a particular context. Their discourse was situated within a specific sequential environment and occasion (death), institutional setting (family), and argumentative framework (Wiggins & Potter, 2005; Woofitt, 2005). Had it not been for the death of their husbands, they would not have identified themselves as widows or as being in need of sympathy.

The use of “I” in their statements to refer to themselves is another way participants built different socially situated identities in their language. According to Gee (1999) speaking in the first person, “I” is just another way in which participants constructed identity in and through language. In this study participants used “I” to refer to what they talked about themselves. In several cases they used “I” in their cognitive statements as they talked about thinking and knowing (*I know... or I think...*). They also used the “I” in ability and constraint statements to refer to having to do things (*having to perform the rituals and inability to oppose the in-laws or culture*). In all these categories, they talked about themselves in relation to something (death or rituals) and others (husband and in-laws). This implied that in their talk, the value of significant others was of importance in the participants’ actions and interactions.

Their use of cognitive statements appeared to communicate the previous interaction that took place in their world. Mutshekwa (G5, TA) made it clear that other people “*will do the arrangements*”. That idea showed that she had a previous interaction with those

people and now she was confident that they will arrange her husband's funeral. Another example was Phophi (G5, TA), who said "*I know that you who are educated do not see any value in performing these rituals*". It appeared in response to her previous interaction with educated people who were ignorant of the performance of bereavement rituals and who possibly did not understand the value of bereavement rituals. It may also be the way that she has constructed educated people.

7.2.5 Political building

Gee (1999) referred to political building as "using cues and clues to construct the natural and relevance of various social goods, such as status and power, and anything else taken as social good here and now" (p. 86). The participants told the audience about their lack of status and power as widows when they could not choose the coffin, or when they were forced to do things they did not want to do. The issue of lack of status and power reflected the position in which others put them and in which they put themselves. Their position implicated them as vulnerable (Burr, 1995). The more the audience agreed with the participants' social construction through the use of social language, the more they positioned themselves as the poor bereaved widows.

One would want to choose a coffin for her husband (Sarah: G2, AC).

When a husband is dead, it is difficult to decide what to do and what not to do. That is because as a woman you are married to this family. As a result you have to abide by the rules of the family ...I had to do some of these things, not because of the belief I had around such rituals, but because the elders weere expecting me to do them. Even when you do not believe in other things you would just do them to avoid disagreement (Sarah: G2, AC).

The participants also granted others (family, in-laws, church members, etc.) power by positioning them where they could or had to decide on their behalf. They submitted to their demands using language that put the elders on a higher and superior level to the participants (they had knowledge of the bereavement experience because they had also

lost their husbands), giving them power over how they should or should not feel about their loss. The participants seemingly considered the in-laws' bereavement (because they had lost a son while the participants had only lost their husband) as being on a higher level or as being deeper than their own sorrow.

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

The participants used language to tell the audience about their sad and disenfranchised future, and how the family would tell them who to marry. This further implied lack of power to decide even those things that concerned their intimacy. The choice of the word "allowed" appeared to imply that even if they wanted to exercise their rights, those people in authoritative positions would deny them such rights.

They will find you a new man. That man would either be a younger brother to the deceased or any other blood relative to the deceased. That widow is not allowed to marry any other stranger. The other thing is that in our culture she does not have the rights to love the man of her own choice; the old ladies will find her a relevant person (Tshinakaho: G2, TA).

But in Tshivenda, a widow takes the whole year observing taboos. She is not allowed to do anything. I mean having sexual relationships with another man. She is not allowed to have sex with another man before a year is over (Anna: G2, AIC).

Although there were participants who talked about themselves as powerless and others as powerful and having authority over what they were supposed to do, there were some participants who accepted and presented themselves as having power and

responsibility over their situation, actions and interactions. While some participants, like Sarah (G2, AC) could not refuse the authority from her in-laws in relation to the performance of bereavement rituals, others like Avhasei (G5, AIC) refused to perform the bereavement rituals. Participants like Avhasei took positions as women who have responsibility in preparing their husbands' funeral and practiced their rights as individuals after their husbands' deaths.

I refused because I knew that staying in the house would mean they would have to choose the casket and tombstone for me. I told them, they could do all other things but allow me and my children to choose the tombstone and the casket (Avhasei: G5, AIC).

I refused to perform the rituals because I relied on prayers (Salume: G6, AC).

Some participants' position to perform the rituals appeared to be influenced by their religious affiliation. It was evident in the language Salume used. She "*relied on prayers.*" In some cases, the rituals were performed because they had therapeutic value (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). Possibly, Salume relied on prayers as they would provide some form of therapeutic intervention. According to Chong (2006), prayer is a way of communicating with God who watches over people and consoles them when things are difficult and painful.

7.2.6 Connection building

Connection building was "using cues and clues to make assumptions about how the past and future of an interaction, verbally and non-verbally, are connected to the present moment and to each other" (Gee, 1999, p. 86). The participants used language in a way that showed how they built connections across the sentences of their stories. The most used connection words were "*because*" and "*as a result*". These two words were used to connect the past and the present within the context of bereavement and the performance of bereavement rituals. These connections might imply that history had an influence on how people understood and constructed meaning out of what they

experienced in the present. This supported the social constructionist notion that all forms of knowledge and understanding were culturally and historically specific and relative (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2006).

It was so painful because of the meaning he had for me (Maria: G1, AIC).

But, mm, in our culture when a person is buried in the graveyard we see him as if he is too far from us. As a result we have to bring him home. This is also done if somebody has died in a car accident. We have to bring him home because his blood would have been shed on the road (Dorah: G1, AIC).

I saw it painful because the deceased was the only one working (Rose: G1, AC).

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

You know what, death is more painful to me as the wife to the deceased than to anyone else. That is because the in-laws will think you are the one who killed their son (Selina: G3, AIC).

It was evident in their talk that the participants used language that connected them to their husband's death and the previous life they lived together. This was possibly because of women's identities being embedded in connectedness, affiliation and attachment (Ross, 2002). They talked of their connection and attachment to their husbands as validating their experiences of their husband's death. This implied that for these participants, the performance of bereavement rituals was not only meant to satisfy the dominant group, but it was also meant to help the women practice their right and freedom of action as a result of the life lived and the connection with their husbands. This also implied that if there was no connection between the past and the present, the

participants' experiences would be different. Possibly, they would not talk of themselves as widows, who needed to perform bereavement rituals.

My husband's death has affected me so much ...that was because I loved him and he loved me (Mercy: G1, AC).

I stayed in the house from the day we heard that my husband had died until the funeral (Grace: G5, AIC).

Yes, if my husband is dead, I am dirty and I have to be cleansed (Rose: G1, AC).

To me there was no problem in doing all that. My understanding was it was good for my husband's spirit.... The best is to perform the rituals (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

The behaviour that was represented in their language showed a connection between the deceased and the living in the past, the present and the anticipated future. Even though the deceased was buried in the graveyard (as in Christian burial rituals), the widows performed rituals that were intended to bring him home to be part of the family. Bringing him home represented a belief that life was communal and was possible only in a network of mutual interdependence (Ngubane, 2004). It continued the interaction between the living and the dead.

They also built a connection between the one who knew and the one who did not know what it meant to grieve. They talked about themselves as the ones knowing while the interviewer was the one who did not know, possibly because of age and because she had not yet lost a husband.

I just do not know if these young people still perform the rituals (Mutshekwa: G5, TA).

I had to do all those things. That is our culture, my grandchild (Phophi: G6, TA).

The participants linked their culture with others by indicating that theirs was no different from other cultures deserving of respect. This way of talking called for a recognition of their own culture, just as others might recognise other cultures and possibly admire them.

7.3 DISCOURSES

Certain discourses emerged from the way in which the participants told their stories using the social languages relevant to their situation as bereaved women and as members of a particular religious-cultural group. According to Van Schalkwyk (2005), these discourses were “inherited from our mothers and their mothers before them” (p. 4). They were not new but passed down from previous generations. When analysing these discourses, a consideration was made of the possible alternative discourses that could be constructed in the place of the chosen ones. This supported Coyle’s (2007) argument that “discourse analysis can be used to indicate that alternative discourses could be constructed in their place” (p. 104).

7.3.1 Discourse of being not ‘normal’

In the way the participants told their stories about the bereavement rituals, they used language or words to describe their experiences as *not ‘normal’* (pain, loss, lack of status, crying, etc.), as somehow *ill* (death contagion, need for cleansing, need for protection against evil spirits, etc.) and *suffering* (need for healing, the pain never goes away, guilt over the death of a spouse, etc.). The audience also responded with language that confirmed and legitimised the state of being not ‘normal’.

I know that with all that was done, it was meant to help the family recover from the pain of death. Otherwise it would take us long to cope with that death (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

Yes, if my husband is dead, I am dirty and I have to be cleansed (Rose: G1, AC).

It is possible that this way of describing the bereaved women derived from the family, such as the in-laws, or from cultural institutions that considered performing the bereavement rituals to be essential for women because it decreased the pain (made them *normal* again), cleansed them (made them *healthy* again), drove away the evil spirits (avoided further *abnormality*), absolved them from blame and guilt (gave them *therapy*), and healed them from their great pain.

All the practices included in the rituals were aimed at curing the ‘abnormality’ to the extent that the institutions of culture and family might even choose a new husband for the widow so that she could be ‘normal’ again. Even though the participants might not agree with all of these practices, in telling their stories, they constructed a reality in which they believed – that they needed the rituals to overcome the grief they were experiencing. They even constructed their reality in such a way that they considered it honourable to be ‘abnormal’ and in need of healing, thus making it easier to accept the inevitability of having to perform the rituals.

A contrast to this abnormality discourse would be that their story would involve acceptance of death of their husband without having to perform the rituals, of God’s better judgement and peace (in the case of Christian participants), recognising social support for what it was and not trying to explain elaborately why they needed the rituals for any kind of appeasement. They might still have used words such as loss and pain to describe their experience of death, but without the implicated meanings of damage, harm, injury, hurt, failure, and ruin. They might have performed the rituals because they perceived them as enriching and part of a social support system that would be needed at times of trauma and distress. But they might also have been telling a story of their refusal to comply with expectations that could have resulted in them being considered even more ‘abnormal’ in society. They might have moved away to another community to find solace because they were too ‘abnormal’ (abandoning culture for religious values).

Moving away from one's community would mean accepting the identity and position of the outcast, the rebel against one's culture, family, and elders.

7.3.2 Power/patriarchal discourse

Burr (2003) argued that discourses were not only embedded in power relations, but also had political effects. From a social constructionist perspective, the issue of power relations supported power inequalities between the participants in this study and their in-laws. Burr viewed power as the person's capacity to have some effect on their world. In their stories, the participants mostly positioned their in-laws with power and authority, prescribing how they should behave and perceive bereavement. The participants had very little capacity to affect their own worlds. They were positioned as passive followers who acted as directed by those in power (in-laws). This was in line with Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine's (2008) and Coyle's (2007) argument that when an individual is constructed through discourse, he or she is offered a particular subject position within that discourse. The discourse brings with it a set of images, metaphors and obligations concerning the kind of response that could be made. In his or her response, the participant either accepts or denies such a position. By accepting such a position, participants in this study fulfilled the obligations of the position they were subjected to.

But we had to go to the diviner to find out what was behind that accident. That was because they said that should be done. People just believe that there is something or somebody who caused that death or accident (Ndivhuwo: G3, TA).

It is because the elders are always behind all these ...I had to do some of these things, not because of the belief I had around such rituals but because the elders were expecting me to do them (Sarah: G2, AC).

The participants constructed the people involved in the bereavement rituals (their children, elders, in-laws, church members, sangoma, etc.) as the dominant group with power to influence events. They positioned themselves as the subordinate ones who

could not make their own decisions, who had no choice or influence, who were in bondage, and who were dominated by cultural beliefs, family values, expectations. This was all meant to avoid conflict. They gave power to other people by positioning themselves as the unfortunate widows, the ones who could not think for themselves and who had no influence over events that concerned them deeply. This positioning of the participants, most likely derived from a culture and religion that granted privileges to members of the dominant group (husband, in-laws, elders, sangoma, priest, etc.) and to God as the Omnipotent One. Mostly, the participants could not recognise their own oppression or the powers of the dominant group, possibly because they were used to the social stereotypes surrounding the bereavement rituals. Not even their religious affiliation could help them challenge the dominant discourses.

The participants may have opposed this power discourse had they positioned themselves in more symmetric and equal relationships. That might mean that they would not speak about and put other people in a dominant position, but that their story would be about the equality amongst all parties. The participants as the bereaved widows, the in-laws who were grieving for their son, the family and so on, all being equal partners in making decisions about the burial of the participants' husband and his estate. The parents-in-law would acknowledge the widow as a person in her own right even though she was no longer married to their son. The participants' position in society would not be dependent on being married to someone else's son, but would be because they were human beings. The participants would have used an entirely different set of words to describe their experience of the bereavement rituals in their culture. Possibly, they would have used language that put people in an interdependent culture in equal positions.

7.3.3 Gender discourse

A gender discourse appeared to construct women as vulnerable and emotional when compared to men. Vulnerability and emotionality called for sympathy from others. According to this discourse, participants would accept their positions as being in need of

other people's care. It appeared as if on their own, they could not make it or improve their status and position as related to their feelings in a way that fitted the self.

...death is painful, especially when you are a wife (Maria: G1, AIC).

...the deceased was the only one working (Rose: G1, AC).

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

If he were here, I would tell him that this child is doing like this and the other child is behaving like that, and together we would come with a way to discipline them. As a result, when I am alone it is difficult (Dorothy: G3, AC).

I believed in prayer. But since I came here through marriage, all family members and relatives believe that there should be throwing of bones, killing the goat and also helping the dead to rest (u luvhedza) I do not know (laughing) if you will understand what that means? All those rituals that are performed in Tshivenda, to tell the truth, they were all performed here. I had no power to refuse them. No, that was because they were things admired by my in-laws. Had I refused to perform those rituals, it would have caused conflict (Salume: G6, AC).

Related to their positioning of others as dominant, the participants positioned themselves as subordinate, not only because of their lack of socio-political power and influence, but because they were women, wives, widows and mothers. In their stories they told the audience about what their husbands meant to them. They talked about their dependence, as opposed to co-dependence or interdependence, on him because he was the strong one, the one who disciplined the children, and the one who earned money so that the participants and their children could survive. The participants were

the submissive parties who only had status in life because they were married. They did not have any influence over their own movements and life in general. Their stories included events and situations in which they were silenced because women were not allowed to have their own mind. As widows, they were silenced because they appeared to know even less about what they wanted and needed, only the elders seemed to know them.

Culture, religion and family (institutions) positioned the participants as people who had to take on a particular role in society, a role that was subordinate to the dominant or privileged group, that is, the males (husband) and the family (in-laws). The participants had been placed by their religious-cultural heritage as members of a marginalised and oppressed group by the fact of their sex (female), a characteristic that is beyond their control. The participants lived up to this positioning by crying, avoiding conflict, being submissive, considering others' feelings more than their own, taking the blame or avoiding the blame, and subjecting their own views to that of others, all gendered stereotypes and attributes of women in their culture.

As widows (another element beyond the participants' control), they were positioned as members of an even more marginalised and oppressed group. They had to perform rituals simply to maintain peace and harmony (more stereotypical feminine attributes) and because they did not know their own mind (Winbush, 2000). This was apparent when one listened to the language and symbols the participants used to reflect on their subordination to dominant others (husband, family, culture, religion). It was also illustrated in the way they constructed a reality regarding the rituals that impressed upon the audience that they had no power of influence. They were bound by discourses that produced 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as objects to be understood and positions to be lived out in ways that are oppressive, particularly for the bereaved widow.

I do not have much to say, but what I would like to add is that when you are married to a particular family, it is difficult to tell them that you do not want to do certain things. Imagine if I said I do not want to perform those rituals. I

think they would believe that truly I killed their son. Do not forget that to those people, they cannot trust me when I say I did not kill him. It is like in our culture, if a husband dies, there is always an element of doubt even when the wife is innocent. To avoid that blame, you simply have to do as they tell you. After all, these rituals are temporary. You do them once and then you live your life freely (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

I could not choose because I had no money. In fact, they did not involve me in any arrangement. I stayed in the house from the day we heard that my husband had died until the funeral. That taught me that truly money talks. I think if I had money they would have allowed me to participate in funeral arrangements. Knowing that I had no money, I had to understand (Grace: G5, AIC).

The participants could not refuse to perform the rituals and could not even talk about them during the mourning period because that would mean being insubordinate to the dominant, patriarchal, familial or cultural powers. This was because when a husband died a woman was expected to be quiet and not talk to anyone or question anything (Guzana, 2000). Participants would be accused of witchcraft or sorcery, or be blamed for the ill-health or misfortune that might befall themselves or the family at a later stage. This would make the participants members of an even more marginalised and oppressed group (the witches, the insubordinates) with even less power of influence in society. Possibly, the participants felt that they could not allow this to happen. As women they became blameworthy (society would not blame men in the same way), and they had an obligation to comply with orders because they did not know enough to behave differently.

Even though they were positioned in a powerless role because of their gender, somehow they were positioned by other married women as 'objects' that were sexually attractive to their husbands. This suggested that participants did have some power to

attract men. This positioning might have come from the religious-cultural background that described women as attractive for the purpose of satisfying men's sexual urges.

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

The gender discourse that women abided with when talking about their husband's death made it difficult for them to realise the positive implications of their husband's death. That is because in cultural contexts where women have been socialized into dependent social roles, some kinds of losses might act as a means to remove social constraints for growth and independence. For women in these social contexts, loss might in some ways be liberating from dependence to independence (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001). This was a liberation from dependence on the husband as the dominant one to independence and self-reliance.

However, some participants in this study resisted cultural and societal labels of a widow as passive with no voice about what happens in her life after the husband's death. While Selepe and Edwards (2008) stated that Tshivenda widows had to observe a 12 months mourning period before they remarried, some participants in this study argued that even after the death of a husband a young widow still had sexual interests and needed a man to satisfy such needs. This showed that even though they came from Tshivenda culture with its dominant gender stereotypes, this study gave them the space to voice their feelings. Although they could talk in defence of their feelings and resisted cultural prescriptions associated with their loss, participants also talked about how the pain they experienced was associated with what they 'gained' in the form of responsibilities in relation to loss of a husband.

7.3.4 Religious-cultural discourse

In a sense, everything the participants were saying was intricately connected to the social relationships and structures of the wider culture that could explain how the psychological phenomenon of their grief, bereavement and experience of the rituals came about. There was a socio-political and ideological basis for the way they constructed their reality of the bereavement rituals.

The collectivist culture and faith community of which the participants were members, further provided them with a social language that made them interpret their experiences in one way and not another. Participants told stories that connected intimately with the historical features of their cultural embeddedness and the people, ideas, things and institutions that the participants valued in their culture, also encouraging each other to talk about the importance of their valuing the bereavement rituals in order that they did not disappear. Thus their stories could not be value-free and, though only part of the multiple realities that could be constructed regarding bereavement rituals, their stories were richly coloured with the values of their culture and the faith community to which they belonged.

7.3.5 Minor discourses or discourses found within other discourses

In relating their stories, the participants also used language to describe other aspects of their experience of bereavement rituals. The participants described, for example, their fear of the unknown (fear discourse), of the afterlife, divination and putting the dead to rest (religious discourse), of blame (blame discourse), of the Sangoma (witchcraft discourse), and so on, thus legitimising practicing the rituals and positioning themselves and others in specific relationship patterns.

7.3.5.1 Fear discourse

This discourse was related to the activities connected to the performance of bereavement rituals. The participants performed the rituals not because they were part of their culture and a symbol of respecting that culture, but because of fear of the unknown that they might suffer at a later stage, the so-called misfortunes (Kyei,

1992) from which rituals protected people. Such fear might come from a culture that threatens those who do not comply with expected rituals and from the elders who would blame participants for the death of their son. Frantz, Farrell and Trolley (2001) maintained that the death of a loved one forced many grieving people to experience emotions associated with sadness, guilt, anger, or fear that followed the loss.

The traditional healer can come and do all other things, including 'u fara mudi' (protecting the homestead by the traditional healer). So to prevent misfortunes and witches from getting to the family (Lucy: G2, TA).

If one family member gets sick, I will suspect that maybe it is the reason is that there were things that we did not do (Masindi: G2, TA).

To me there was no problem in doing all that. My understanding was it was good for my husband's spirit. I just thought if, as a wife, I did not do those things my life would not be safe. Even my family, including children and whatever we touched by our hands would not prosper. To me those rituals are of value because if, like she said, you believe in these rituals when they are not performed you will never be happy. Always, you will see your husband. That will be showing that his spirit is still lingering and he is angry with you. The best is to perform the rituals (Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

I had to do all those things. That is our culture, my grandchild. I know that you who are educated do not see any value in performing these rituals, but it is important to perform them. That is because when you do not, for example, wash, as a wife, you invite misfortunes in your life. The dead one will not rest in a good manner knowing that we did not perform those rituals. If they are not performed, my grandchild, you will not forget about your husband. You will always think about him. Nothing will prosper in

your life. Now, if you do not want to encounter misfortunes, it will be better if you do what is prescribed by your culture (Phophi: G6, TA).

Had they not known about the misfortunes associated with failure to perform the rituals, they would possibly have used a different language to construct the performance of bereavement rituals that would not be informed by a fear discourse. They would have talked about bereavement rituals in a way that represented self-confidence when performing bereavement rituals.

7.3.5.2 Religious discourse

When they talked about the functions of the bereavement rituals, participants used language that justified the need to know the cause of the death through divination. They put the Sangoma in a position of somebody who knew the cause or who should be blamed, and positioned themselves as people in need of knowledge concerning the death of their husbands.

Mm... like going to sangoma for divining. They will always tell you he was bewitched by so-and-so. After knowing that, what will you do? Nothing, you cannot go and kill that person. You just accept that the person has died. God has taken him. He went where there are others. We will also follow (Mutshekwa: G1).

Imagine a person got sick for a week and then he dies. Do you think we should just accept that it is death. No, we have to find out what killed him. If we do not do it, I think he will think we do not care about his death. That is when he would just torment you (Masindi: G2).

They also justified the need to help the dead to rest through the performance of bereavement rituals. Their talk implied that they performed the rituals to please the ancestors (Aiken, 2001). The participants positioned themselves as people responsible for the happiness of the ancestors through their practices.

That will be showing that his spirit is still lingering and he is angry with you
(Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

If you do not perform the necessary rituals you remain with the image
(Murunzi) of the dead person and that can bring misfortunes (Muofhe: G4,
TA).

7.3.5.3 Blame discourse

In their stories concerning the reasons for performing the bereavement rituals, fear of blame was emphasised. Participants spoke about blame as coming from other people (in-laws and some community members). These people appeared to be representing the culture that valued the performance of bereavement rituals.

To avoid that blame, you simply have to do as they tell you
(Tshovhewaho: G4, TA).

Most of the things you do because the in-laws want you to (Avhasei: G5,
AIC).

That is because the in-laws will think you are the one who killed their son
(Selina: G3, AIC).

When he was still alive, all family members were happy about me as their
in-law, but that death changed everything. I suspected they were blaming
me. They thought I had killed him. It was tough (Tshidaho: G4, AIC).

In their talk, they demonstrated how others were responsible for their behaviour. The participants would do what other people said to avoid blame. They presented the pain of death as '*outside the self*' and coming from an external source, in this instance, the in-laws, and not so much as their own sense of loss that justified the

performance of bereavement rituals. The participants' activities were meant to avoid the blame that the in-laws would place on them.

The participants talked about being judged without a hearing and having their freedom of choice further restricted. They constructed the activities they performed as being done to avoid judgement by others. In most cases, the participants used language that indicated that they did not take ownership of their statements, by using the collective terminology of “we” and “us” or “they” and “others” as being responsible for their actions and behaviour.

The participants would not have been coerced into doing things they did not agree with, if the Tshivenda culture was not so adamant about blaming those who did not comply with prescription. Had death not occurred in the family, the participants would have used different communication styles or would have used a different vocabulary to refer to the role of the in-laws. The family also used blame to keep the widows submissive after the death of their husbands.

7.3.5.4 Witchcraft discourse

Fear of witchcraft came out in the participants' stories as contributing towards their reasons for performing the bereavement rituals. In their stories about fear of witchcraft, they talked about witchcraft and the positions and roles of the sangomas as 'divining'. At one level, the Sangoma was equated to a witch, but at another level the participants saw the same as being good at dealing with bereavement. At yet another level, if the participants did not want to comply with the cultural practices, a Sangoma was seen as bad or threatening. In the final analysis, however, the Sangoma and the possibility of witchcraft took away the participant's control over her own self and over events taking place around her loss of agency.

You know what, don't ignore your culture. Ah, witches will play with you
(Mutshekwa: G1, TA).

The traditional healer can come and do all other things, including protecting the homestead. “u fara mudi” so to prevent misfortunes and witches from getting to the family (Lucy: G2, TA).

The human subject that the participants talked about was either a witch or a Sangoma with a different or similar role in the lives of the participants. This role was either to bewitch the participant as a punishment for failing to perform the rituals, or it was a therapeutic role in dealing with bereavement. The participants were inviting the reader to understand the positions that sangomas occupied in the Tshivenda-speaking bereaved people. On one hand people were supposed to respect the Sangomas for the good healing job they performed and, on the other hand, they blamed them for the witchcraft that they were afraid of.

The fear of witchcraft that participants talked about in their stories might derive from the cultural and historical knowledge that tells people that death could be best explained as having non-physical causes like witchcraft (Opoku, 1989). In this instance, death was considered to be caused by witchcraft. The participants' talk implied that should there be different cultural knowledge about death other than that put forward by Opoku (1989), who suggested that witchcraft was responsible for death, they would have used different language. Possibly, the participants might have used such language when talking about reasons of performing the bereavement rituals. They would not have performed the rituals out of fear, which subjected them to subordinate positions.

7.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

What was apparent in this chapter was the way the participants used language to construct their realities (cultural, religious, familial, and so on), build their different tasks (semiotic, world, activities, socially situated identities and relationship, political and connection building), and how selected discourses informed their constructions. In terms of semiotic building, there was connection and representation between the

language the participants used to construct their realities (Coyle, 2007), and the world they built from that language in terms of bereavement experiences and performance of bereavement rituals. The participants used language that represented their pain and loss thus justifying the performance of bereavement rituals. Personal and distant (e.g., they, others) words were used in the construction of bereavement and bereavement rituals.

The chapter presented the different social languages that the participants used when telling their stories. The participants used language and speech that symbolised them as people hurt, injured, not normal and in need of healing. Such symbols again appeared to justify their performance of bereavement rituals. The world that they constructed through different social languages involved the realities concerning their needs. Such needs involved bereavement rituals, and how different people, places, times, objects, the institutions, and God and ancestors played certain roles in their construction of bereavement rituals.

The activities that were prevalent in their construction of bereavement rituals involved the way they talked about the rituals: going to the sangoma for divination, cleansing, sitting in the house before burial, crying, carrying a basket on the head, choosing a coffin, and being worried that the husband might not be buried properly. In these activities, the language used represented most of them as being widows without the power to decide their own actions and behaviour, particularly since they performed those rituals to appease other people who were in authority. They used language that positioned them as the ones without power, and others as having more power and status. There were participants who were able to either refuse the authority of others or participate in rituals because they understood the role they (rituals) played in their lives. They could take responsibility for their activities contrary to their less powerful counterparts.

The way in which participants constructed their socially-situated identities and relationships involved their identities as widows and the relationship they had with their

husbands and their in-laws, when the husband was still alive and after his death. They represented their identities through the use of “I” statements, and their relationship with others through the use of cognitive statements. They put others in the role of sympathisers after their husbands’ death.

In their construction power to choose or not to choose the coffin positioned them either as powerful (for some) or powerless (for others). For those who granted others power to choose the coffin on their behalf, they positioned themselves as powerless, whereas those who chose their husbands’ coffins placed themselves in powerful positions. The participants furthermore built connections between beliefs and their rationale for the performance of bereavement rituals. Consequently, while the participants from a traditional African background would perform the rituals because the rituals had a cultural base, the Christian participants would pray to God for healing and recovery.

The analysis of discourses showed that participants performed bereavement rituals because they were powerless and had a lower status to other people. They performed the rituals because they were widows or married to a particular family, they appeared abnormal and they supposedly wanted to return to their normal state by performing the rituals. They were also afraid of witchcraft and of being blamed for the death of their husbands.

The following chapter reflects on the process undertaken in the study.

CHAPTER 8

REFLECTIONS ON PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

8.1 REFLECTION UPON THE PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY

In chapter 7, I outlined the discourses that were identified and analysed from the spoken language of the bereaved participants from the Tshivenda-speaking community. It was apparent in the conversations that the religious-cultural discourses prevailed in the talk about the bereavement rituals. The discourses that were identified as informing the way the participants experienced grief were discussed as they had particular roles in the way participants constructed their realities in connection with death and bereavement rituals. Since language reflected and constructed the situation or context in which it was used, the way language was used to construct their perceptions was also context-dependent (in this case, the death of a husband).

This chapter reflects on the processes undertaken in this study. It also contains a summary of the discourses identified in the participants' talk. The conclusions based on the findings of the study are also highlighted, including my recommendations. At the end I address the limitations of the study.

8.2 REFLEXIVITY

In this section I address methodological and personal reflexivity. I further expand on the methodology part in the section dealing with the study's limitations (see section 8.5).

8.2.1 Methodological reflexivity

The nature of the objectives and research questions of the study called for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from the participant's point of view that would be difficult to obtain through the adoption of positivist approach that focuses on pre-conceived variables (Willig, 2001). In order to obtain a deeper understanding concerning the participants' constructions of bereavement rituals a qualitative approach

appeared most appropriate and relevant for this study. It allowed me to explore participants' construction of their experiences of grief, bereavement rituals and subject positions they enacted when grieving for a deceased husband. The adoption of a qualitative approach allowed me an opportunity to listen to the language participants used to give meaning to their perceptions of the phenomenon (Storey, 2007), and how knowledge and social action go together to construct reality.

To ensure that my study was credible and trustworthy, I stayed in the field until the data were saturated. During interviews, I asked different questions that were in line with the objectives of the study, and all interviews were tape-recorded. This made it possible for me to relate what the participants said to the objectives of the study. The empathetic way that I asked questions during focus group interviews influenced the answers given. I asked questions in a way that encouraged participants to give answers that added to my knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. Such a way of asking questions put the participants in authority and expert positions and accorded me the position of someone who did not know and was in need of such knowledge.

During the interviews, I constantly checked that what I heard the women saying was really what they meant to say. Tellis (1997) called this double-checking the data. I would briefly repeat or rephrase to the participants what they said after their conversations. This helped me to obtain a full sense of the participants' expressions. I continued to reflect upon the objectives of the study during the study process. As suggested by Babbie and Mouton (2001), I ensured that the findings are the product of the focus of the study. After the interviews, I transcribed the verbal stories from the tape into a written text for the purpose of discourse analysis. During transcription, I tried to produce a detailed transcript because, according to Wooffitt (2001), discourse analysts must always produce as detailed a transcription as possible.

However, it appeared that the method of data collection (focus groups) might have influenced the selection of words used by the participants. Having to discuss their religious cultural views and experiences in a group might have caused them to position

themselves in culturally acceptable ways (such as being in need of healing) to avoid being criticised by other group members. They might also have reproduced taken-for-granted religious-cultural assumptions and beliefs about bereavement rituals (that they will provide healing to the bereaved, and that failure to perform them will result in misfortune). The participants might have adopted the traditional values embedded in the Tshivenda culture and that were also reflected in the religious-cultural values.

The themes that guided the interpretation of the transcripts were in line with the objectives of the study. I had to reflect on the questions that I asked the participants during the interviews and the responses that they gave to generate the themes and sub-themes during the interpretation phase. When analysing the discourses, I also reflected on the objectives of the study to avoid analysing irrelevant information that did not contribute to the objectives of the study.

Given the purpose of the study, to analyse the discourses pertaining to the way Tshivenda speaking women construct performance of bereavement rituals, discourse analysis appeared the best method to analyse participants' construction of reality concerning bereavement rituals. It allowed me to identify a coherent set of meanings, objects, stories and statements that participants used to produce a particular version of events pertaining to bereavement rituals (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). As they talked about their events, I was able to identify the discourses that I will reflect on in section 8.3. By adopting discourse analysis, I was able to listen to and identify the relationship between the language participants used and the construction of bereavement rituals and to describe as best as possible the socially constructed realities that emerge in the day-to-day lives of participants.

8.2.2 Personal reflexivity

When working within the social constructionist framework, issues concerning the gender, age, and ethnicity of both the researcher and the participants are important factors in how the research and information gathering were approached. In this section I

reflect on my personal constructions of the topic and how this might have constructed the study.

My experience of losing my father and remaining with my mother in our Tshivenda-speaking family, and observing her performing the bereavement rituals, provoked and sharpened my interest to do this study and choice of research approach. This experience sensitised me to understand the meanings participants attached to their experiences and the language they used to describe such experience. I was able to understand and interpret their experiences concerning staying in the house until the day of the funeral, covering the body with a blanket, cleansing, the inability of the widow to arrange funeral and choose the husband's coffin. Since I was interested in gaining more in-depth understanding of what my mother might have felt during her time, I probed and asked 'why' questions so that the participants could give more information. When observing their non-verbal expressions as they talked, I assumed their emotions and transferred them to what my mother might have felt. Although I felt angry and blamed other people for making my mother go through what I felt was possibly a difficult time, I had to hide my emotions so that I could gain quality data for the success of this study. Hiding my feelings was especially difficult to do during the transcription of the focus groups. When transcribing the data, I would stop in the process and engage my mind in searching for the meaning of what the participants were talking about in relation to what my mother experienced because I was still young (18 years) and it was difficult to understand what my mother was going through. This is because experiences are life histories of people and consist of values, emotions and memories that are embedded in stories (Papa, 2008). Listening to the participants' stories brought back some painful memories for me. I had to guard against constructing discourses from the participants' data that reflected how I had constructed my mother's experience, i.e. as negative and difficult.

During the execution of this study, there were certain roles that I had to accept because of their influence on the study. I accepted the position of being a child or grandchild and of being 'ignorant' because of my age. This helped me gather more information than I

would have obtained had I behaved like a person who already knew about death and bereavement rituals. It was culturally expected that the younger generation, in the presence of older people, should be identified either as their child or grandchild or as a person who has little comparative life experience such as death and bereavement rituals. What made it further possible to achieve the outcomes of this study was the fact that I shared the ethnicity and the language of the participants. As a Tshivenda-speaking interviewer, it was possible for me to gain access to participants who also spoke the Tshivenda language. My knowledge and general worldview which I brought to the data, helped during the analysis and interpretation stages (Taylor, 2001). Being familiar with the participants' language and references, I was able to understand the idioms and metaphors within their stories.

Although I was younger than all the participants, age did not prevent them from expressing their perceptions and experiences regarding the phenomena under exploration. In their discourses, the participants acknowledged my age and related to me either as a child or grandchild, or the younger generation. With this background, some of the participants expressed themselves in a way that informed me about cultural expectations, in the assumption that I did not know about these things, either because I was too young or because I was only formally educated about them.

8.3 THE BUILDING TASKS AND DISCOURSES IDENTIFIED DURING ANALYSIS

Certain discourses emerged from the way that participants told their stories using the social languages relevant to their situation as bereaved women and as members of particular religious-cultural groups. These were the discourses that informed the participants' talk. Before analysing these discourses, Gee's (1999) building blocks or tasks for analysing discourses were followed. These gave the context in which discourses were analysed.

- **Semiotic building**

This building task involved the way that the participants used language to construct their reality concerning bereavement experiences and the performance of bereavement rituals. They used language that described them as ill and in need of healing through performing rituals. Their language appeared to call for sympathy from others. It was evident in their talk that they carefully selected the words that they used to tell their stories. This building block addressed the study's objective of identifying the participants' constructions of bereavement and bereavement rituals. It answered the research question concerning their experiences of grief following the death of a husband.

- **World building**

In their stories, participants constructed a world that concerned the reality of bereavement rituals as something they needed given their grief and their need for healing. This building block addressed the objective of identifying the role and meaning that the rituals play and have in the participants' lives. Through their talk, they defended these rituals as fulfilling a personal need and thus acceptable as being culturally prescribed and part of their culture. In their construction of bereavement rituals, the participants talked about people, places, times, the objects and institutions that played particular roles in their stories.

- **Activity building**

This building block addressed the objective of understanding the process of grieving and the performance of bereavement rituals that the participants could not take responsibility for. In the participants' stories of their activities, there were certain "subjects" who were given power and responsibility for their actions. These subjects included in-laws, ancestors, witches and sangomas. Each of these subjects had a role to play in the participants' actions. The participants went to the sangoma for divination, cleansed, sat in the house before burial, cried, carried a basket on the head, chose a coffin, and were worried that the husband might not be buried properly. In addressing this building task, they used language that represented most

of them as being widows without the power to decide their own actions and behaviour, particularly since they performed those rituals to appease other people who were in authority. Some participants either refused the authority of others or participated in rituals because they understood the role they (rituals) played in their lives. They could take responsibility for their activities contrary to their less powerful counterparts.

- **Socio-culturally situated identities and relationships**

When participants answered the question concerning their experiences, they used language that identified them in a certain way in relation to others and that identity had particular meaning to the participants. The language they used put them in certain positions different from others' status. In their talk, participants used language that positioned them as the victims, the broken ones, the ones who needed sympathy from others and the ones who needed healing through interaction with others. They talked about other people, institutions, times, places and objects that all positioned them as widows who needed support and who experienced intense emotions. Although they used language that positioned them as being in need of sympathy, they addressed the interviewer as someone who was ignorant of the experiences they described and who should learn from them.

- **Political building**

This task concerned the way participants lost and gained certain status and positions because of the power that others were granted by the religious cultural context of death. The language they used to address the meaning they attached to others in the context of performance of bereavement rituals gave others the power to make decisions for the participants, who in turn either accepted the position of being without power and, therefore, the position of being someone who should follow others' instructions, or rejected others' power and instruction and acted as they wished. For example, in their construction concerning the choice of a coffin, some (powerful) were able to choose the coffin and others (powerless) could not choose.

- **Connection building**

The way the participants talked about the past, present and future indicated how they built connections. Connections between their bereavement experiences and the activities they had to perform (bereavement rituals), between the death of the husband and the treatment they got from the other people, between the husband's life and their bereavement experiences, were evident in their talk. They built connections between beliefs and their rationale for the performance of bereavement rituals. It is evident that the participants from a traditional African background performed the rituals because the rituals had a cultural base and the Christian participants would pray to God for healing and recovery. Such connections were prevalent in their use of connection words in their stories.

Based on the objectives of the current study and the answers given by the participants, I identified the following discourses:

- **Abnormality discourse:** in their talk concerning their experiences of grief, participants used language that implied they were not normal, that they were somehow ill and suffering and in need of healing from the abnormality.
- **Power/patriarchal discourse:** in their stories concerning performance of bereavement rituals, some participants talked about other people as dominant in terms of power, and they positioned themselves as being subordinate and unable to make their own decisions. Their actions were decided by others. Although power was granted to the in-laws and sangomas, there were participants who constructed themselves in a position of power and rejected the oppression from others.
- **Gender discourse:** as they talked about their experiences in the context of bereavement and bereavement rituals, participants did not only position themselves as subordinate because of socio-political power and influence, but also because they were women, wives, widows and mothers. Gender discourse was identified because participants identified themselves as expected to perform bereavement rituals that are not expected for a man in the same situation.

The participants appeared vulnerable due to their gender that called for other people to take care of them. Their gender justified oppression and submissiveness to the dominant group. Being a wife and widow bound the participants by discourses that produced masculinity and femininity.

- **Religious-cultural discourse:** what the participants were saying concerning their experiences of grief and bereavement rituals, functions and meanings of bereavement rituals, the process and other situated meanings attached to their reality were connected to the social relationships and structures of the wider culture, which could explain how psychological phenomena of their experiences came about. Their collectivist culture and the faith community of which they are members also provided them with social languages that they used in their stories.
- **Minor discourses:** in their stories, participants used social languages that described several other aspects of their experiences of bereavement rituals. They talked about fear of the unknown, putting the deceased to rest, blame, and the role of the Sangoma, thus legitimising their performance of the rituals and positioning themselves and others in specific relationship patterns.

8.4 CONCLUSIONS

In the conclusion, particular attention is given to the way the study answered the research question that informed the interpretation of the results.

8.4.1. Construction of grief experiences

When asked to talk about their experiences of grief, the participants' constructed grief in terms of how they reacted to the knowledge of their husband's death. Irrespective of religious affiliation, the participants who anticipated their husband's death did not have as complicated and intense feelings as for those whose husbands died unexpectedly. It was evident that for African Christian participants, the death of a husband was experienced in a religious context (it was God's will). With traditional African participants, language that gave God responsibility for their husband's death was never understood.

In this study I found that for both traditional African and African Christian women, losing a husband through death is a difficult and painful experience accompanied by multiple losses. This concurs with research by Davies (2004). It appeared that such losses involved not only losing a husband, but also losing status, companionship, love, financial support, physical attachment and emotional support that the husband would have provided. The pain participants experienced when grieving the death of a husband was aggravated by the additional responsibilities that the participants used to share with the husband and which they now have to carry alone. These responsibilities included raising and disciplining children. The participants from both religious affiliations were also deprived of pleasure associated with sexual needs.

This study also found that the death of a husband was difficult to cope with, especially when there are certain responsibilities that as a widow one has to execute alone. Coping is even harder when a wife was financially dependent on her husband. Hence women from a traditional African background tended to blame God for taking away their husbands. Looking at the way the participants constructed their grief experiences, it seemed that they regarded themselves as ill and in need of healing through the performance of rituals (traditional African) and prayers (African Christian).

8.4.2. Constructions of bereavement rituals

Although bereavement rituals were considered therapeutic in nature, the participants experienced them as something that others wanted to see performed, irrespective of religious affiliation. Their constructions symbolised that most of the participants, particularly from traditional African background, had no power to refuse participation in these rituals because they were culturally prescribed and represented family values; and failure to perform them could bring misfortune. They performed the rituals out of fear of punishment by ancestors, in-laws and witches, and wanted to protect their in-group position in the family and cultural institutions.

Possibly, because of the socio-political context in which the interviews took place, as well as their religious-cultural assumptions, beliefs and values, traditional African

participants constructed bereavement rituals in a way that positioned them as being in need of healing. That was because the interviews took place in groups, which might have influenced their selection of words to avoid being criticised by other group members. It might also be the result of the religious-cultural assumptions and beliefs that the bereavement rituals provided healings to the bereaved and failure to perform them would cause misfortune. Given the values embedded in the Tshivenda culture, it was possible that the participants had no other values apart from the religious-cultural ones.

For African Christian and African traditional women, mourning the death of a spouse, the construction of their realities concerning the bereavement rituals was intermingled with their submissiveness to the dominant patriarchal and oppressive norms that prevailed in the Tshivenda culture. Thus, the participants were expected to submit to their husbands when they were still alive and to the in-laws after their deaths. Only a few participants from an African Christian background were able to either stand firm against the cultural prescriptions or perform the rituals because they understood the value of the rituals in their lives.

8.4.3. Subject positions the participants enacted when grieving the husband's death

The participants in this study constructed the death of the husband as an event that was painful and accompanied by multiple losses. Such losses included loss of the position that the participants used to occupy when the husband was still alive. Upon his death, they occupied a different position which the participants, from both religious backgrounds, constructed as uncomfortable. The transition from wife to widow was seen to legitimise the performance of bereavement rituals in order to be accepted in the community and the family, irrespective of religious affiliation or personal inclination. Most of the participants had to live according to the positions they occupied.

Oppressive inequality was constructed in terms of the distribution of power relations where the participants were silenced by their lack of power. The in-laws became more

powerful and ordered the participants' actions and interactions in relation to the performance of bereavement rituals. As a result, the participants remained with little capacity to have some effect in their world. Most of them, particularly from a traditional African background seemed to accept the position of the oppressed who could not oppose the social stereotype that surrounded bereavement rituals.

Through their talk, the participants enacted certain positions that they were subjected to by themselves and also by others. They used language that legitimised those positions as a result of the grief they experienced after they lost their husbands. Such positions included being an unfortunate widow, and a hurt, lesser being without value, and a subordinate who had no say in what was happening around her. In this position, the participants were silenced because of their gender and their religious-cultural background. They were dominated by cultural beliefs that took power away from the woman and gave it to her husband, and took power from the widow and gave it to the in-laws.

The participants may have opposed some of these discourses had they been able to position themselves in more symmetrical and equal relationships. That might mean that they would not speak about and allow other people to be in a dominant position, but that their stories would be about the equality of all parties. The participants would be viewed as the bereaved widows, the in-laws who were grieving for their son, the family and so on. All would be equal partners in making decisions about the burial of the participant's husband and his estate. The in-laws would acknowledge the widow as a person in her own right even though she was no longer married to their son. The participants would have used an entirely different set of words to describe their experience of bereavement rituals in their culture. Possibly, they would have used language that positioned people as equal. Rosenblatt and Nkosi's (2007) research with Zulu widows seems to imply that financial independence was a factor in the positions their participants could take. If the widows had been financially independent when their husbands were still alive they might have been able to take a different position and could have exercised their rights without fear upon their husbands' death.

Nevertheless, some participants used language that represented them as dominant and responsible for their actions, and resisting the power from both their in-laws and culture. These participants accepted their gender stereotype, but enacted their freedom of action and interaction. They performed the rituals because either they believed in their (rituals) role in their lives or they did not perform the rituals because they were in a position to resist other people's oppression.

8.4.4. Contradictions in the participants' constructions

In the African Christian women's constructions there was a particular contradiction with what the church (AIC) expected and prescribed, and what the Tshivenda culture expected and prescribed. In order to deal with these contradictions, the participants had to become detached while performing these rituals. This sense of detachment, however, silenced their voices and allowed only the voices of culture, religion and family values to dominate in their performance of the bereavement rituals.

In their constructions, the participants perceived bereavement rituals as something that would heal their hearts (wounds). This implied that they regarded the rituals as therapeutic, whilst on the other hand such rituals were regarded as "that" which the in-laws expected the participants to perform. That shows that some participants were not sure of where they stood in terms of the performance of bereavement rituals. There were contradictions in their constructions of their reality.

The participants' voices appeared to be saying something in contradiction with what they felt about the issues concerning bereavement rituals. They talked in a way that justified their performance of bereavement rituals, whilst at the same time they felt confined to the process by others (those in authority). On the one hand, they talked of bereavement rituals as cultural activities that should be observed, and on the other hand, they talked of bereavement rituals as something they are forced to do as a sign of respect for their in-laws and to gain a sense of belonging in the family.

Such inconsistency between their constructions of reality and their feelings calls for consideration from those who provide professional help to widows, who in some cases feel differently from what they say as a result of outside influences (in-laws and culture). Such inconsistency might be because of the fear of being marginalised. Their constructions also show that when the interviewed participants were confronted with the death of a husband, they did things they were not comfortable with as a result of fear. They would justify their actions not because they enjoyed those actions, but because they wanted to avoid conflict and to ensure peace and stability in the family.

8.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

I am aware of the considerable limitations of my study. The nature of the group setting for data collection might have been threatening to the participants and they may have withheld some of the stories for fear of judgement by others. It became apparent in the group interviews that some of the participants were not free to speak about their perceptions, possibly because they felt this could pose a threat to their positions as widows in the community. As a result, they were dominated by others' conversations and their contributions were minimal. To counteract this as far as possible I ensured that I collected data until saturation point (Greeff, 2005; Maritz et al., 2008).

Secondly, since most of the respondents were not fluent in English, a dominant language in the academic world, interviews were conducted in their first language (Tshivenda) which was also important as it facilitated the development of a sound rapport between the interviewer and the participants (Kagee, 2004). Consequently, the transcribed interview data were translated from Tshivenda to English before the discourses could be analysed. Translation process might have led to omissions or inappropriate substitutions of the original rich material provided by the participants. In order to address that, I translated the English material back to Tshivenda because I had an advantage of speaking the same language and culture with the participants.

Thirdly, some disadvantages could also be noted for the procedure used in the present study. There was the question of the effort that the procedure involved. Setting up and interviewing six groups took a long time and delayed the start of the analysis phase because I had to spend so much time doing transcriptions from the audiotapes to obtain the texts for analysis. The transcripts left me with a great deal of material that needed much time to be read and analysed (Wilkinson, 2008). Discourse analysis can be extremely time-consuming and labour-intensive (Levett, 1989; Taylor, 2001). Sufficient time was required, not only for transcribing the interviews, but also for the wide preliminary reading demanded by the procedure. No matter how much time was demanded for the discourse analysis itself, additional time had to be allocated to meet all the requirements for the procedures.

Fourthly, the nature of this study means that the collected data and their interpretation could not justify generalisation to the whole community of Tshivenda-speaking women who have lost their husbands. That is because qualitative research by nature lacks generalisability of the findings (Kagee, 2004). Also the sample of this study (snowball sampling) was too small to represent the whole population (Struwig & Stead, 2001), but enough to produce a large pool of information for discourse analysis (Taylor, 2001). Although generalisation is not applicable in qualitative studies, I ensured some transferability of the findings by including 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). I collected and reported detailed descriptions of the data and engaged myself in a first level of interpretation of the findings before identifying discourses.

These limitations do not detract from the credibility and trustworthiness of the research. Rather, it shows the complexity of the phenomena under investigation. The different themes identified as inherent in these participants' discourses are open to discussion. The analysis or evaluation of discourse is multifaceted, dynamic and subjective to some extent, and it does not cater for the collective group of individuals such as family members who might not be seen to be directly affected by the issue. However, in view

of the above, the anticipated contribution of these research findings to the scientific body of knowledge is that, since there is very little literature on the subject of bereavement rituals in traditional African communities, like Tshivenda, the findings will add to the available literature concerning women in the context of bereavement rituals.

8.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of what has been discussed, as well as the complex and subjective nature of the effect of death and bereavement rituals on the participants, it is recommended that further research should be done in the field of bereavement rituals. Such research can focus on discourses informing the reconstruction of the self after losing a husband in a traditional African family.

Since this study utilised focus group interviews, another study focusing on the bereavement of women can be conducted using in-depth individual interviews, which might bring new information to light that did not arise in the focus group interviews. Instead of thinking about and voicing their views within the context of the views of others, as it is the case in focus groups (Patton, 2002), individual interviews allow participants independence in terms of what they say.

Furthermore, the discourses identified from this study should be considered to help sensitise and inform people about the impact of bereavement rituals on the psychological well-being of bereaved women. It is also important for people to understand the positions women are subjected to by themselves, by others and by their religious-cultural heritage. People should not judge women by the way they behave, but understand them within the setting, for example, of losing a husband within a given socio-cultural and religious context.

Some of the participants in this study identified themselves as powerless and not responsible for their actions concerning rituals. It is, therefore, important that women who appear vulnerable after they lose husbands re-construct their positions and their

notions of issues like responsibility, power and womanhood that can assist them before and after the death of a husband. This can be done through empowering bereaved women, who still think they have no choice regarding their actions so that they understand the positions that they could accept or deny during the presence of their husbands and after their death. Bereaved women can also be empowered on issues pertaining to equality and dignity of each human person as advocated in the South African Constitution, especially when oppression of women is justified according to cultural practices and religious ideologies. When empowered they will or not perform the rituals not because they are forced to, but because they understand the role of the rituals in their lives.

Given the nature of the experiences that women go through when grieving the death of a husband, it is recommended that professionals who are consulted also consider the religious-cultural sphere that might be contributing towards the difficulties and pain that women in this situation experience. The findings from this project show that not only the participants should be assisted, but also the in-laws who were found to subject the participants to submissive and oppressive positions without power. This study could help professionals to understand the participants' experiences and how women's voices concerning their lives could be heard, and also the role of the rituals for those who believe in the significance of such rituals in their lives.

In addition to the above recommendations, there is still valuable and rich information in the transcripts of this study that can be used for studies with a different focus than this one. While this study focused on the discourses that inform the participants' talk about bereavement rituals, another focus could be on the way women reconstructed their life after losing a husband.

South Africa is a multi-cultural country and different cultures may have different ways of acting and interacting in the context of widowhood. Since this study only focused on the Tshivenda-speaking women, I also recommend that further studies around bereavement rituals in other cultures be conducted. Tshivenda might not be the only

culture dominated by patriarchal discourses and that positions women as weaker than men. Thus, a culture in which women, as weaker and powerless beings, are expected to observe all bereavement rituals that their counterparts (men) may not observe due to gender imbalances within the particular society (Fulton & Metress, 1995) poses further questions for research, especially when performance of rituals is not always dependent on one's will and choice.

8.7 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it is imperative to conclude that the participants' perceptions and constructions of bereavement rituals are informed by the religious cultural discourse. For some African Christian and African traditional participants, mourning the death of a spouse and the construction of their realities concerning the bereavement rituals were intermingled with their submissiveness to the dominant patriarchal and oppressive norms that prevailed in this culture. Other participants managed to resist such norms.

The findings of this study will shed light on the pain that some Tshivenda-speaking widows experienced after the loss of a husband, especially widows who were, among other things, financially dependent on their husbands. People will possibly understand the way this pain leads to a need for healing through performance of bereavement rituals, within the context of the positions the participants enacted as they grieved the death of their husbands. It was evident in this study that widows occupied different positions during their mourning period. They either subjected themselves or were subjected by others to a powerless position. They accepted or rejected and resisted such positions and practiced their human rights even within the context of the death of the husband. It was also evident that, although there were widows who perceived bereavement rituals positively, others perceived the rituals negatively. Based on the findings of the study I can conclude that some widows performed the rituals because they were willing to do so and understood the significance of the rituals in their lives,

while others performed the rituals not because they were willing, but wanted to please and submit to their in-laws and culture.

It is therefore important to understand that bereavement rituals have immense therapeutic value to some bereaved Tshivenda speaking widows. People have to appreciate its value in the healing of the individual and the community after the death, especially for those who believe in the significance of the rituals in people's lives. It is also important to accommodate and respect those who do not believe in the bereavement rituals, as they do not perceive the role and value of the rituals in their lives.

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APPENDIX A

1. RESPONDENT INFORMATION LEAFLET AND INFORMED CONSENT

TITLE OF PROJECT

Discourse analysis of bereavement rituals in a Tshivenda-speaking community: African Christian and traditional African women's perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to volunteer for a research study. This information leaflet is to help you decide if you would like to participate. Before you agree to take part in this study you should fully understand what is involved. If you have any questions which are not fully explained in this leaflet, do not hesitate to ask the investigator. You should not agree to take part unless you are completely happy about all procedures involved.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH?

Death is one of the aspects that impact on bereaved people. After a family member dies, it is a custom that African people perform bereavement rituals. Currently I am investigating the ways in which African Christian and African traditional women perceive performance of such rituals. The purpose of the investigation is to explore the value of such rituals on the lives of bereaved people. Preliminary studies have shown that bereavement rituals are performed for therapeutic purposes.

A minimum of six groups of five women who have an experience of losing a family member and/or participated in bereavement rituals will be invited to participate in a focus group setting where they are exposed to the main research question. The main objective of the group session is that most of bereavement rituals are performed in groups and are communal in nature. This session will also provide information regarding realities that individuals and the groups construct when dealing with bereavement rituals.

WHAT IS EXPECTED OF ME DURING THIS RESEARCH?

If you agree to participate in this project, you will be involved in such a session for ± 60 minutes during which time all procedures will take place. Time will be determined by data saturation. For the purpose of research, the session will be tape-recorded in order to analyse the discourses regarding bereavement rituals.

The single focus group session will take place on the date and time negotiated with you upon indicating your willingness to participate.

HAS THE RESEARCH PROJECT RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

The Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria has evaluated the ethical form of the purpose of this study and granted the researcher permission to continue with this study.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS PARTICIPANT IN THIS PROJECT?

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate or stop at any time without stating any reason. Also consider that you will not be penalised for withdrawing your participation in this project. The investigator retains the right to withdraw you from the study if it is considered to be in your best interest.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no risks or any particular inconveniences involved, either physical or psychological. During the session you will be required to participate in the discussion around performance of bereavement rituals. If participation can lead to any unanticipated emotional problem, it will be the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the participants get professional counselling immediately. The session will take place in a well-equipped classroom in one of the schools around your area. The researcher is also qualified to facilitate group sessions of this kind, while the research assistant will operate the tape-recorder.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All information obtained during the course of this investigation is strictly confidential. Data that may be reported in scientific journals will not include any information that identifies you or disclose any personal detail about you as participant of this investigation. Any information uncovered regarding yourself as a result of your participation in this project will be held with strict confidence. A formal report will also be handed to you if required.

You will be informed of any finding of importance to your participation in this investigation but this information will not be disclosed to any third party without your written permission. The only exception to this rule is that the supervisor will access the final report since this study is for academic purposes.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this investigation. If you have any further enquiries prior to the group session, please do not hesitate to contact me, M.S. Radzilani in this regard. The telephone number is: 015 962 8419 or cell phone: 0824912784.

M.S. Radzilani
Research investigator



2. PARTICIPATION LETTER

Date: -----

Dear Participant

Re: Participation in perceptions regarding bereavement rituals study

In the information leaflet I outlined the purpose of this study regarding the performance of bereavement rituals. You have indicated that you are willing to participate in a project regarding performance of bereavement rituals, involving also other community members who had an experience regarding the phenomenon.

I would like to thank you in advance for participating in this project, which will take place on -----
----- in your community school classroom. The venue is specifically equipped with tape recording facilities, and by signing the accompanying letter of informed consent, you approve that the session will be tape recorded for research purposes. The tape recorder will be used for research purposes alone and will not be used for any training or other purposes. Confidentiality of all participants is ensured throughout the process. I will be the facilitator for this session and the research assistant will operate the tape recorder.

Please find attached an indemnity form to be completed by each participant prior to the session.

Thank you for your cooperation in this regard.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely

M.S. Radzilani
Research investigator



3. INDEMNITY

Project: Discourse analysis of bereavement rituals in a Tshivenda-speaking community:
African Christian and traditional African perceptions.

Location: School classroom

Date: -----

I, ----- (name and surname, and identity number) am willing to participate in the perceptions regarding bereavement rituals study in a group setting. I understand that this is a research project and that my identity will not be disclosed. I also give permission that the session may be tape-recorded for research purposes.

I, -----

- Declare and undertake towards the research that I discard any claim of any kind that I have now or might have in the future due to any form of action or neglect arising from any activities within the project and which can form the basis of a civil claim that I may obtain in my personal capacity against the researcher on account of a casualty suffered by myself while involved in the project.
- Hereby indemnify M.S Radzilani and the research assistant against any liability which might arise from any actions by me and undertake not to hold them liable for loss of any kind that I might suffer during my involvement with the mentioned project.

Thus signed at ----- on this ----- day of ----- 2004

Signature of participant

Witnesses

1.

2.

INFORMED CONSENT

I, -----(full name and surname) hereby confirm that I have been informed by the investigator, M.S. Radzilani about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this research regarding the bereavement rituals in traditional African families. I have also received, read and understood the above written information (Patient Information Leaflet and Informed Consent) regarding the research and the processes involved.

I am aware that the findings of the research, including personal details and comments will be anonymously processed into a research report.

I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the research. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the focus group session for this research.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's name _____ (Please print)

Researcher's signature _____ Date _____

I M.S. Radzilani herewith confirm that the above participant has been informed fully about the nature, conduct and expectations regarding this research project.

Witness's name* _____ (Please print)

*Consent procedure should be witnessed whenever possible.

Witness's signature _____ Date _____



VERBAL PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

(applicable when patients cannot read or write)

I, the undersigned, M.S Radzilani, have read and have explained fully to the participant, named.....and/or his/her relative, the information leaflet, which has indicated the nature and purpose of the research in which I have asked the person to participate. The explanation I have given has mentioned both the possible risks and benefits of the focus group session. The participant indicated that he/she understand that he/she will be free to withdraw from the research at any time for any reason and without jeopardizing him/her in any, to which he/she agrees.

I hereby certify that the participant has to take part in this research project.

Participant's name _____	(Print please)
Research's name _____	(Print please)
Researcher's signature _____	Date _____
Witness's name _____	(Print please)
Witness's signature _____	Date _____