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BRIEF REPORT

Grieving widows' lived experiences in a rural South African setting

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The study explored widows' social isolation and the stigma experienced in a rural South Africa setting. Participants were a purposive sample of 10 widows (black = 95%; age range 30 to 60 years old). The widows completed semi-structured individual interviews on their sense of community. Thematic analysis indicated that widows self-perceived as a social burden to extended family and to experience a deep sense of social isolation and loneliness, dealing with their grief and loss. The widows reported to lack in social support after the death of their partners and to be treated to humiliating cultural stereotypes. Implied guilt by the in-laws and other family members about the widows' involvement in the death of their partners is a recurrent influence in the widowhood experience in a South African rural setting.

Keywords: loneliness and humiliation, perceived social burden, rural, widows

Introduction

Around the world, approximately 285 million women are widows (United Nations Women, 2017). A widow is a woman who has lost her husband or partner (Dorris, 2018; Idialu, 2012). In addition to the potential loss of material and social support from the husband and the accompanying grief, in many societies, widowhood is socially stigmatised (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2001). Widows have been displaced from their homes by their in-laws or the widow's children (Dahal, 2007). In some African societies, widowhood may come as an elevated experience of deprivation, subjugation, and humiliation (Babafemi & Bolanle, 2013). Rarely are widows in a position to share their life stories of adjustment after losing their partners. In this study, we explored the lived experiences of widowed South African women, so as to understand the core meanings they attached to their community living, while in grief over their deceased partners.

In traditional South African cultures, the widow's ordeal starts immediately after the husband's death is announced (Sossou, 2002). It starts with the family, in-laws, and elder folks asking the widow to sit in a designated place, usually in the couple's bedroom, where people come to express condolences and say prayers (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). Although there are cultural differences in expectation for widows during the funeral period, the widow is expected to stay in the designated room until the burial. After the burial, the widow is expected to wear mourning black, white, or blue in her dress, to be readily identifiable as in mourning (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2015). The widow is expected to wear the apparel until after the cleansing period, regardless if the widow is either sick or pregnant.

The period of wearing mourning dressing is determined by family cultural affiliation. The common duration of the mourning period among the Sotho and other Nguni tribes

is a year. During that time, the widow stays at home and is not expected to seek or engage in a sexual relationship. Similarly, there is the cultural expectation for a widow to desist from social activities or public gatherings, such as weddings, funerals, parties and in some cases, even church services until after the cleansing rituals (Magudu, 2004). Once the determined mourning period has expired, the woman mourner is cleansed ('*hatsuwa*') of the impurities ('*senyama*') and bad luck ('*bate*') of losing a husband. She is then able to live as a normal human being again, supposedly (Daber, 2003). Even after the widow has gone through all the widowhood rites and rituals, she continues to be referred as '*mohlolohadi*' (widow), rendering her different from other woman of the family and community.

Goal of the study

The aim of the study is to explore the grieving widows' lived experiences in a rural South African setting, to understand their struggle in dealing with bereavement. The findings could provide a better understanding of widows' life stories of adjustment during the period of bereavement. In addition, the findings could provide a better understanding from both the in-laws and community on how best to resource them to support the widows.

Method

We utilised a phenomenological qualitative inquiry (Ary et al., 2009) to gain an in-depth understanding indigenous community experiences of grieving the loss of a woman's partner in a rural setting of South Africa. A phenomenological inquiry approach is appropriate to explore rural, indigenous community experiences of grieving the loss of their partner in indigenous communities.

Participants and setting

The participant widows ($n = 10$) were a convenience sample (black = 95%; age range = 30 to 65 years old) in the

Free State Province of South Africa. The participants were mainly black, Sesotho speaking. Most of the participant widows (98%) self-identified as Christian faith followers.

Data collection and procedure

Participants were recruited at their home or at work. The participants volunteered to take part in the study. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants. For ethical reasons, the names of the respondents were not identified. The participants provided informed consent to take part in the study. The participant widows completed a semi-structured individual interview on their personal beliefs and widows' experiences during the grieving period. Interviews were conducted by the researcher in seSotho. The widows completed the interviews at convenient locations for them and the lead researcher. Interviews were concurrently transcribed and translated for analysis.

Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed using open-coding procedures (King & Horrocks, 2010). These procedures involved systematically organising, categorising, and summarising data, followed by describing them in meaningful themes. Themes were assigned codes to condense the data into categories. For the data reporting, randomly assigned numbers as de-identifiers were used.

Findings and discussion

The thematic analysis resulted in three themes: (i) perceived social burden; (ii) loneliness; and (iii) humiliation, during the grieving period. Each of these themes was considered and the evidence for it.

Theme 1: Perceived social burden

About 98% of the widows reported being treated as a burden. For example, three widows commented as follows:

The reason is, some people look at a widow like a burden; [they think] the women, they get so much used to the [husband's] family, all that she's going to do is asking or begging. She will be having lots of requirements and lots of complaints. (Respondent # 5, 54 years)

Honestly speaking, so much has changed since the death of my husband. People treat me differently. It is as if we are considered bad omens. We (widows) are excluded from events like children's birthday parties, and it has been difficult for me to enrol in a new stokvel (saving scheme club) because people give you funny reasons why you cannot join. Because my husband has passed away, they think I won't be able to pay. (Respondent # 9, 34 years)

The support I get is mostly from my parents and my relatives but from my in-laws ohoo... [meaning no, they don't support her] (Respondent #2, 44 years)

Women who outlive their husbands are not only regarded with suspicion but are also considered an economic burden on their relatives (Chen, 2000; Mohindra et al., 2012). What is particular to widowhood is that financial burdens tend to fall entirely upon

women (Mohindra et al., 2012). High rates of marriages, particularly between younger women and older men, combined with infrequent remarriages, lower the quality of community life of widows (Lenette, 2013).

Only 2% of the widows receive support from the in-laws and about 98% of the widows felt deserted, having no-one to encourage them. Specifically, when their friends' distance themselves from them, they become desperate. For instance, one respondent said: "*The only time I see my in-laws is when they are visiting their friends around where I live.*" (Respondent # 8, 36 years)

Some widows might cope despite being treated as a burden by detaching themselves from a social network or community (Chigali et al., 2002), rather than remaining aloof from social gatherings, as their presence is considered inauspicious (Manyedi et al., 2003; Mohindra et al., 2012).

Theme 2: Loneliness

Most (98%) of the widows said they were very lonely most of the time, which caused them emotional pain. For example, they expressed their pain from loneliness, as follows:

I feel lost because there is no-one I can talk to. I hardly get visitors; this house is very lonely. I have no one to turn to during difficult times. My friends have deserted me. I am seen maybe, as burden to them. (Respondent # 7, 59 years)

I stay with my children who are too young to relate to me. When they are out to play with their friends, I am left alone in the house, sometimes until late in the evening, when they come for their meal and fall asleep. Even when they are around, they are too young to relate to me on issues affecting me emotionally. (Respondent # 4, 39 years)

I really miss my husband; he was a jolly person. He used to crack jokes and would laugh with children. His absence has left a void in my life; I hardly talk to children because they're too young to understand what I am going through and in addition, do not enjoy the topics that we old people like. (Respondent # 7, 59 years)

Previous studies have reported widowhood as one of the strongest predictors of loneliness (Beal, 2006; Chambers, 2005; Savikko et al., 2010; Utz et al., 2014), because of social isolation which mainly stems from cultural norms that prevent widows from interacting with the community (Sheykhi, 2016). In her widow's narrative, Chambers (2005) identified "loneliness and despair" as a major theme. The study's findings emphasise "emotional" loneliness, resulting from the loss of significant social and emotional attachment (Bennet & Victor, 2012) which is harmful to a widow's quality of life (Moses, 2018). Becoming a widow is a common and difficult transition in life, yet it can lead to significant loneliness that is difficult to mitigate (van Baarsen, 2002).

Therefore, the death of the husband results in the loss of regular interaction which exposes widows to loneliness through the loss of social, emotional, and instrumental

support (Greenfield & Russell, 2011; Lubben & Gironde, 2003; Pinquart, 2003; Shiovitz-Ezra & Ayalon, 2010).

Theme 3: Humiliation

About 98% of widows reported a sense of humiliation from discrimination against them and ritual sanctions on them. For example, some observed:

Moments after the death of my husband was announced, I was expected to sit in a designated bedroom without furniture and with only a mattress to sit on. I was given a blanket and covered myself while people were there. I was with old folks – people from all walks of the life came to express condolences and offer prayers. (Respondent # 7, 59 years)

On the day of the funeral, I had to change into all black attire, something that was going to remain until after six months. The wearing of the black attire signifies a period of mourning; this is not peculiar to only women but to all who lose one relative or the other. However, that of the woman seems to be monitored by almost everyone in the community, [and if] not clad in black clothes, becomes the subject of discussion, with people doubting her innocence at the death of her husband, no matter the cause of death. (Respondent # 8, 46 years)

I was asked to strip naked and older folk shaved my head, private parts and the armpits. I was so embarrassed to go through the process. (Respondent # 9, 48 years)

I am seen as a potential suspect of stealing their husbands. It is against this background that I do not visit my friends anymore. It is very embarrassing that I have to sit in a back row in church; that's why I am very reluctant to go church. Worse still is when I had to travel by taxi; I was expected to sit in the back seat. (Respondent # 1, 46 years)

I wore the mourning clothes for six months. Every night I had to wash them to be ready for the next day. (Respondent # 9, 34 years)

During this period, I had no income. I depended on my parents to provide food for my family of three. (Respondent #2, 44 years)

Among the Sotho speaking people of South Africa, widows are suspected, by default, of killing their husbands (Young, 2006). The study found that the beginning of the mourning period includes the chief mourner who occupies a sacred, mourning physical space where candles are lit (Hutchings, 2007). This could symbolise being isolated from the community for the period of mourning, with the widow covered with a blanket and being allowed only married women to sit with her. Similar practices are said to prevail in many African nations today (Widows Rights International, 2013). With fellow women in charge of this situation, the widows are silenced into submission and acceptance of the practice as culturally appropriate and respectful in honour of the dead (Sossou, 2002).

Implications for women rights protections

Spousal loss has social and behavioural consequences, often requiring a renegotiation of one's social roles. This includes significant changes in one's friendships and social relations in terms of reduced social networks and contacts (Bennet, 2008). The lack of social integration and social support is the main cause of widow loneliness (Pinquart, 2003). While the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights guarantees equality and human dignity of all South African citizens, widows' rights continue to be violated through cultural practices that demean women by denying them their subject position.

Limitations and future recommendations

This study had the limitation that the participants may have been guarded and conservative in their responses because they were concerned about social desirability. Future studies should interview in-laws about their opinions on the grieving process and their support for widows in their families. In conclusion, Sesotho widows are vulnerable and subject to various discriminatory practices and the social stigma of living without a spouse. With few exceptions, isolation or alienation becomes part of their life. This is the shocking price black, rural widows pay for a traditional, patriarchal culture.

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