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# Sociocultural Experiences of Bereavement Following Fatal Road Traffic Accidents for Urban Black South Africans

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# Sociocultural Experiences of Bereavement Following Fatal Road Traffic Accidents for Urban Black South Africans.

**by**

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**Supervised**

**by**

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A research report to be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree of

**Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology**

**In**

**The Faculty of Humanities**

University of the Witwatersrand

Date: 30 October 2024

**Declaration**

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.

Sign: 

Date: 30 October 2024

## Abstract

This study focuses on exploring the sociocultural impact of fatal road traffic accidents (RTAs) by examining the narratives of bereavement experiences constructed and interpreted by individuals. While studies on RTAs have mainly focused on statistical analysis and prevalence, there is a lack of research examining the sociocultural impact of RTAs. This research aims to enhance the understanding of social operations that underlie road accidents and broaden the lens of exploring the phenomenon of RTA fatalities. By exploring grief practices, the implicit cost, and the role played by society and culture in shaping these narratives, the study seeks to inform greater awareness of the impact of RTAs on individuals and communities.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals who had experienced a bereavement occurring over a year ago. The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. From the analysis, three key themes emerged: culture, gendered mourning, and the influence of location, societal expectations, and labels. The findings indicate that the transformation in meaning during the bereavement process following fatal road traffic accidents was linked to the unnaturalness and suddenness of the loss, which were perceived as protective for families and communities. These variations in grief expression were informed by gender identities and the challenges of mourning, which were shaped by societal expectations regarding location, adherence to grieving practices, and the process of reintegrating into personal and communal spheres after the loss.



**Keywords:** *Black South Africans; fatal road traffic accidents; bereavement; sociocultural*

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to Study

## 1.1. Introduction

Road traffic accidents (RTAs) refer to incidents that take place on public or private roads when two or more vehicles collide, a vehicle collides with a pedestrian or cyclist, or a vehicle hits a stationary object like a tree, resulting in at least one person getting injured or losing their life (Fisa et al., 2022; Machetele & Yessoufou, 2021). A fatal road accident is one where the accident leads to the death of one or more individuals either immediately or within 30 days of the incident (Verster & Fourie, 2018). This includes the driver, passengers, and other road users. RTAs are a significant cause of death worldwide, responsible for approximately 1.3 million annual fatalities across all age groups, ranking them eighth among leading causes of death (Machetele & Yessoufou, 2021; Van den Berghe et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2018). While South Africa has made efforts to reduce road-related fatalities, they remain high in comparison to other African countries, with a recent increase of up to 26%. Despite this trend, there is a lack of research examining the sociocultural impact of RTA's (Lamont & Lee, 2015; Machetele & Yessoufou, 2021; Ncube et al., 2016).

Studies on road accidents have mainly focused on statistical analysis and prevalence. These analyses typically highlight the contributory factors such as human, vehicle, environmental, and road factors (Machetele & Yessoufou, 2021). Human factors are responsible for 80% of fatal RTAs and take into account the age and gender of the driver, vehicle occupants, and other road users involved in the accident (Verster & Fourie, 2018; Vogel & Bester, 2005). Negligent human behaviour, such as speeding, driving under the influence, lack of awareness of other road users, and distraction, are among the significant causes of RTAs (Montle & Moleke, 2021). Vogel and Bester (2005) identified vehicle brake and tyre failures, vehicle type and age as the leading causes of vehicle-related RTAs. Environmental and road factors, such as the time of day, peak traffic periods, insufficient road infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists, poorly maintained roads, inadequate road signs, and insufficient public transport infrastructure and planning, also contributed to RTAs (Ribbens et al., 2008; Ncube et al., 2016; Vogel & Bester, 2005).

However, research often overlooks the sociocultural aspects of fatal road traffic accidents. Compared to other causes of death, RTA's are unique in that they are sudden and premature, caused by someone else's negligence, and often result in bodily mutilation (Keyes

et al., 2014; Krychiw et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2020; Stewart, 1999). The circumstances surrounding a person's death can significantly impact the grieving and mourning process (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). Sociocultural context plays a significant role in shaping bereavement and the accompanying grief reactions (Hall, 2014; Manyedi et al., 2003; Silverman et al., 2021). Sociocultural contexts shape the experience of bereavement and its accompanying grief reactions according to the cultural worldview's appropriateness, acceptability, norms, and common practice (Silverman et al., 2021; Stroebe et al., 2001). For Black Africans, the sociocultural framework encompasses communal mourning rituals, the role of spiritual beliefs, and the expression of grief as a collective rather than solely individual experience (Kgatla, 2014, as cited by Khosa-Nkatini & White, 2021; Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014). These contextual factors significantly influence the manifestation and processing of grief in response to the loss of a loved one, particularly in the context of sudden, traumatic deaths like those resulting from fatal RTA's (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999a; Currier et al., 2015). In essence, bereavement is a socially and culturally sanctioned experience that transforms a biological event into a constructed experience (Silverman et al., 2021). However, understanding cultural narratives of bereavement is complex due to culture's fluid and diverse nature (Falkof, 2023).

The interpretation and construction of bereavement experiences are highly subjective and fluid and can be influenced by locality, society, and worldviews (Falkof, 2023; Makgahlela et al., 2021a). In the unique context of South Africa, Black individuals often draw on traditional and religious conventions, or a combination of both, to create meaning in their personal grief narratives (Brittian et al., 2013; Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). Traditional worldviews view life as cyclical rather than linear and understand life and death as interconnected phases (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016; Hall, 2014; Thomas, 2021).

### 1.2.Rationale

Holmes et al. (2019) identified a gap in current road accident research, which tends to emphasise statistical analysis at the expense of qualitative analysis. They contend that a qualitative research approach, with a specific focus on RTA research, has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that underlie road accidents. By directing attention towards the experiences of individuals and communities directly impacted by fatal RTAs, such an approach can foster collaboration and enhance efforts to prevent such accidents, building on existing interventions (Holmes et al., 2019).

By taking a broader perspective on the issue of RTA fatalities, we can gain a deeper understanding of how grief is experienced, the hidden costs involved, and how societal and cultural factors play a role in shaping these narratives (Thomas, 2021). When a death occurs as a result of a road accident, it can elicit a unique set of responses from those who are left behind (Manyedi et al., 2003). Unfortunately, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the topic, but the limited studies suggest fundamental differences between expected and unexpected deaths. Martin et al. (2013) also noted that research on African bereavement rituals during mourning processes is scant. The nature of bereavement is heavily influenced by cultural norms and narratives, as well as the specific circumstances surrounding the death, the actions taken by society and family members, and the expectations placed upon them.

While it is well-documented that bereavement practices can differ depending on whether a death was expected or unexpected, delving deeper into these narratives could provide valuable insights into how cultural and social factors play a role in shaping such practices. Primarily exploring how sociocultural factors impact bereavement practices in the context of fatal RTAs could be enlightening, accompanied by a secondary interest in bereavement more generally. The sociocultural framework for Black Africans encompasses communal mourning rituals, the role of spiritual beliefs, and the expression of grief as a collective rather than solely individual experience. These contextual factors significantly influence the manifestation and processing of grief in response to the loss of a loved one, particularly in the context of sudden, traumatic deaths like those resulting from fatal RTA's. Examining these sociocultural influences on bereavement practices in the RTA context could shed light on how individuals navigate and cope with unexpected, devastating losses. This could offer essential insights into culturally responsive bereavement support and provide insights on road traffic interventions.

### 1.3.Aims

This research primarily investigates the bereavement process following fatal road accidents among urban Black South Africans. It aims to understand how the unique circumstances surrounding these tragic events influence the experience of grief. Given the alarming frequency of RTAs in South Africa and their profound emotional impact (Modipa, 2023; Peltzer & Renner, 2003), this study highlights the critical nature of bereavement in this context.

Additionally, the research will explore bereavement more generally, acknowledging that experiences of loss can be multifaceted and often contradictory (Oyebode & Owens, 2013). By analysing bereavement narratives, the study seeks to illuminate the interplay between sociocultural identity and expressions of grief in the aftermath of fatal RTAs, providing a broader understanding of how social and cultural factors shape these experiences.

### 1.4.Research Chapter Outlines

Chapter One introduces the research and its intended purpose. Chapter Two explores the existing literature to gain insights into road accidents as a phenomenon, cultural bereavement practices, narratives on grief, and an exploration of road accidents specific to the South African context.

Chapter Three examines the Dual Process Model as the theoretical foundation for this research. The chapter explores into this framework's context, principles, concepts, and applications and how it relates to the study. Chapter Four presents the methodology for analysing and interpreting the participants' accounts and experiences. Due to the research's aims and questions, a qualitative research design is appropriate, and a narrative inquiry approach is utilised to capture the central narratives of personal stories. The chapter also includes a section on reflexivity and trustworthiness, emphasising their significance in ensuring the thesis's credibility.

Chapter Five presents the findings of the study. Three main themes are identified: 1) Culture, 2) Gendered mourning, and 3) The impact of Location, Societal expectations and Labels. Chapter Six presents the concluding section of the research, which discusses the results of the main concepts and themes explored in the preceding chapters. This section also includes an in-depth overview of the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature review explores the intricate relationship between bereavement, grief, and mourning within African cultures, specifically focusing on urban Black South Africans in the context of fatal road accidents. It is organised to provide a comprehensive understanding of how bereavement is expressed in African cultural practices, highlighting the following key themes:

First, the section will explore the concept of bereavement and its embodiment in African cultures to explore how cultural beliefs shape the experience of loss and how grief is expressed. Understanding this cultural framework is essential for contextualising the emotional responses to bereavement. The exploration of grief, mourning and bereavement as themes highlights the various stages of the grieving process and how they manifest across different African communities. This section will also consider the role of communal versus individual mourning practices.

Additionally, social support systems, which are crucial during times of loss will be reviewed in terms of how communal support networks, both formal and informal, provide solace and aid to those grieving. The role of rituals in facilitating social support and their function in the grieving process will be assessed critically. Additionally, this study will review syncretism and traditional African practices, focusing on how these beliefs intertwine to shape mourning rituals and the experience of bereavement. This synthesis often leads to unique expressions of grief that reflect a blend of cultural heritage and contemporary beliefs.

Finally, a contextual analysis of road accidents in South Africa will be presented, highlighting the frequency and impact of these incidents on families and communities. This will link the broader themes of the review to the challenges faced by individuals grieving in the aftermath of fatal road accidents. By weaving together these themes, the literature review aims to provide a holistic understanding of bereavement and its cultural dimensions, ultimately shedding light on the profound social and cultural implications of loss in the context of fatal road accidents.

### 2.1. Bereavement and its Embodiment in African Cultures.

Bereavement is a profoundly painful social phenomenon intricately linked to the deep sense of loss it brings (Makgahlela & Sodi, 2016). It is a universal experience (Aiseng, 2024;

Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999a; Szuhany et al., 2021), with processes and outcomes shaped by culture and context (Appel & Papaikonomou, 2013; Granek & Peleg-Sagy, 2017; Silverman et al., 2021; Thomas, 2021). Grieving and its associated rituals vary significantly across cultures. In African societies, bereavement is deeply ingrained within the social and cultural fabric, with unique practices reflecting collective beliefs about death, the afterlife, and social roles. This section explores the cultural, psychological and social dimensions of bereavement in Africa, exploring how Africans perceive grief and loss.

### 2.1.1. Grief, Mourning and Bereavement

Grief, mourning and bereavement are often used interchangeably. Grief is understood as the reaction to a loss, while mourning and bereavement refer to the process individuals undergo to integrate a loss into their lives (Granek & Peleg-Sagy, 2017; McNeil et al., 2020). Universal reactions to death typically include finding meaning to cope with the loss (Setsiba, 2012; Silverman et al., 2021).

Rooted in psychological and therapeutic frameworks, ‘grief work’ is the active process of coping with emotional pain and adjustments post-loss, involving various stages and tasks. Grief work allows for emotional expression, making sense of loss, and integrating the loss into life’s narrative, helping people adapt by redefining roles, relationships and routines (Thomas, 2021). It also includes memorialisation through rituals, which help connect to the departed and engage with support networks.

Extensive research on death, mourning, and loss, including seminal Freudian theory and psychoanalytic perspectives, has significantly contributed to understanding bereavement (Appel & Papaikonomou, 2013; Martin et al., 2013). Psychoanalytic perspectives emphasise letting go and breaking ties with the deceased. Unsuccessful detachment is viewed as pathological grieving, a highly criticised notion (Silverman et al., 2021; van Heerden, 2002). This perspective, rooted in traditional Freudian and psychoanalytical theories, assumes that “grief work” involves breaking ties with the deceased and completely letting go (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). However, this fails to account for sociocultural contexts that shape grieving practices and experiences. Scholars have increasingly argued that grief is a complex, multifaceted process that does not necessarily require complete detachment from the deceased (Makgahlela et al., 2021b; Stroebe & Schut, 2010), particularly in non-Western

cultural frameworks where maintaining connections with the departed may be considered an integral part of the grieving process (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014).

Examining African bereavement literature reveals a noticeable dearth of information on indigenous African bereavement rituals (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014). Existing literature highlights substantial differences in the conceptualisation of death between African and Western frameworks, challenging the idea that grief is a universal process (Appel & Papaikonomou, 2013; Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014; Boulware & Bui, 2016; Kamwendo & Manyeruke, 2017; Makgahlela & Sodi, 2016). Grief expression varies across cultures, reflecting cultural norms, beliefs, customs, behaviours, and social etiquette (Setsiba, 2012). While traditional models of grief, such as Kubler-Ross's five stages, Worden's mourning tasks, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Rando's six Rs of mourning, have been influential, recent literature suggests that the grief process is not as linear as traditionally depicted. Each culture has distinct ways of dealing with loss, shaped by its fundamental values and perspectives (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). African bereavement practices for example emphasises the communal nature of grief, with mourning often involving extended family and friends and the broader community (Nwoye, 2005). The focus is not solely on the individuals intrapsychic experience, but on the broader social and spiritual dimensions of loss and the community's role in facilitating healing (Nwoye, 2005). Within this framework, maintaining connections with the deceased through rituals, ceremonies, and continued relationships is seen as a healthy and meaningful aspect of the grieving process, rather than a sign of pathology (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999).

### 2.1.2. Cultural Framework of Bereavement in Africa

Culture as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon encompasses a range of human-elements that shape our beliefs, values, worldviews, rites, and rituals. Culture encompasses distinctive ways of thinking and behaving passed down through generations, differentiating various groups (Parkes et al., 2015). Contemporary theorists studying grief work, which includes Strobe and Schut's dual process model, continuing bonds theory and Neimeyer's meaning reconstruction model, represent shifts from traditional grief theories, which often depict grief as a series of stages or tasks to be completed, which excludes specific experiences. Instead, they underscore the diversity of grief experiences and the individual's active role in shaping their mourning process. By acknowledging experiences, such as the maintenance of bonds (Hall, 2014), the search for meaning (Neimeyer, 2017) and the

dynamic interplay of grief responses (Schut, 1999), contemporary grief theories offer a richer and more empathetic understanding of how individuals navigate their unique bereavement journeys, especially in the context of diverse cultural beliefs and practices. They now consider situational factors, the personal significance of the loss, evolving representations of the lost relationship, and the management of coping and emotions.

Regarding situational factors, contemporary theorists recognise that the context in which a death occurs significantly influences the grieving process (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). This includes external factors such as the nature of the death, for example, sudden versus expected deaths, the social environment, and the cultural norms surrounding death. For example, a fatal road accident might evoke a different set of responses compared to a death from natural causes (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Additionally, considering the personal significance of the loss encompasses the emotional bond shared with the deceased and shared experiences (Rosenblatt, 2017). As discussed, contemporary grief theorists posit that grief is not just about 'working through' it but also about finding one's way to live post-loss, which can range from life returning to normal after the loss to an 'unbearable' existence. In the African context, where cultural traditions, communal support, and rituals are deeply embedded in the grieving process, these contemporary theories can help illuminate how individuals and communities adapt to loss.

In many African cultures,  death is viewed as a dialectical process, with rituals helping to transition the deceased’s spirit into the ancestral realm, necessary for getting closure for both the deceased and the bereaved (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014), as well as having a therapeutic effect (Mojapelo-Batka, 2013). Death is not seen as the end of life but as a transition. Mbiti (1975, as cited by Mbaya & Cezula 2020), noted that this perspective influences mourning rituals across various ethnic groups. Communal interconnectedness and solidarity play a significant role in bereavement practices (Thomas, 2021).

The communal aspect of bereavement customs includes family and community visiting the bereaved's home to offer condolences and help with funeral arrangements, feast and prayers (Setsiba, 2012). Similarly, in Hindu culture, bereavement practices are communal events impacting immediate relatives and the local community (Parkes et al., 2015). This contrasts with Westernised bereavement practices, where grief is seen as a private personal experience (Parkes et al., 2015; Silverman et al., 2021). In African cultures, mourning is a

communal and collective process, ensuring that the bereaved are supported by extended family and community (Rosenblatt 1997 as cited by Radzilani, 2010)

In Black African cultures, bereavement practices are performed to show respect to the deceased and ensure the social reintegration of the bereaved (Kilonzo & Hogan, 1999; Mojapelo-Batka, 2013). Different ethnic South African ethnic groups have specific rituals associated with death. For example, in Xhosa, Zulu and Tswana cultures, mourning rituals such as slaughtering an animal, shaving the head, sitting on a mattress, wearing black clothes, ingesting specifically prepared herbs and refraining from social activities for a prescribed period (Aiseng, 2024; Mojapelo-Batka, 2013; Setsiba, 2012; Thomas, 2021; Yawa, 2010).

### 2.1.3. Mourning Rituals and Gender Dynamics

In many African cultures, mourning rituals are strongly influenced by gender. Women often adhere to strict mourning customs that control their actions, determine their clothing, and restrict their social interactions. In certain cultures like the Vhavenda, Tswana, and Bapedi, women, particularly widows, undergo elaborate rituals, including cleansing ceremonies, to protect themselves and the community from bad luck (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014). Rituals are understood as crucial for preventing spiritual harm but can be isolating and discriminatory. Additionally, this contributes to stigmatisation or being blamed for a spouse's death (Rosenblatt & Nkosi, 2007). As explored by Cebekhulu (2015), this experience of stigma and discrimination contributes to the development of prolonged and complicated grief. This is particularly true in rural contexts where traditional customs and patriarchy dictate social interactions (Kapuma, 2011, as cited by Ndlovu, 2013).

In contrast, widowers face fewer restrictions. Dlukulu (2010) noted that widowers in urban settings, for example, are not expected to observe as many rituals as women, reflecting patriarchal influences on mourning practices. Women report feeling coerced into performing rituals they do not fully understand or agree with. This leads to women feeling pressured to conform to traditional customs, which can lead to resentment, feelings of powerlessness, loss of autonomy and complicated bereavement for those who wish to move beyond the confines of tradition (Itsweni & Tshifhumulo, 2018; Somhlaba & Wait, 2009). Therefore, the experiences of bereavement are heavily influenced by gender, with women facing more challenges than their male counterparts.

### 2.1.4. Social Support

Despite the challenges, African cultures have a rich tradition of providing solid social support during bereavement. The concepts of family, extended family, and community play crucial roles in offering both emotional and material support (Poovan, 2006). Religious groups, neighbours, and burial societies also help arrange funerals and provide ongoing support to the bereaved (Manala, 2015). This reflects the principle of ubuntu, which emphasises mutual care and collective responsibility, especially in bereavement. Ubuntu ensures that people do not grieve alone, with the community collectively participating in the mourning process (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014; Khosa-Nkatini, 2022; Mnyandu, 2018).

However, urbanisation and modernisation are gradually weakening these traditional support systems (Setsiba, 2012). In urban settings, bereaved individuals may experience loneliness, prolonged bereavement, and a lack of social support, as family members are often scattered, making participation in the mourning process difficult. Younger people, particularly those who live in cities, are less likely to be exposed to cultural practices and are less likely to adhere to traditional mourning rituals (Dlukulu, 2010). As a result, they may engage in Western coping mechanisms such as therapy, which focuses on individual rather than communal support (Anderson, 2010).

### 2.1.5. Rituals and Their Functions

Rituals are central to the grieving process in African contexts because they allow people to express their grief. As a dynamic concept, culture encompasses unique beliefs, customs, and behaviours that guide interactions with death through rituals (Kilonzo & Hogan, 1999). Rituals are structured, repetitive, and standardised symbolic expressions used to allow mourners to channel their emotions in a culturally accepted manner, alter the societal perception of time for specific occasions, integrate individuals into roles and foster cohesion (Ayling, 2015; Mojapelo-Batka, 2013; Radzilani, 2010). Rituals are multipurpose, depending on contexts, as described by Makgahlela et al. (2021, p 92): purification, continuity, transition, reconciliation and affirmation. Rituals, such as cleansing, provide individuals with emotional relief by symbolically purging the harmful effects of death (Kilonzo & Hogan, 1999). Additionally, these rituals highlight the significance of "the communal and collective aspect of grief" for Africans, demonstrated through communal mourning customs (Aiseng,

2024). Failure to perform these rituals risks trapping the deceased's spirit in an aimless existence, offending family members, community and ancestors, and the spread of misfortune and bad omens (Appel & Papaikonomou, 2013; Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016; Mojapelo-Batka, 2013). It is believed that rituals are necessary because death is a pollutant or contaminant (Setsiba, 2012).

The interdependent bond between the living and the deceased remains central to mourning customs, illustrating the cyclical nature of life where existence transcends physical death (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016; Thomas, 2021). This elucidates the underlying mechanisms involved in the bereavement journey, which includes seeking counsel from traditional healers to probe potential reasons for the passing based on the belief that environmental factors like witchcraft or *umeqo* may have contributed (Hutchings, 2007, p. 190). This is because when death occurs in African cultures, causes are attributed to spiritual elements such as witchcraft and offending ancestors (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). Gathering the spirit of the departed from the incident scene using branches or *amahlavu* is a symbolic act of 'bringing' them back home, underscoring that they are not forsaken in death (Makgahlela et al., 2021). Both practices underscore the deliberate efforts to guide the departed into their new role as an ancestor. They also symbolise a deterrent to particular community individuals who were thought to be responsible for the death. In exploring traditional power, Kamwendo and Manyeruke (2017) emphasise the significance of rituals in mitigating anxieties stemming from the belief in malevolent spirits.

How someone dies in African cultures plays a crucial role because it informs rituals, customs and the meaning attached to the loss, which has significant meaning for the grieving process (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016). Divided into expected and unexpected fatalities, this distinction arises from the notion that some ways of dying are more favourable than others. With expected death, there is a gradual termination before death occurs. In contrast, sudden death implies a natural or unnatural death which is unexpected, happens without warning, and, in some cases, could have been prevented. The study of mourning practices across cultures provides valuable insights into how human experiences shape and shape cultures. Understanding the cultural dimensions of mourning offers a unique perspective on how individuals and communities cope with loss, navigate grief, and find meaning in the face of death.

### 2.1.6. The Syncretism of Christianity and African Traditional Practices

Religion and traditional beliefs are crucial in shaping African perspectives on death and mourning. These belief systems provide explanations for death, prescribe rituals, and guide the community's support for the bereaved. According to Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata (2014), the notion of ancestors is central to understanding how Africans perceive death. While traditional African religious beliefs continue to influence mourning practices, the integration of Christianity into these belief systems has introduced new perspectives on death and bereavement, sometimes challenging existing practices (Makgahlela, 2021). Christianity emphasises the finality of earthly death and the promise of eternal life in heaven (Patru, 2022). Despite these differences, African religious frameworks have adopted Christian beliefs, resulting in hybrid practices observed in churches (Mokhoathi, 2021) such as the Ibandla lamaNazaretha of Isaiah Shembe, Zion Christian Church (ZCC) of Engenas Lekganyane and the St John's Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of Christina Nku (Mashabela, 2023). For example, in many Christian and African communities, traditional mourning practices are adapted to align with religious doctrines.

In syncretised Christian-African communities, it is common for mourning periods to blend church services, prayers, and hymns with traditional practices like wearing mourning attire or head-shaving (Manala, 2015). Families often combine Christian prayers with traditional rituals to honour religious and ancestral customs. For example, in Xhosa culture, Christian funerals frequently incorporate elements of ancestor veneration, such as connecting with the deceased's spirit through a traditional healer and seeking blessings through church services (Yawa, 2010). However, research suggests that the challenge of syncretism lies in the churches' difficulty in integrating African spiritual practices, leading many congregants to incorporate traditional rituals to meet their needs privately (Mokhoathi, 2021; Mokhutso, 2023; Ntombana, 2016). Traditional customs like honouring ancestors, sacrificing animals, and performing cleansing rituals are often discouraged by Christianity because they are considered to be inconsistent with the beliefs of monotheistic religions (Manala, 2015).

Religious and traditional rituals provide structure and meaning during bereavement. Funerals, communal prayers, and post-burial ceremonies allow the bereaved to express grief in culturally accepted ways, reducing disenfranchised grief (Mouton, 2024). Blending customs can create an internal conflict between religious convictions and cultural expectations. Itsweni and Tshifhumulo (2018) found widows felt pressured to undergo

traditional cleansing rituals that conflicted with their Christian beliefs. Nonetheless, religious and traditional support is crucial during bereavement, offering spiritual guidance, prayers and counselling (Manala, 2015). Tensions between traditional beliefs and religious doctrines continue to shape the evolving landscape of bereavement in African societies as individuals navigate the complexities of faith, culture and grief.

### 2.2. Road Accidents: A South African Contextual Analysis

Road accidents are critical public health and safety issues in South Africa, contributing significantly to the country's mortality and injury rates (Meel, 2008; Modipa, 2023; Verster & Fourie, 2018). South Africa has one of the highest rates of road traffic accidents globally (Aghabayk et al., 2021; Olukoga, 2004), representing an interplay of socio-economic, infrastructural and behavioural factors. In 2022, South Africa recorded approximately 12 436 road fatalities, with many more suffering from serious injuries (Geduld et al., 2024). As a result, South Africa is among the top countries globally regarding road traffic deaths (Parkinson et al., 2013).

#### 2.2.1 Factors that Contribute to Fatal Road Accidents

Human, environmental, and infrastructural factors drive the high prevalence of road accidents in South Africa (du Plessis et al., 2020). Driver behaviours, which include drunk driving, speeding, reckless driving and failure to use seat belts, are critical behavioural factors that contribute to the high rate of accidents (Geduld et al., 2024; Meel, 2008; Rolison et al., 2018; Verster & Fourie, 2018). According to Govender et al. (2020), alcohol involvement accounts for at least 27% of fatal RTA's. This is contributed by South Africa's culture of drinking and driving, underpinned by dominant patterns of alcohol consumption. Alcohol use is regarded as a means to foster friendships, celebrate occasions, and engage in recreational drinking in marginalized communities that lack positive social and recreational opportunities (Alves et al., 2022; Setlalentoa et al., 2010; Sukhai et al., 2022).

Many vehicles on South African roads are poorly maintained, with mechanical failures that contribute to road accidents (Geldenhuys, 2021). This is especially common for taxis, which are frequently overlooked and poorly serviced, putting passengers and other road users at risk (Aghabayk et al., 2021). Furthermore, pedestrian involvement was found accountable for a significant proportion of road accident fatalities, especially in urban areas where pedestrians share the road with vehicles (Levulyte et al., 2017). This is characterised

by a lack of pedestrian infrastructure, such as safe crossings and sidewalks, which increases the risk of individuals on roads (Hasani et al., 2018; Verster & Fourie, 2018).

### 2.2.2. Government Involvement and Social Responses

Government involvement attempts to decrease the number of road fatalities through various agencies such as the Department of Transport, RTMC and public awareness campaigns (du Plessis et al., 2020). Legislative measures, as communicated through road safety laws such as the National Road Traffic Act, establish limits for speed, vehicle safety standards, and blood alcohol content for drivers. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable lack of compliance with road safety laws, indicating that the attitudes and behaviours of road users are undermining the efficacy of formal institutions and contributing to South Africa's poor safety outcomes (du Plessis et al., 2020).

Additionally, public awareness campaigns such as Arrive Alive and Safe Roads South Africa aim to raise public awareness of road safety issues (Verster & Fourie, 2018). These initiatives focus on educating drivers, with particular emphasis during high-risk periods such as the Easter and Christmas weekends, when South Africa observes a mass influx of road users travelling to rural areas. Research suggests that these initiatives are ineffective due to a widespread disregard for rules, regulations, and laws among South Africans (Geldenhuys, 2021). Modipa (2023) found that road users do not obey the rules of the road and law enforcement officials do not enforce the law consistently, which compromises road safety campaigns and initiatives. This is characterised by corruption among traffic officials that undermines these efforts, with drivers paying bribes to avoid traffic fines, leading to a lack of accountability (Modipa, 2023).

# Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Dual Process Model (DPM), a bereavement model developed by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut. It emphasizes the dynamic interplay between two key processes that characterize the grieving experience: loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented coping. The theory posits that in response to the death of a loved one, a bereaved individual will engage in loss-orientated and restoration-oriented modes of coping in order to manage feelings of grief and stressors of life post-loss (Larsen et al., 2024). The framework acknowledges the complexities of grief and highlights how effectively adapting to loss involves an oscillation process (Fasse & Zech, 2016). This process entails confronting the emotional pain of grief while also engaging with life and its changes after a loss. This chapter will outline the theoretical framework, discuss its relevance to the study, consider various cultural perspectives on bereavement, and explore its application to African bereavement practices in the context of fatal road accidents.

## The Dual Process Model (DPM)

The DPM's theoretical foundations recognize that grief is not a linear process but rather a continuous experience of feeling and adapting. It suggests that grief encompasses a range of processes, rather than being confined to specific stages or phases (Fiore, 2021; Stroebe & Schut, 2015). This is emphasised through the concepts of loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping modes.

Loss-oriented coping focuses on the emotional responses to grief, including sadness, longing for the deceased, and the need to process this loss. This approach allows individuals to express their feelings constructively, often through actions such as crying, reminiscing about the deceased, and holding a funeral service (Larsen et al., 2024). Such processes validate the experiences of those who are bereaved. In contrast, the restoration-oriented mode of bereavement focuses on a rational approach to processing grief. This involves adapting to life without the deceased by engaging in new social roles, redefining relationships, and managing practical responsibilities. This process helps individuals reestablish their identity as they navigate everyday life, allowing them to gain a sense of normalcy and balance (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

The relevance of this framework to the study lies in its appreciation of the complexity of bereavement experiences. By alternating between two coping modes, individuals can address their emotional needs while also managing the demands of everyday life (Fiore, 2021). This model promotes a more holistic understanding of bereavement, taking into account individual differences in coping styles and the temporal nature of grief responses (Nguyen et al., 2022; Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The DPM expands its focus to include the adaptation to daily tasks and changes that occur (Carr, 2010). According to the DPM, traditional grief work has limitations as it is conceptualised to be internal and does not account for variations across cultures (Fiore, 2021; Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The DPM acknowledges that cultural influences shape and reciprocate bereavement reactions (Hall, 2014), which is crucial for the proposed study as fatal RTAs redefine cultural experiences of grief. The DPM recognises the evolving nature of grief and how grief practices differ across cultures (Hall, 2014).

African bereavement practices often involve both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping strategies, reflecting the communal nature of many African cultures. A study conducted by Hunt (2004) explored the applicability of the DP within an African context. The study concluded that while the model is relevant, it requires a balanced approach between the two modes to be effective, as well as the energy necessary to oscillate between these processes. Loss-oriented practices in the African context may include rituals such as traditional ceremonies, communal prayers, and family gatherings where relatives and the community come together to express their grief. These rituals strengthen social bonds and create a space for emotional expression, while also acknowledging the pain associated with the loss (Seretlo-Rangata, 2017). Restoration coping may involve community support in practical matters such as organising funeral logistics, assisting with meals and the transition of roles within the family. This is on the premise that the communal aspect of African cultures dictates that the community is an active role-player in supporting bereaved individuals, which facilitates both emotional healing and practical adjustments to life post-loss (Khosa-Nkatini, 2023).

In cases of sudden and unexpected deaths, such as those resulting from fatal road accidents, intense and immediate grief can occur. This situation requires both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping strategies. The loss-oriented approach is crucial in this context, as bereaved individuals seek to process their emotional shock. This may involve

participating in rituals and communal mourning practices that facilitate shared grief. Additionally, the restoration-oriented approach can help manage the practical realities that follow an unexpected loss, such as handling funeral arrangements, addressing financial concerns, and navigating changes in family dynamics. In the context of fatal road accidents, cultural norms around grief may influence how individuals engage with these coping processes. The stigma associated with sudden deaths, often perceived as tragic or shameful, may complicate the grieving experience (Pitman et al., 2018).

By recognising the oscillation between emotional expression and practical adaptation, the model highlights the importance of both individual and communal approaches to grief. This duality is relevant in African cultures where community plays an important role in the grieving process, The DPM encourages a comprehensive understanding of grief that respects cultural practices while considering individual coping strategies.

# Chapter 4: Methods

This chapter explores the research study's design, sample and sampling, instruments, data procedure, data analysis, and participants' backgrounds. It also provides information highlighting the study's trustworthiness and ethical considerations. Furthermore, it explores reflexivity and the study's limitations.

## 4.1. Main Research Question

The main research question of the study is: how do urban Black South Africans experience bereavement as a result of a fatal road traffic accident?
Within the main research questions lie four secondary questions:

4.2.1. How do cultural beliefs and rituals shape the grieving process and meaning-making for individuals bereaved by fatal road accidents in African communities?

4.2.2 In what ways do the intersections of traditional African practices and Christianity influence bereavement experiences and rituals, particularly in the context of perceived "unnatural deaths".

4.2.3 How do gendered identities influence expressions of grief and mourning practices among individuals in African rituals, particularly their inclusion and exclusion from specific roles

4.2.4 In what ways do societal expectations and gendered experiences shape the grieving process, particularly regarding the balance between communal support and individual emotional processing following a loved one's death within the context of a fatal RTA and generally?

4.2.5 How do geographic location and cultural aspects influence expressions of grief and the communal aspects of mourning among individuals experiencing bereavement in South Africa ?

## 4.2.Research design

The study undertook a qualitative approach, aiming to provide detailed descriptions of the phenomenon being explored. This approach allowed for a deep and personalised understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Astalin, 2013; Queirós et al., 2017) . The rationale behind the study was to explore the meanings of phenomena rather than quantifying results, as is typically done in quantitative research (Rahman, 2016). This was

suitable as the study aimed to investigate the sociocultural experiences of fatal road accidents as experienced by bereaved individuals. The study was situated within a phenomenological research design, which supported the intent to understand the meaning behind phenomena through the participants' perspective by focusing on lived experience (Tuohy et al., 2013; Willig, 2013). Furthermore, a phenomenological research design was based on participants' subjective experiences (Tuohy et al., 2013), allowing for an understanding of how participants personally interpreted and applied meaning to their experiences.

### 4.3.Sample and sampling

The study aimed to recruit eight to ten adult participants who had lost a family member in a fatal road traffic accident. The sampling criterion specifically sought individuals who lost a family member through a fatal road accident more than a year ago. The participants were required to be over 18 years old to provide independent consent (Hamilton, 2016; Mathews, 2022). The sample was selected using volunteer non-probability purposive sampling. This method was chosen to gain deeper insights into the specific experiences of individuals. The rationale for this sampling approach is that the study focuses on people who have been affected by fatal road accidents. Thus, the individuals targeted for the study are those who have experienced this phenomenon, are available, willing to participate, and possess the ability to communicate their experiences and thoughts in a clear, expressive, and reflective manner (Etikan, 2016). Volunteer participants were sought using word-of-mouth and social media.

The initial plan of the study was to explore the experiences of individuals living in townships. However, the researcher, with guidance from the supervisor, realized that this approach would significantly limit the sampling opportunities. As a result, they decided to broaden the participant pool. Volunteer participants were required to be residents of Johannesburg, specifically focusing on Black South Africans, as this was the main interest of the study, particularly regarding traditional and cultural aspects. Johannesburg was selected because of its dense population, which offered a large pool of potential participants. Additionally, the city’s diversity includes individuals from various urban and rural backgrounds. Finally, the widespread accessibility of Facebook facilitated reaching a broad sample of participants.

As an operational definition, the term "Black" denotes a social construct based on skin colour, cultural background, and spoken language (Jones, 2021). It typically refers to individuals of African descent, including a wide variety of ethnicities, cultures, and experiences, marked by a shared historical and sociopolitical identity shaped by colonialism, racism, and cultural background (Malaza, 2014; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017). The term "Black" encompasses a range of collective experiences, particularly highlighting an under-researched group with unique social struggles. This makes it a crucial term for studies aimed at understanding the distinct challenges and perspectives within this population.

The study excluded individuals who had lost a family member within the past year, as research indicates that integrated grief outcomes typically manifest six to twelve months following the loss (Butler et al., 2018; Kenny et al., 2019; Szuhany et al., 2021). This informed the sample selection and helped identify potential prolonged grief reactions. Additionally, individuals who had received a psychiatric diagnosis after their loss were excluded from the study and categorised as a vulnerable group (Butler et al., 2018). Given the study's focus on bereavement, this posed a high risk to the participants. Therefore, special care was taken to ensure the protection of vulnerable groups from serious adverse harm and exploitation (Butler et al., 2018). Furthermore, individuals involved in the same road traffic accident (RTA) as the deceased were also not included in the study to prevent adverse delayed trauma reactions that could lead to secondary distress or trauma (Butler et al., 2018).

The primary method of recruitment involved utilising Facebook as the central platform for distributing advertisements through community groups and the sharing function. This approach effectively reached a large audience. The advert specifically invited individuals to participate in a research study on bereavement following fatal road accidents (see appendix F). Interested participants were then included in the study. Subsequently, snowball sampling was employed as a sampling technique, where interested participants were asked to refer other individuals who met the specified criteria and would be interested in participating (Laher & Botha, 2012)

The desired sample was challenging to obtain through word-of-mouth and social media, leading to the use of a snowball sampling technique with individuals who volunteered to participate in the study. However, this method also proved to be inefficient. This inefficiency may have been attributed to the sensitivity of the topic or the societal taboos surrounding discussions of death. As a result of word-of-mouth, social media, and snowball sampling, the

researcher managed to recruit thirteen volunteers. However, during the interview process, four of these volunteers did not show up, reducing the final number of participants to nine. Additionally, one interview had to be discarded because the participant did not meet the inclusion criteria, which became apparent only during the interview. This issue may have been related to a language barrier concerning the term ‘psychiatric disorder.’

The final sample comprised eight participants, which was deemed sufficient, so no additional participants were recruited. Although the sample was homogeneous based on the inclusion criteria, efforts were made to diversify it regarding age, gender, and life experience. The final group included seven Black females and one Black male, with ages ranging from 18 to 53. Seven of the eight participants were undergraduate students in various disciplines and were all under the age of 25. Only one participant was part of the workforce.

### 4.4.Table of Participants

Brief profile of research participants

| Participant[1] | Gender | Age | Ethnic Affiliation | Religious Denomination |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Noma | Female | 24 | Xhosa | Christian |
| Lindo | Female | 21 | Zulu | Christian |
| Khumo | Female | 23 | Zulu/ Sotho | Christian |
| Thuli | Female | 53 | Zulu | Unspecified |
| Refiloe | Female | 20 | Tswana | Christian |
| Dali | Female | 22 | Xhosa | Unspecified |
| Tshego | Female | 18 | Sepedi | Christian |
| Lolo | Male | 21 | Xhosa | Unspecified |

### 4.5.Instruments

The study used semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews to explore the participants' personal experiences, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and potentially sensitive issues

[1] Identified under pseudonym

related to bereavement resulting from a fatal RTA (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Willig, 2013). The researcher developed the interview schedule, informed by the literature review process, to guide the conversation without restricting participants' expressions (see Appendix B). Open-ended questions allowed for flexibility, and in-person interviews facilitated the observation of nonverbal communication. Given the topic's sensitive nature, this approach was chosen to create a less alienating and insensitive environment.

The interviews were held either at the participants' homes, another private location of their choosing in Johannesburg or the Wits Emthonjeni Centre, which was preferred by most of the participants. This provided a secure and enclosed environment, minimising distractions and ensuring confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Additionally, the interviews were recorded using a mobile app and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Each interview began by outlining the distress protocol (see Appendix D) to the participants, explaining how to pause or discontinue the interview if they requested. Biographical questions were then posed, such as “How old are you?”, “How long ago did the passing of __ occur?” and “What cultural group do you belong to?” Participants were encouraged to interpret the questions freely and were prompted for clarification only if they requested it or if the researcher needed to probe further on specific terms. As a result, some questions were refined to address potential misunderstandings (McGrath et al., 2019). Toward the end of the interview, the researcher asked participants to describe their experiences. This also served to help manage any distress or adverse trauma reactions before concluding the session. While concerns about researching sensitive topics like trauma are valid, studies show that most participants generally cope well, with few adverse reactions. Distressing questions can evoke emotions like grief or anger, but these feelings are often temporary and not indicative of lasting psychological harm (Draucker et al., 2009). Reflecting on the interview experience provided deeper insights for the researcher and the participant regarding their constructed experiences and narratives of ‘blackness’.

### 4.6. Procedure

After obtaining ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) at the University of the Witwatersrand, a call for research participants was made on a selected social media platform. The advertisement outlined the research objectives, eligibility criteria, and the researcher's contact information. Prospective participants who were interested contacted the researcher via email or phone. Upon contact, they received a

participant information sheet providing comprehensive details about the study requirements. After expressing their willingness to participate, the potential participants were requested to complete a consent form indicating their voluntary agreement to participate in the study. Subsequently, a mutually convenient date and time for the research activities were scheduled, along with confirming interview locations and times.

Before each interview, participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they could opt out of the study before data analysis without facing any negative consequences. We also discussed confidentiality and anonymity before the interviews began. Participants were reminded that the interviews would be audio-recorded for data analysis purposes. If participants felt unable or unwilling to answer specific questions during the interview, they were permitted to refrain from doing so. Additionally, participants were informed that they could terminate the interview if they experienced distress, and a distress protocol would be followed. At the end of the session, a brief debriefing was provided, and participants were reminded of the free counselling services available. Finally, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms when reporting the results.

### 4.7. Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, the data from the eight semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews was analysed using Clark and Braun's (2022) six-phase thematic analysis. This flexible approach allowed for identifying patterns in the data, from which subsequent interpretations were drawn (Clark & Braun, 2013; Clark & Braun, 2022). Common themes were then grouped into meaningful units (Willig, 2013), enabling coding to occur. The coded data was organised into various themes and then reviewed and modified. The data was systematically analysed, allowing the researcher to identify, interpret, describe, and report on multiple aspects of the research.

In the initial stage, the researcher familiarised themself with the data by carefully reviewing the interview transcripts and recording their observations (Clark & Braun, 2022; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The researcher then coded the data, organising it systematically to extract meaningful insights. Coding involves condensing the data to reveal underlying patterns and meanings (Clark & Braun, 2022). The subsequent step was to categorise significant data clusters into themes. These themes were developed from the codes and

further organised into broader categories that addressed the research question (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Clark & Braun, 2022). The researcher then reviewed, modified, and refined these themes as part of the third step. Next, the researcher considered how the data related to the proposed study in the fourth step (Clark & Braun, 2022). Step five entailed fine-tuning the identified themes and exploring potential subthemes (Clark & Braun, 2022). Finally, the last step involved compiling the research report, which served as the write-up for the study (Clark & Braun, 2022).

Initially, data analysis began with a thorough review of the data to help the researcher become familiar with it as a whole. This involved looking for underlying meanings within the data. The entire dataset was explored before coding commenced. The transcription process also provided the researcher with an opportunity to familiarise herself with the data.

The second stage began after the researcher familiarised herself with the data, leading to the development of initial codes. These codes helped identify interesting features within the data. The researcher then organised the data into groups, focusing on the aspects that stood out as noteworthy. Throughout this stage, it was ensured that all extracted data was thoroughly coded. After coding the data and identifying various codes, the researcher entered the third phase, where the identified codes were organized into themes. This process involved combining different codes to create a single theme. Codes that did not fit into any of the initially identified themes were categorized as miscellaneous. The researcher then preliminarily identified the main themes and sub-themes. The main themes identified were culture, gender and location, societal expectations, and labels.

During the fourth stage, the researcher refined the identified themes, creating meaningful coherence among the data. The selected themes were examined in greater detail to ensure they accurately represented the meanings throughout the entire dataset. This process provided a clear understanding of the various themes and how they collectively conveyed the overall narrative. During the fifth stage, the chosen themes were further refined. This process involved identifying the essence of each theme and determining what aspects of the extracted data were the most interesting and important. A detailed analysis of each theme was conducted, along with an assessment of how each aligned with the overall research aim. The themes were then refined, and sub-themes were identified as necessary. Sub-themes became essential, especially in cases where a main theme, like the culture theme in this study, contained a significant amount of information. Finally, in the last phase of the analysis, a

report was written to provide a clear, logical, concise, and engaging account of the narrative presented in the data.

### 4.8. Trustworthiness of the Study

We carefully considered credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the study's trustworthiness. Credibility focused on the accuracy of the study findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) to align with the participants' experiences (Gunawan, 2015). Credibility was maintained by practising reflexivity to disclose the researcher's biases and assumptions (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) through a reflexive journal and field notes. Peer reviews by the research supervisor were used to validate interpretations of the research data. Transferability aimed to demonstrate that the findings could be applied beyond the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) by providing detailed participant experiences and study context. Dependability was achieved by providing thorough methods and descriptions of the findings to enable replication by other researchers. Confirmability ensured that the findings reflected the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's (Gunawan, 2015). Additionally, confirmability is strengthened by including participant quotes in the results chapter, which support interpretations, illustrate key points, and provide evidence for identified themes (Eldh et al., 2020).

### 4.9. Ethical Considerations

Before collecting data, we obtained ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) at the University of the Witwatersrand. Once ethical clearance was secured, the study commenced. Potential participants were provided a participation information sheet to ensure they were fully informed about the study's requirements. The information sheet clearly stated that participants were free to withdraw from the study without facing any consequences. Additionally, participants could abstain from answering specific questions that they found challenging. We sought permission to record the interviews using a recording app on a cell phone. The participation information sheet also emphasised that confidentiality would be upheld to the best extent possible by storing the transcripts and audio recordings electronically in a password-protected device, accessible only to the researcher and their supervisor. Interviews were conducted privately to ensure the participant's information remained confidential and avoid disruptions. While complete anonymity could not be guaranteed due to the in-person nature of the interviews, no

identifying information was used. Pseudonyms were used to enhance anonymity further, as direct quotes may be used in the final report. Therefore, we ensured final anonymity in the research report.

The proposed study aimed to have participants explore and express their experiences of bereavement, which may have caused distress. If participants felt distressed, the Distress Protocol outlined in the Wits HREC (Non- Medical) Guidelines were followed. The Distress Protocol (see Appendix D) detailed a structured approach, explaining that the study was of medium risk, indicating that participation could evoke emotional and psychological distress. Participants were informed about the study's ethical considerations through a clearly outlined participant information sheet, which included contact details for free counselling services accessible if needed. Explicit criteria for recognising distress signals, such as shaking or trembling, were provided. Immediate response procedures were then outlined: stopping the interview immediately, assessing the participant with follow-up questions like "tell me what you are feeling right now," and reviewing whether to resume or terminate the interview based on the participant's ability to continue. If the interview was terminated, the protocol involved contacting the provided counselling services and rescheduling the interview at the participant's discretion. Additionally, with consent, participants would receive a courtesy follow-up call. None of the interviews conducted required the implementation of the distress protocol.

Participants were provided with referral information for free counselling services from Mbhalati Wellness Services on the participant information sheet if further assistance was needed. At the end of each interview, a debrief session was offered to the participants. Questions such as "Is there anything else you would like to comment on before we end the interview?" and "How did you experience the interview when asked to speak about your experience of losing a loved one?" were asked.

### 4.10. Reflexivity

In a qualitative phenomenological design, I relied on their subjective, nuanced judgment (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Acknowledging the influence of my subjectivity and context on the research process was crucial. This required recognising my biases, beliefs, and personal experiences that might align with the participants (Dodgson, 2019). I was mindful of the fact that I had not personally encountered a fatal road accident within my familial context,

nor had they worked closely with individuals impacted by such an event. Thus, I reflected on approaching the participants' experiences without drawing solely from their own. Given the sensitive nature of the bereavement topic, I anticipated that participants might undergo strong emotions during the interviews. While their encounters with loss may have facilitated empathy towards their distress, it also posed a challenge in listening to their painful experiences. Therefore, a reflexive approach to managing their emotional responses during the interviews was essential.

It was crucial to acknowledge the impact of my background as a resident of the location where the study occurred. Even though I would not be interviewing individuals I knew personally, my insider knowledge could have influenced my perceptions, potentially leading to biases and incorrect assumptions. On the other hand, my familiarity with the participants' environment could have provided valuable insights into their references, fostering a more natural and open dialogue during interviews (Swain & King, 2022). Recognising the potential influence of my perspectives on how I interpreted participants' accounts, I maintained a reflective journal to document and analyse my assumptions, impressions, and emotions (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017). Additionally, I sought guidance from my supervisor to explore how my subjectivity could impact the research.

I recognised that my background involved contemporary rather than traditional bereavement practices within my family. It was important to consider my own cultural experiences, which might have made me less familiar with the bereavement practices of the participants. Additionally, I was mindful of potential language differences and similarities. As a Setswana speaker, I understood that the participants in the study might speak other languages, such as Sesotho or Isizulu. I knew that language barriers could lead to misinterpretations, as concepts might be understood differently across languages (van Nes et al., 2010). On the other hand, sharing the same language with the participants could have improved their engagement and comfort during the study, making them feel more at ease and reflective. Cultural and language similarities and differences could have influenced how I interpreted the study's information (Espinosa et al., 2022).

# Chapter 5: Findings

The final results of this research highlight three primary themes that emerged from the exploration of bereavement.

The first theme delves into the cultural experiences surrounding bereavement, particularly within the context of ritualistic traditional activities (RTAs). This section examines various cultural practices and customs related to mourning and how they shape individuals' experiences of loss. It also broadens the perspective to include bereavement as a universal experience, exploring common emotional and psychological responses that transcend cultural boundaries.

The second theme focuses on the intersection of gender and bereavement. It investigates how societal norms influence how individuals express grief and perform their roles during periods of mourning. This theme emphasizes the distinct expectations placed on different genders and the implications these expectations have for personal experiences of loss and the expression of grief.

Finally, the third theme centers on the impact of one's geographical location on the mourning process. It explores how cultural, social, and economic factors related to various locations shape individuals' experiences of grief. This theme also addresses the social expectations that accompany mourning in different communities, as well as the labels that can affect the grieving process.

Together, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of bereavement, highlighting its complexity and the various dimensions that influence how individuals navigate their experiences of loss.

## 5.1.Cultural Bereavement Practices in the Context of RTAs

### 5.1.1. The Cultural Significance of Death in African Bereavement Rituals

Bereavement rituals encompass complex interactions that involve the deceased individual, their family, and the wider community. As participants consider their engagement with the bodies of their deceased family members, they also contemplate the connection

between this transformation of meaning and African bereavement rituals, highlighted by the significance of the cause of death and its potential meanings.

**Noma:** "*In the Xhosa culture, the body does not come into the house like every other funeral, you know, because it was an accident… it passed by but like really far so that the spirit of accidents does not infiltrate or like spill over into anyone else in the family essentially."*

In her interview, Noma was struck by how different this cultural practice is from the usual practice of bringing the body into the house. Her description conveys an association of the body as dangerous, which needs to be kept 'far' for fear of infiltrating or spilling over.

The experience of the deceased family member's body being prohibited from entering the home before a cleansing, which is performed to conceal the accident, was shared by Thuli:

*"First of all, if you die from a car accident, you are not allowed home until the cleansing. The coffin is not allowed in the house too. It is only allowed to get into the house after you have slaughtered a goat. The reason for this is to conceal the accident before you can enter."*

Noma continues to reflect on how different the funeral was because the deceased passed away in a car accident:

**Noma:** "*Because it was an accident, the men obviously went to go wash the body and whatnot, and they got up really early on the day of the funeral… Typically, you do not think of these things with every other funeral because you know that the coffin is going to be there for a couple of days, and people are going to come. But when it does not happen, it is weird because you are almost lost… They could not slaughter a cow like they typically would because of the nature of how he passed… there was a church service, but the body's already been buried. We just went there out of like, I guess, kind of thing."*

Dali shares her account of the customary burial proceedings, which typically involve opening the casket, allowing loved ones and community members to pay their respects, taking the body to the family's home, and final interment taking place after the funeral ceremony. Nevertheless, she notes that certain aspects of the process unfolded unexpectedly:

*"I think this funeral was different because it was a car accident funeral because it was not an open casket. We did not see the body. Usually, the coffin will come in the morning on the day of the funeral. They will put it in the house, and there will be a short prayer. The preacher will also come. People from the church do come during the week, but they come the day before the funeral. The coffin is there; there is like a prayer. People can get a chance to look at the body before the funeral starts, and everyone gets the chance to see the body one final time. This time around, that was not done. The casket did not come in early. It had only come during the funeral and was a closed casket. Nobody got to see it, and they quickly went and buried it before the funeral even started."*

Participants reported that specific changes were made to rituals. These changes included male family members washing the bodies of deceased family members, the body not being brought home before burial, the omission of a cow being slaughtered, the burial taking place before the funeral service, and family members and community members not being able to see the body before it is buried.

The shared experience of the body being prohibited into the home was described as a measure taken by families and communities to safeguard themselves against the reoccurrence of a car accident.

**Thuli:** *"We understand that if we bring him into the house without doing the necessary cultural rituals, another car accident may happen immediately. So that is one thing. It is an important part. If you do not do that, someone else might follow. So, the reason they slaughter the goat is to stop it. So, if you do not do that, they do not even bring the coffin. Do not do that. Do not bring the coffin to the home because you will bring the curse home."*

Thuli's account serves as a warning that conducting a ritualistic cleansing, such as the slaughtering of a goat in this case, can prevent the reoccurrence of misfortune or a "curse." She emphasises that failure to do so may lead to the inevitable infiltration of hostile forces that may lead to the reoccurrence of a car accident.

**Thuli:** "*That is another thing (laughs). From the Zulu culture, my culture. First of all, if you die from a car accident, you are not allowed home until the cleansing. The*

*coffin is not permitted in the house too. It is only allowed to get into the house after you have slaughtered a goat. The reason for this is to conceal the accident before you can enter… For instance, one of our CEOs passed away from a car accident. It was packed, and before his body entered the home, a goat was slaughtered to conceal the accident… we believe very strongly that if we do not do that, we are opening it for other generations so that it does not happen again."*

Thuli's observations on the intergenerational effects of misfortunes such as car accidents underscore the significance of traditional rituals in African culture. According to her, failing to perform these rituals can result in future generations being exposed to similar risks. This highlights the critical role that cultural practices play in mitigating the impact of adverse events.

Refiloe contemplated the intergenerational nature of unexpected and sudden fatalities resulting from car accidents, as experienced in the Tswana culture. Additionally, she grouped being gunned down, being stabbed, and suicide into the same category and explained how the spiritual connotations of unexpected and unnatural deaths follow a pattern. She describes that if the deceased member is allowed into the home, someone else may experience the same fate in upcoming months or within the same year. Alternatively, they could be gunned down, stabbed, or commit suicide.

*" So, according to my family, his dying in an unnatural way, like a car accident or if it was like suicide or those types of incidents, means if he spends the night in the house, that would mean that in the next few months or even, in the next year even someone else could die the very same way that he died. So, someone else could maybe get, like, into a car crash, or someone could even, uhm, commit suicide; it does not necessarily have to be like a car accident, but someone in the house will die in a very unnatural way. So, they believe it is like a… it has to do with like a, it is a spiritual thing basically cause then you are inviting that bad spirit into the house, you know, so yes, that is the whole thing."*

Thuli's perspective echoes Refiloe's, emphasising the importance of performing rituals to prevent the recurrence of unexpected and unnatural deaths, which may otherwise be passed on from generation to generation. Thuli also highlights the significance of traditional practices in shaping cultural beliefs and values and their role in maintaining the well-being of communities.

*"So, in the Zulu culture, they believe that if someone has died in a car accident, is gunned down, or is stabbed before they enter the house, they need to clear that because it is taken as a curse. If you do not cleanse that curse before they enter the house, that person can bring it into the home. That is why you get things like suicide, and people would say that there have never been suicides in your family, but it is happening because you never had a cleansing. We do not look at the underlying causes, but in my culture, we say no. We look back and say something happened, and someone did not do something right."*

Similarly to what has been observed in Zulu and Xhosa cultures, preventing car accidents from happening again in the Sotho culture involves performing preventative rituals. Khumo shared a personal experience where her younger brother was involved in a car accident, just like her father, who had passed away in the same manner. Highlighted in her account is the belief that if preventative rituals are not conducted, such as allowing the body of the deceased to enter the home, the same tragedy will happen again. This intergenerational misfortune of car accidents is evident in Khumo's own experience of almost losing her life in a similar way to her brother and father.

> *"Those Sotho people, my dad's side of the family, were saying that what happened to Kagiso happened because my mother did not follow that ritual and because, apparently, with culture, if someone has passed away by a car accident, their coffin does not come into the house. So, they were saying after Kagiso passed away that that happened because my mother did not follow tradition, and that the same thing would happen to me. Man… can I tell you a story? Can I tell you a story!? Did I not almost die in a car accident in twenty… when I was in grade seven? After these people said that the same thing would also happen to me, I also got into a car accident."*

In addition to engaging in preventative rituals, participants reflected on their efficacy in facilitating their loved one's journey from the physical plane to the spiritual realm, highlighting the fundamental tenet of African belief systems that the continuity of life persists beyond bodily death.

> **Refiloe:** *"So we had to go to a spiritual doctor to… make sure his spirit ascends to the spiritual realm and basically go there to consult to see if there anything that was tampered with traditionally or spiritually with regards to the car… we also had to go*

*there with this branch type of thing where he passed on to collect his spirit because according to the Tswana culture we had to go there… to collect his spirit, walk with him, take him home"*

Refiloe shared her family's experience of seeking the guidance of a traditional doctor after her father's passing to ensure that foul play was not involved. She reflects how, in the Tswana culture, it is customary to visit the accident site to facilitate the deceased's journey to the spiritual realm. After this, a branch is used to 'collect' the deceased's spirit, symbolising that the family will continue to support them on their new journey and that they are not alone. This is a way of showing that the family remains present even after death and that they will not abandon their loved one. This was also touched on briefly by Tshego:

*"I remember the part where my other uncles had to take his soul from his final resting place and, oh, from the place where the accident happened and having to transfer it to his final resting place… I just think it's more of an ancestors-related type of thing."*

According to Lolo, his uncles retrieved his father's spirit or soul at the accident site using "amahlavu," which are tree branches that were later placed atop the coffin. The purpose of this ritual was to protect against potential witchcraft by those responsible for his father's untimely demise. Putting the tree branches on the coffin was thought to serve as a deterrent to these particular individuals within the community.

*"There is that thing to collect his soul or whatever. Amahlavu. He is collected by his brothers and everything. So that is when they go and collect his… where he died! That is when they go and collect his… Yes! I do not know… his soul or his spirit. They take branches, tree branches. They take those things… those branches and put them on top of the coffin. There was this other guy who was his friend. So, when they actually… Africans, we believe in witchcraft a lot. So, she had a beef with her next-door neighbour and our front-opposite neighbour. So, they never came. I do not want to dwell on those things so much. So, with my mom, I believed her that these people are kind of involved, whatever."*

### 5.1.2. The Reconstruction of Meaning

Individuals responded differently to the loss of family members due to road accidents, resulting in varied interpretations and perceptions of their loved ones' deaths. These

differences were shaped by their personal beliefs about the causes of road accidents and how their cultural backgrounds influenced their creation of meanings.

> **Noma:** "*I get that car accidents happen… I guess you know it is recklessness, often negligence, and things like that. But sometimes you could just be in the wrong vehicle with the wrong person. That person's baggage, whether emotional or spiritual or whatever, unfortunately, is why you pass on… that causes an accident because something is following a certain person… There was a lot of spiritual stuff at play, and it was not necessarily from them in the car, but they were just collateral damage."*

Noma reflects on how she found meaning and understanding in the cause of her cousin's death. She notes an unusualness in the circumstances surrounding his passing, which has led to the belief that road accidents are not simply isolated incidents. Instead, there is a belief that other factors are at play, such as witchcraft or collateral damage from spiritual battles among individuals.

On the contrary, Thuli asserts that road accidents are caused solely by the recklessness and disregard of taxi drivers. Despite her family's belief that the accident was not a mere coincidence and urged her to seek the guidance of a traditional healer, she opted to interpret the situation based on her comprehension and ultimately find closure.

> *"It was pure negligence and nothing more. Also, there is the taxi driver's carelessness and the way that they drive. That is the thing only. I took it that way. I know some family members said accidents just cannot happen randomly, and then maybe you need to find out what happened. I just nodded and said okay, I would find out sometime. There was nothing I was going to go find out. When a person is gone, they are gone. What am I going to find out? Where will I go and speak? They will give me a reason, but what will I do with that reason? I could go to the doctor or witch doctor; what reason would they give me, and how would that help me at the end of the day? So, I took it as negligent driving as what caused the accident."*

Tshego echoes Thuli's views on road accidents but takes a more detailed approach by attributing them to driving under the influence and poorly maintained vehicles. She goes on to connect the tragic loss of life to religious beliefs, which have helped her come to terms

with her loss by accepting that it was part of God's plan and that the time had come for her loved one to depart.

> *"I think there are so many things. In this instance, it was the drunk driver. Uhm, being intoxicated does influence how you behave, and your ability to think properly, and driving requires a lot of thinking skills, so I think drinking while driving or driving while being drunk will cause an accident. I think cars malfunctioning, I guess, also causes accidents, but overall, I have just learned that it is… I have also made peace with the fact that it was his time. So, I also relate it to how God plans things out, uhm, and how that was just the moment he had to die."*

According to Lolo's reflection, road-related fatalities can be attributed to several factors, including reckless driving habits such as driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, individual misfortune, and timing that may be associated with religious beliefs. This suggests that his creation of meaning is denoted by multiple complex variables when considering the causes of road accidents.

> *"So, accidents, I think, are caused by reckless driving. Sometimes, you are just unlucky. You were at the wrong place at the wrong time. When I say reckless, I am covering everything from drinking and driving to all those things, but sometimes, it is just that it had to happen. That is just how God… that is how you had to depart. Through an accident."*

> **Refiloe:** *"I am not quite sure about car accidents in general, but that specific spot where my dad passed on was initially in Rustenburg, the place that has the most accidents. So, I think it was like it happened because there are a lot of uncollected spirits there. Someone whose spirit was not collected caused the accident, so that is the one thing."*

According to Refiloe's personal experience, accidents on roads can be attributed to the presence of spirits that are abandoned and not collected by their respective family members. The failure to collect these spirits is believed to lead to the subsequent causes of more accidents, which is how she interprets and understands the loss of her loved one.

### 5.1.3. Culture, religion, and the in-between.

The participants, who had experienced the loss of a loved one in a road accident, shared their reflections on the interplay between culture and religion. While some felt ambivalent about the expectations surrounding bereavement, others found solace and a sense of closure.

> **Khumo:** *" Listen, my dad's side of the family are cultural people; they follow the culture. My mom's side of the family are pastors, and they are Christians… the Sothos were saying that my mother when my dad passed away… apparently, there were some rituals she was supposed to do, and my mother refused to do it. My mother just refused to do it because she is Christian."*

Khumo sheds light on a complex predicament when cultural and religious beliefs intersect with bereavement practices. Specifically, her paternal family adheres to traditional rituals that must be observed, while her maternal family follows a faith-based approach. This conflict highlights the challenges of navigating cultural and religious differences in times of mourning.

> **Tshego:** *"So I'm a Christian, and so with that, as per how I decide to follow my religion, I do recognise, or I choose to recognise, the fact that I do not believe in ancestors and in practices that relate to them… navigating that period of mourning was challenging because you want to respect what they are doing, but it just doesn't align with your beliefs. It came out of respect and out of respecting the fact that they're mourning more than making it about myself and my religion, but it's something that I chose not to participate in actively."*

Tshego's experience underscores the difficulties of balancing the ambivalence of her personal convictions with respect for her family's beliefs and customs. As a Christian, Tshego does not subscribe to the veneration of ancestors or ancestral rituals. Yet, when confronted with mourning rituals that were incongruous with her own beliefs, she faced the challenge of maintaining her convictions while also showing deference to the practices of others.

Khumo's experience echoes a common struggle when personal beliefs clash with cultural traditions. Despite pressure from her family to participate in certain rituals, Khumo's mother maintained her Christian faith and refused to engage. This conflict illustrates the challenge of balancing one's values with familial expectations.

*"Listen, my dad's side of the family are cultural people; they follow the culture. My mom's side of the family are pastors; they are Christians. She was supposed to do some rituals, but my mother refused. My mother just refused to do it because she is Christian, so she was just like I do not believe in this."*

In contrast to Tshego and Khumo's religious views, Thuli maintains her traditional beliefs while exploring the cultural distinctions and practices surrounding funeral rituals and animal slaughter between the Zulu and Swati people.

**Thuli:** *"With the Zulu, there would be goats, and they would say that a cow should be bought and that on the day of the funeral, they would insist that because he was head of the household, it would be slaughtered. The Swatis do not do that. They only use a goat or a sheep, whether big or small. They just use that. Irrespective. It came as a surprise, which is why I also think there are things I thought they were doing very casually. My cousin used to say that in Swati culture, when someone dies, it is as if a cat has died. To them, it does not mean a thing. To us, it is a big thing."*

Thuli observes that the Zulu community values the deceased's status as the head of the household and prefers to use a larger animal, such as a cow, for the funeral. Conversely, the Swati people do not adhere to this custom and are satisfied with using any animal, regardless of its size or status. Thuli emphasizes the divergent attitudes towards death in these two cultures, with the Swati treating it with less significance than in her own culture, where death is a substantial event that elicits discomfort.

For some participants, incorporating traditional practices with faith-based methods provided a sense of solace and obligation. They believed they were fulfilling their duty and aiding their departed loved ones in transitioning to the next stage of life.

**Refiloe:** *"My family is both religious and spiritual…I think it was very comforting for me. I am not going to lie because it left me feeling like I am doing something right for my dad, you know. It felt like I was making his journey towards being a part of the spiritual realm easier for him."*

**Lolo:** *"My uncles from my dad's family are quite religious, so the Methodist church carried out the funeral. We also did the umhlambe we garaaf, where we slaughtered a sheep."*

Lolo's family incorporates both traditional and religious practices in bereavement practices in how the religious aspect oversaw the proceedings of the funeral, which was followed by the traditional cleansing. Thuli, on the other hand, found the incorporation of the church and her Zulu background problematic:

*"The Zulu culture respects death a lot. His family respects the church more than the culture and the family. That is what I hated a lot… It is the family that gives the church so much power and freedom. Like in my house, you cannot come and lay down rules. I am the one who is supposed to set the rules and say that this is how things are supposed to run, but they allow such things. They go to twelve apostles. That church is very … Yoh, I am trying to find the right word to explain. But they allow them. Yes. They are autocratic. It is them, their beliefs, and the family because they all attend that church. Then they cling onto that, and the church must tell us if we can do this."*

Thuli expresses frustration with how her husband's family prioritised the church over her cultural traditions and family values. This highlights a conflict between cultural values and the influence religion has over family dynamics. Thuli states that the church held too much power and autonomy within the family, restricting their ability to make decisions and set rules. Subsequently, she criticises the authoritarian nature of the church and how it imposes its beliefs on the bereaved.

In conclusion, the participants consistently conveyed a sense of ambivalence towards entrenched traditional beliefs and practices, indicating a conflict between the cultural significance of these customs and their values and autonomy. This ambivalence frequently precipitated an internal struggle as they endeavoured to harmonise deeply ingrained traditions with their yearning for personal expression.

### 5.2.Gendered Mourning

The female participants in the study, who comprised of most of the sample, expressed their grief differently based on their gendered identities. Women in the study described being

excluded from traditional mourning rituals. However, they developed their ways of coping with grief and finding meaning in their experiences. These unique expressions of grief were shaped by the participants' gender identity and their experiences of exclusion from traditional bereavement practices. Noma, for example, commented:

> *"The men went obviously to go wash the body and whatnot and then got up early on the day of the funeral, and only then did they dig the grave, and they had to bury him, and we could not go. We had to stay at the house… The reason women or females did not ever go to the graveyard is that you are givers of life, right because you give birth and whatnot, so being in spaces of death or anything surrounding death was avoided. So, based on that explanation that I got, it made sense to me**...** Also, typical women are more emotional than men. And there are certain things that, as a woman, I understand I will never take part in**.** It was okay. I had to be okay anyway because all the other women are okay, you know what I mean."*

Noma's account of her experience as a Xhosa woman emphasises the typicality and shared knowledge with other women in her community. Noma highlights how being a woman and performing mourning is a customary practice and also explains how women were excluded from road-accident-related bereavement practices due to the stereotypical notion that women expressed their emotions more openly than men and because of their biological functions. She says she is "okay" with these practices, but her comment that "I had to be okay" underscores her experience of not being able to impact or change gendered practices: she has no choice but "to be okay".

Lolo, the sole male participant, recounted observing another man crying:

> *"He started crying. That was the first time seeing him cry, and it was very hard to see a man that old cry."*

Lolo's experience witnessing a man cry was novel and exceptional, which he emphasised by pointing out the atypical nature of an individual of that gender and age group shedding tears. His remark suggested that crying is socially constructed as an acceptable emotional expression, primarily for women and children.

Similarly to Noma, Dali echoes an account about the exclusion of women from certain bereavement practices and provides further insight into the cultural practices and gender dynamics within the Xhosa community:

> "*Only the men were allowed to take it and go, and if they wanted to see the body, they could. Apparently, women are too frail… so only the men went out to the graves… the women waited, and then they came back, and then the funeral proceeded while the body was already buried. Honestly, I did not like that. I did not like it … but I wanted to see the body. They were like, no, you cannot; it is only the men who can… I was very upset about that because I was asking who determines who is strong enough to see the body. Like, what is this situation? But I guess it is just a cultural thing. They are just like no, it is just how it is done."*

Unlike Noma, Dali directly challenges normative expectations of women who are mourning. Due to her gender, Dali is prevented from participating in certain rituals that are reserved only for men, such as viewing the body of the deceased and attending the burial. Dali questions the view that women should be passive in the grieving process, as they are expected to wait at home and conform to patriarchal customs, leaving no room to question cultural or gendered practices. Dali continues:

> **Dali:** "*I am the person's relative, so don't I have a say in how I get to grieve during this time? People should be more accommodating to that and not make decisions on my behalf, but overall, I just chose to try and respect their beliefs. I should go to the burial at some point, even though it was only for other men. I should go because I need to see the body, so I should just get a chance to do it. But overall, I just chose to respect the customs."*

The absence of agency for Dali created a feeling of disconnection from the community, underscoring a loss of personal identity. Although she challenges gendered customs, she concludes that she "chose" to respect customs: by making this her choice, she regains some agency in the mourning process. The collective experience of passivity and the obligatory adherence to conventional customs was commonly shared.

> **Thuli:** *"There were many things that I did not like, and then my mom said, ' You do not say a word; if you lose a husband, you do not. ' And then she said, ' Once you say*

*a word, you will never stop talking. You will keep talking for the rest of your life, ' but then I watched in disbelief."*

For some participants, navigating the bereavement process involved constant negotiation between asserting their autonomy and adhering to cultural norms and obligations. Thuli, for example, recounted her decision to defy cultural expectations by attending her brother's wedding as a widow, which traditionally would have been prohibited outside of designated times for public appearances:

"*Some of the things like not going out at night and you are not supposed to attend certain functions… for instance, my brother was getting married, it was happening in the evening. I had no choice but to attend; his family was still around. I remember when I left. I told them it was my brother and there was no other option. I did not worry about what they thought because my brother was getting married, and the service started at 6 pm (laughs). So, what was I supposed to do? Not go? So, I went there and came back at midnight"*

Thuli expressed her disapproval of certain mourning customs in her family's Zulu culture, which she deemed severe and rigid. In her late husband's Swati culture, she found solace in the absence of such rituals and practices. She contemplates the unpleasant experiences she would have had to endure had she adhered to them:

*"The Zulu culture is very harsh, and it is also very strict. They kept asking me every morning to wake up and bathe in cold water, which was cold. I ignored them, and they asked me if [my in-laws] did that, and I said no, they did not. They said that when I get back [to KZN], I have to wake up every morning at five o clock and open the shower with cold water. Listen, I would not even. I would not bathe in cold water if it were fifty degrees outside. Never, I would not, never! That weekend [in KZN], they told me to go outside and wash with cold water, and when I got back [to Johannesburg], I should do it every morning. I said yes, but after that, I never did it again. Imagine if I was home and there was someone else around. That was something that I would have been expected to do every day. That is why I say that the Zulu culture is very…. They are oppressive. In the Zulu culture, they tell you must mourn for three years. I knew I would be in a black robe, maybe for two years. Also, there are seasons when you cannot remove it, like in summer, and you can only*

*remove it in winter. I was happy that I was not practicing Zulu culture because they were not doing that on this side. The Zulu culture is very big; you must cleanse and do rituals for this and that. All those kinds of things. So luckily, in SiSwati, they do not practice all of that."*

Thuli describes facing significant challenges reconciling her personal beliefs with the expectations of her society and cultural obligations. She is vocal about her frustrations with cultural expectations, which include prohibitions on going out at night, prohibited attendance at certain functions, bathing in cold water, and wearing mandatory black mourning attire. Furthermore, Thuli contends with the pressure to conform to societal expectations and cultural traditions, which she finds irksome and restrictive. These observations testify to the difficulty of comprehending and accepting cultural practices.

Thuli's actions to safeguard herself against the vulnerabilities of being a widow were evident. Her financial independence served as a protective measure against undue influence, as suggested by her response. This highlights the significance of financial autonomy in mitigating the adverse impacts of her gender making her vulnerable:

*"Especially when you lose a husband and stuff like that, they control you because they know that you need the stuff, and you need money."*

Thuli's emphasis on the importance of financial self-sufficiency and self-reliance in the context of bereavement underscores the role of these factors in providing women with a sense of agency and autonomy. She reflects on how the loss of a husband can lead to dependency that families can exploit and how societal norms and expectations can reinforce these power dynamics. By controlling one's financial situation, individuals are less vulnerable to familial forces that may seek to exert control over women's decision-making processes.

**Lolo:** *"I have to go and learn more about my culture. About what happens when somebody dies, and it is very important to me as an African man because I am twenty now. In the next twenty years, my uncles will be in their seventies and eighties, and I will be the one everyone will be looking at and imagine somebody has passed away, and I am clueless about what is going on."*

Lolo's reflection on his male identity and role during his time of mourning led him to consider his place within intergenerational culture. Following his father's passing, he felt

compelled to delve deeper into his cultural heritage, uphold traditional customs, and embrace his masculinity to safeguard and impart knowledge to future generations.

In conclusion, the differing perspectives of male and female participants highlight the deep-rooted nature of gender roles in cultural mourning practices. While this section provides limited focus on how gender relates to RTAs. The data gathered still conveys significant bereavement experiences overall.

Female participants expressed a common feeling of exclusion from traditional rituals, reflecting patriarchal norms that dictate who is allowed to engage with death and the manner in which they do so. Many women navigate their grief within the limitations of prescribed roles. Conversely, the male perspective is more concerned with societal norms regarding emotional expression, illustrating the restrictive qualities of traditional masculinity that discourage emotional openness. Furthermore, the expectation placed on bereaved men to uphold cultural traditions often prevents them from challenging these norms.

The narratives from both genders reveal that they experience grief within the confines of their cultural identities, but they do so in notably different ways. For women, the challenge often lies in their limited access to communal rituals, while men struggle with the pressures of emotional restraint. This dichotomy illustrates a complex interplay of agency, obligation, and identity, emphasising the need for a more inclusive understanding of grief that recognises and values the diverse expressions and experiences shaped by gender.

### 5.3.Social Expectations of Bereavement following RTA death

Participants engaged in a reflective analysis of their diverse encounters with manifestations of grief, observing that their reactions were contingent on their location. Consequently, they were compelled to negotiate societal expectations, adhere to conventional grieving practices, and re-integrate into communal and personal spheres of existence.

> **Noma**: *"So my family is based in the Northern Cape. So, I was not privy to much of what may have happened before the burial because I was here in Joburg. I could have arrived the day before, or at most, it would have been two days before, you know, so a lot of stuff happens during the week when you are still planning to go down.*

**Dali:** "*When we do have a death, family comes together. We all go back to Eastern Cape, where my grandparents live. Relatives come to visit, and people from the village come too. We have praise every time someone comes to visit. We will have a prayer. They will come and offer condolences and stuff, and then we will all come in the house and sing some church songs, and then they'll pray. And sometimes they offer to help with things like cooking and organising the funeral.*"

Participants illustrate the common practice of returning to their homeland for funerals after experiencing a loss to maintain cultural customs. They highlight the sense of togetherness and assistance evident as relatives and community members come together to show support, help with practical arrangements, and participate in traditions, prayers, and cooking, demonstrating a strong sense of unity and solidarity during grief. For some, participating in family rituals underscores the difficulties of being geographically distant from certain customs. Consequently, they could not fully partake in the preparations and activities leading up to the event.

**Noma:** "*There is no culture in Joburg. You know what I mean. There's Joburg culture, but it is not real, you know what I mean. Having grown up here and not being as exposed to certain things makes you feel somewhat deprived when you are around people that have been exposed to such things."*

Noma expresses dissatisfaction with the cultural experiences in Johannesburg, a metropolis in Gauteng, as she relays feeling a lack of genuine richness and limited exposure to mourning rituals compared to those immersed in diverse practices. It seems that Noma is expressing a yearning for a more profound cultural connection and a sense of being excluded or disadvantaged in some respect.

In juxtaposition, Thuli related the experience of her shame to her geographical location and the desire to escape it. She describes feeling a strong sense of shame in her previous environment but finding relief when she moved to Cosmo City, a multiclass and multiracial city located North of Johannesburg, where she felt anonymous and free from judgment during her grief.

**Thuli:** "*That is the part that I hate a lot… there is a level of shame. I escaped shame when I moved to Cosmo City. It helped me a lot with shame because they did not know*

*me. It was a new community. No one knew you, and we were all from different places. When I knocked off from work or got off the bus, I would be greeted welcomingly. Hi, how are you? You know that kind of thing. Nobody knew me. Because then I could leave freely without anybody judging me. That is why I finally decided Cosmo City was the right place to escape all these things. And really, that is how I escaped*."

Participants articulated the complex task of navigating societal expectations while concurrently grappling with the necessity to navigate their grief. This introduced the concept of coping and adapting to loss within their narratives.

**Refiloe:** "*I could not mourn properly, and then it was the academic year. I had to focus on my academics. I cannot say I have mourned*."

**Noma:** "*But I wasn't there for that because I had to return to Joburg. To real life, it was November, peak exam season… so there was that."*

Participants mentioned the pressure and duty felt regarding academic responsibilities, which were taking priority over their grieving process. The reference to the peak exam season and the idea of returning to "real life" implies an apparent conflict between the demands of everyday life and the need to grieve, suggesting that these two experiences are mutually exclusive.

Other participants explore the contrast between coping with personal grief and adapting to the normalcy of life. Underlying was the societal pressure on individuals, particularly women, to suppress their emotions and quickly move on from difficult experiences.

**Tshego:** "*One thing about society is that, yes, they will let you express your emotions, like crying, of course. But after that, you are supposed to be this strong woman, and you are supposed to forget. OK, fine, it happened. You are supposed to be fine; it happened. Now, we move on. Do we not even share how we felt? What was it like? How are we feeling? … It is like every person must grieve in their corner, and then when you come back together, it is just all jokes. And it is like we are just over it. Let us just move on*."

**Khumo:** "*We moved on. We really moved on. I am not good with words, but I know that life went on. People forgot except for the people who used to live with him every day. We did not forget cause we… There was a gap. Everybody else they moved on, which is fair, but life went on*."

The phrases "life went on" and "let us just move on" as expressed by some participants, convey a sense of resignation or detachment from the ongoing lives of others. It seems that others have moved on while they are still profoundly affected by the loss of a family member. This suggests that within grieving, there is a lack of genuine emotional expression and support within society, with individuals expected to grieve in isolation and then resume normalcy without addressing their feelings.

In contrast to the experiences of female participants, Lolo emphasises the importance of solitary grieving.

**Lolo:** "*I feel you should go through the grieving process alone. Society maybe might be… You must go through the process alone, and if you feel like you need help, that is when you can reach out to people. However, I feel like you must go through everything alone*."

Lolo believes it is crucial to process emotions and feelings independently and only seek help from others when necessary. Lolo values self-reliance and believes individual introspection is essential before involving others in grieving.

Noma reflects on the intricacies of coping with the loss of a loved one and the subsequent adjustments that come with it.

**Noma:** "*Learning how to be and exist is tough and weird. I was with my family earlier this year after my uncle's passing, and there's so much, it's in the little things that you can point out, you know? Like, ugh, if he were here, he would've done that. That would've been taken care of. But now, here we are, and it's not done. And now, what now, who?"*

Noma contemplated the voids of 'little things" left by the departed, evident in the everyday aspects of life. Her contemplation of "what now" and "who" signifies the challenge

of moving forward after a loss and seeking direction amidst grief. It also suggests the difficulty of filling the deceased individual's role within a family.

Participants reflect on the difficulties of adjusting to life after experiencing profound loss.

> **Thuli:** "*That is the difficult part. When you have to do things at the house, it triggers you. I remember, at some stage, there was no light in the bathroom. It would trigger that I am now expected to learn to change the lightbulb. He used to go when there were meetings at school to fetch reports and stuff like that. That was one difficult part that I had to adjust to, along with the responsibilities. The responsibilities changed from paying school fees to the house and this and that. Those things made it harder because thinking about going through all those processes takes you back to asking why. Why should you go, and then now I have to stay behind and do all of those things? It takes time*."

> **Noma**: "*It is tough because that person is gone. What do you mean I need to live? What do you mean I need to figure it out? I must wake up tomorrow and do what exactly, you know what I mean, but life is moving on because even if I say to you right, for example, uhm man, I lost this person, oh I am so sorry, but like life goes on. You will go on about your day, and there is no skin off your back. You might feel that sympathy, but it is whatever.*"

Thuli and Noma express profound sorrow and confusion as they confront the deep loss in their lives. Noma struggles with frustration and resignation and reconciling her pain with the ongoing demands of life. Meanwhile, Thuli grapples with the emotional and practical challenges of taking on responsibilities that were once her husband's, feeling overwhelmed and doubting her abilities in these new roles.

Participants contemplated the internal conflict of coping with grief and loss while contending with societal pressures to move forward and resume everyday life swiftly. Pressures to exhibit specific behaviours, such as crying and wearing black clothing, as a way of grieving and society's incapacity to grasp the impact of mourning and the accompanying pressure not to let grief become a reason for falling short of societal standards.

**Tshego:** "*There is a lot that society attributes to mourning, and it made it difficult for me because I did not do what was… what looked like mourning essentially… It was very weird because I could feel the societal pressure to want to cry even though I did not feel that I could cry. Society made it difficult to navigate that period because society made it seem as if certain things needed to be done, like crying and wearing black clothing. And I just did not fit into society's mold for me."*

Noma also reflects on the experience of grieving and the search for closure after a funeral:

**Noma:** *"Funerals provide some sort of closure. You are forced to accept once the body is buried, but while it is still like chilling somewhere, it is a bit weird, you know. I suppose they guide when to… not snap out of it but to get back into it. Get back into life and figure things out without this person. So, when that is delayed, it is weird because now you are just like, how long do I get to feel like this? For how long is this all going to take? I need it all to stop. But it is crazy because it is not like post-funeral you are fine again, right? You just understand that that switch has gone off, to say okay, wrap it up now. You need to. You will deal with it, but we must get back into everyday life right now."*

The significance of physically burying a loved one is emphasised as a means of finding closure and returning to 'normal' life for Noma. Conflicting emotions of having to move on due to societal expectations while grappling with discomfort and uncertainty are discussed, along with the challenge of readjusting and acknowledging the prolonged mourning process due to the profound nature of the loss.

The burial of the body brought closure for some, while for others, the grieving process only truly began once the supporting members had left following the funeral. Initially, the presence of many people in the home served as a distraction from the feelings of loss and emptiness. However, upon their departure, the reality of the loss became more pronounced, highlighting the non-linear nature of grief.

**Lolo:** "*So, in those two weeks, because there were many people in the house, I did not feel that void. But the grieving started after everyone left. So, my aunts from Eastern Cape went back and everybody. I started feeling the enormity of everything. And*

*going back to school… so he used to accompany me to school, so that is when I felt like ok, he is no more*."

Refiloe initially found comfort in the condolences and support offered by others, but as time passed, she began to feel overwhelmed and isolated.

**Refiloe:** "*Obviously, you get people that come to the house, and then they say we are so sorry! Your dad was a good person, blah blah. They tell you things that you know. I also think at first it was kind of comforting, not going to lie, but hearing the same thing repeatedly made me want to detach from the rest of the people, just want not to be a part of the community of that specific society. Even people who did not know my dad came to say those things…*"

While she appreciated the kind words and visits from people expressing their sympathy for her father, the repetitive nature of these interactions became overwhelming, ultimately causing her to withdraw from the community in search of relief from societal expectations.

Khumo also reflects on the challenge of meeting societal expectations regarding the grieving process.

**Khumo:** "*I feel like they, if you've never experienced loss, you would think that that week when you are preparing for the funeral, that is the period you have to grieve and get over it. If someone takes more than that, you start labelling them. You label them because that is not your reality, and you have never experienced it. I saw this with my mom and how her sister, her sister is a nurse and the comments she would make. This is years later, and my dad cannot understand why my mother years later she is still not ok. And I am like, you do not understand because that is not your reality*."

She highlights how societal norms often lead those who have not experienced loss to underestimate the depth and duration of grief, expecting individuals to move on within a specific time frame. This lack of support from others, especially concerning sudden and violent losses, exacerbates the struggle of being labelled or misunderstood by those unable to grasp the long-term impact of such experiences.

Thuli expresses a deep fear and discomfort with drawing attention and being identified by something, such as wearing black clothing, that signifies a personal loss.

> **Thuli:** "*Wearing those black things… I do not know; I am just scared of them because everyone can tell. Not to say that I am scared of them. I am scared of attention. I do not like attention. So now that thing automatically says this one lost a husband. And when you go to work, everyone else, even people that did not recognise you, will recognise you. That thing does that, and it sets you apart from others and says this is what happened. And then others do not want to be close to you because they think that you are cursed.*"

It illustrates a deep sense of isolation and alienation, highlighting how societal judgement and stigma can lead to feelings of being labelled or misunderstood. She conveys an awareness of the pain associated with being perceived as different or cursed, expressing a deep desire to escape the burden of unwanted attention or pity from others.

Drawing attention to societal and cultural support disparity, Noma highlights the solace and direction in cultural traditions following a loss.

> **Noma:** "*Culturally, I think ironically… I think the cultural aspect provides more comfort because of the number of things done traditionally. Those help you understand and come to terms with the fact that, okay, you have lost someone you know, so we are going to do A, B, and C post-burial to ease you back into reality*."

Noma stresses the significance of these traditions in aiding individuals as they navigate the loss of a loved one and in offering a structure for managing the grieving process. She regards these cultural customs as valuable resources for facilitating the transition back to everyday life after experiencing a loss.

Dali found it challenging to address the passing of her loved one in a car accident. She felt that her community and society, in general, avoided discussing the circumstances of her family member's death.

> **Dali:** "*With these types of funerals, people can try to… what is the word? They tried to dance around the issue. They do not want to be very direct. They are using a lot of euphemisms. They are trying to avoid the situation at all costs. I did not find that*

*quite as comforting. They did not want to talk about how it happened and stuff of that nature. They did not want to mention the car accident. They did not want to mention details.*"

Thuli expressed numerous negative associations with grief after road accidents, exploring societal expectations and the responses from others to her mourning. Her narrative reflects the unease and frustration of navigating others' reactions and the scrutiny of being seen as an example, highlighting the challenge of maintaining agency and personal control while coping with loss.

**Thuli: "***Yes, there are a lot! Dying through a car accident, I am not sure why, especially with us Blacks. I do not know why. The expectation is that you need to be hurting for longer because you were not expecting it. You do not want to stay in one place. You want to move on and all those things, but whenever you go, people are like, oh. Or you will be called, oh, sit here. I would go, and they would say I should just sit and not do anything. Oh, shame. If there is a funeral, they ask me to sit there and tell others, "Oh, remember her. I would sit but hated it because they made me an example. Every time, do you remember D***? This is his wife. Remember D****, who died in a car accident? You can see that there is life, etc. No, I do not like those things. But it still lingers."*

Dali draws attention to the societal and communal unease regarding the discussion of fatalities resulting from road accidents. She emphasises that the context in which a person dies can significantly impact the willingness of individuals to engage in open discourse.

**Dali:** "*How he died made many people uncomfortable. I think people were just uncomfortable approaching the topic head-on. If he had died through a sickness, people would be more open to talking about that, but I think how he died just… people are uncomfortable with it*."

As Thuli navigated her grief and reintegrated into society, she opened up about the stigma associated with losing a loved one in a car accident or sudden death. She expressed how this experience made her feel labelled and judged solely based on her loss, highlighting the complex emotions and societal perceptions attached to such circumstances.

**Thuli:** "*It is always on your forehead that you have lost someone! Especially in car accidents and sudden deaths. It is a stigma, but then, normally, what can I say? It is… people feel sorry for you, but I think it goes on and on and on, but they feel sorry for you. But they look at you as someone who lost someone through a car accident with small children, and then you have to go through that process. They feel sorry for you. I think it is like that.*"

**Khumo:** "*The accident does not just kill one person. If, in the event, there was one person, it does not. It does not*."

Khumo conveys the far-reaching and complex consequences of road accidents. She describes how the aftermath extends beyond the immediate impact on the deceased individual and expresses her difficulty comprehending the full scope of the repercussions.

# Chapter 6: Discussion

The study explored the sociocultural experiences of bereavement in the context of road accident-related deaths and examined the dynamics of family interactions. This chapter discusses the implications of the findings concerning existing literature. The discussion chapter centres on three predominant and meaningful themes from the participants' reflections. Furthermore, potential avenues for future research are considered, along with the limitations of this study.

## 6.1. Cultural Bereavement Practices in the Context of RTA Deaths

Participants explored their interactions from a sociocultural perspective, examining the implications and adaptations for burials following road accident fatalities. They reflected on their connections with the deceased, the significance of dying in a road accident, and diverse cultural rituals.

The participants described how cultural expectations influenced their reflections during grieving. Their narratives revealed that culture shaped their meaning-making from road accident deaths and impacted their grief reactions. Echoing Aksos-Efe et al. (2018), participants were deeply affected by shared cultural values, norms, and behavioural patterns. This study illustrated the interdependent relationship between culture and the grieving process, significantly shaping participants' bereavement experiences.

Most participants reported that variations were particularly evident in road accident deaths, which were found to alter both the perception of death and the impact of the bereavement process. Contrary to distinguishing fatal road accidents as a separate category, participants perceived such incidents as part of what they termed "unnatural deaths". This perception highlights the nuanced understanding of mortality shaped by cultural factors. Road accidents, often viewed as common occurrences, were described in participants' narratives as sudden deaths carrying significant emotional and social implications. Similar findings have been documented in African literature, indicating that sudden losses were seen as impurities, bad omens and misfortunes, contributing to a sense of vulnerability and taint within the grieving individuals and the broader community (Ekore & Lanre-Abass, 2016; Martin et al., 2013).

The narratives shared indicated that without proper safeguards, such events can have far-reaching consequences. Participants illustrated three focal points: the transmission of death as a contaminant, roles, rituals and customs and the intersection of culture and community. According to Yawa (2010) , death leads to ill fate within physical and social environments. This study extends this concept to the transgenerational risk of misfortune, where future generations may inherit this risk if precautions are not taken. Participants highlighted that rituals and customs help counter transgenerational contamination, facilitating the deceased's transition to the spiritual realm as ancestors. Makgahlela et al. (2021) explain that these rituals and customs are crucial for post-bereavement adjustment, preventing the deceased's spirit from becoming a wandering spirit and tormenting surviving family members. This study also illustrated the transformative meaning of death and its interplay with culture and community, supporting the notion of African duality, where the dead and the living have reciprocal and unifying functions .

The narratives demonstrate the interconnectedness between the living and the departed, emphasising the cyclical nature of existence beyond physical death. Some participants engaged in rituals and consulted traditional healers to understand the deaths of the deceased, considering factors like witchcraft or foul play, aligning with literature on the influence of witchcraft or "umeqo" (Hutchings, 2007, p. 190). These findings extend to road accidents, viewed beyond environmental, road, vehicle and human factors. A few participants described guiding the deceased into ancestor roles by gathering the spirit of the deceased family members from accident sites using branches or "amahlavu" to symbolise "bringing them back home", ensuring that they are "beside them". Additionally, they used rituals to deter those believed to be responsible for the deaths. This study builds on Kamwendo and Manyeruke's (2017) examination of traditional power, highlighting the importance of rituals in alleviating anxieties from belief in evil spirits.

Participants provided insights into the therapeutic nature of cultural processes, rituals, and guidelines for some participants, helping them find closure and maintain emotional connections with the deceased. Interpretations of the underlying causes of road accidents varied. While recklessness and negligence were common attributions to these incidents, some considered deeper, unforeseeable spiritual factors. Individual beliefs rooted in realism and religious faith shaped these interpretations, resulting in diverse perspectives on finding meaning and closure. These findings challenge Krywhich et al.'s (2018) analysis that violent

deaths often lead the bereaved to feelings of meaninglessness. The disparity in conclusions may alternatively stem from differences in the construction of meaning between Western cultures and traditional African cultures. This research highlights the complexity of understanding and interpreting road accident causes influenced by multiple intricate variables.

The intersection of culture and religion posed significant challenges in interpreting death as participants grappled with conflicting norms and values. Intergenerational disparities, familial expectations surrounding ancestor veneration, related customs, and deeply rooted religious beliefs led to discomfort and uncertainty. Previous research indicates that most South Africans adhere to cultural and religious beliefs, often resulting in conflicting interests (Brittian et al., 2013). Participants shared varied experiences dealing with syncretism; some found it harmonious, while others faced notable challenges. These challenges were consistent with Yawa's (2010) observations: the interconnectedness of the community meant participants felt obliged to engage in traditional practices and rituals, not necessarily out of choice, but to honour traditional obligations and avoid conflict. This finding showed that participation was more a matter of obligation than willingness.

The study explores the challenges of reconciling African spirituality with mainstream Christianity. Narratives highlighted the church's complex influence on family dynamics, often seen as restrictive and authoritarian, resulting in a loss of autonomy for the bereaved. Extending Zwana's (2009) notion of "creative tension", the findings illustrate the progressive tension between Christianity and traditional practices. Christianity often views these practices as sacrilegious without developing new forms to satisfy African spirituality. Cultural contradictions were evident, with some participants noting that specific cultural practices, like slaughtering a goat instead of a cow to honour the head of a household, were considered inappropriate, disrespectful, and offensive. This finding highlights that varying religious and traditional interpretations lead to divergent attitudes and discomfort.

A recurring narrative revealed that changes in bereavement practices and physical separation from the deceased can lead to rituals that do not fully meet the needs of the bereaved due to a loved one dying through a road accident. These included not being able to view the deceased's body, the burial taking place before funeral proceedings, and the body not being allowed to enter the home. This finding highlights the confusion and inability to

find closure when cultural practices do not permit individuals to engage in their grieving processes in a fulfilling way. This contradicts the intended purpose of cultural traditions, which aim to provide guidance and comfort during grieving. Similar to the findings of Martin et al. (2013), the findings show that having the deceased person's body is important for initiating the grieving process, and without this, the psychosocial needs of individuals are not met.

### 6.2. Gendered Mourning

A key finding of this study is that gendered identities shaped participants' expressions of grief. Most of the female participants reflected on their marginalised construction of bereavement that differed from men, primarily due to their exclusion from certain rituals, such as viewing the deceased's body or attending burials, which are roles traditionally carried out by male family members. The only widow in the study highlighted that these practices extended to prohibitions on going out at night, attending certain functions, bathing in cold water, and wearing mandatory black mourning attire. These findings align with Martin et al.'s (2013) research, highlighting the political prioritisation of male elders in patriarchal family structures and their influence on mourning rituals. This study also reveals the impact of stereotypical and misogynistic beliefs, suggesting that women are seen as more susceptible to being overwhelmed by emotions, particularly in witnessing injuries sustained by loved ones in road accidents.

Furthermore, participants associated the exclusion of women with their reproductive capabilities and biological functions, citing potential adverse outcomes, such as the spreading of bad omens or harming unborn children. This research highlights deep-seated African customs and unwritten laws enforcing women’s submission. Some of the female participants expressed having no choice but to accept prescribed social roles due to patriarchal systems. As Khosa-Nkatini (2022) points out, black African cultures remain male-dominated, significantly contributing to the discrimination and silencing of women in bereavement practices. An interesting observation by the female participants was their passive response to bereavement, legitimising personal pain but leading to a loss of identity due to disconnection from the community. Similar findings in the literature highlight this lack of agentic positionality (Khosa-Nkatini, 2022; Kotzé et al., 2012; Makatu et al., 2008).

Despite the lack of agentic positionality, female participants frequently referred to "choosing" to honour traditions to reclaim some control during mourning. This study expands on prior research, investigating the concept of positionality as examined by Davies (as cited by (Kotzé et al., 2012), emphasising agentic positionality. This finding highlighted that female participants' decisions may reflect the limited options available to women, where the "choice' to uphold traditions shows how contexts have shaped them. Alternatively, this may reflect their exercising of agency, emphasising active choice. Either interpretation highlights the balance between asserting independence and upholding cultural expectations and responsibilities. The study aligns with Nhlapo's (2023) findings, suggesting women navigate patriarchal systems and participate willingly as a form of respect. However, this study highlighted that compliance stemmed from a lack of opportunity to question practices and fear of potential consequences for defiance, especially regarding protective rituals.

This study found that mourning may have been distinctly gendered for the male participant, with the sole male participant expressing discomfort at witnessing elderly men cry in response to their grief. This reaction underscores the societal construction of masculinities that discourage men from openly expressing emotions, particularly through crying, which is often perceived as a sign of weakness. This research highlights that such perceptions starkly contrast with traits of strength and emotional resilience typically associated with masculinity. Similar findings have been indicated in the literature, indicating that societal norms reinforce traditional conceptions of masculinity, perpetuating the notion that "boys do not cry, men do not shed tears" (Ezeugwu & Ojedokun, 2020).

This highlights the complex interplay of gender roles within societies. This research also builds on previous studies showing that differences in crying behaviour between men and women are not solely due to biological factors but also gender-role-consistent patterns of emotional expression influenced by societal socialisation and evaluation as individuals age (Sharman et al., 2019). This illustrates the notion that restricting males' emotional expressions, such as crying, constitutes overt gender discrimination. For males, this may indicate difficulty engaging in loss-oriented coping during bereavement, which involves expressing emotions and actively acknowledging one's grief. Such beliefs enforce restrictive stereotypes about how males should behave, invalidating their emotions and discouraging vulnerability. This highlights the broader societal implications of reinforcing rigid gender roles and stigma that reinforces the "silent" problem in African communities (Watkins et al.,

2017). Nonetheless, the male participant valued masculine performativity and its importance in accessing cultural capital, continuing legacies and preserving intergenerational cultural practices.

### 6.3. Societal Expectations of Bereavement Following an RTA Death

The narratives shared by the participants underscored how the places where they experienced their grief influenced their expressions of it. This study revealed that, in addition to the transformative significance of deaths related to road accidents, the environment in which participants engaged with their grief was also tied to their specific location. As a result, the research provided deeper insight into how individuals navigate societal expectations, conform to them, and assimilate into communal and personal realms following a loss.

Participants described a distinctive aspect of grieving in South Africa: journeying back to ancestral lands to reconnect with cultural heritage. In alignment with Baloyi (2014), distance is not seen as a barrier to attending African funerals in South Africa. Communal mourning is viewed as a welcome obligation in African cultures. Most participants in the current study also viewed this as positive, indicating that returning to one's homeland for burials upholds cultural traditions. This study illustrates unity, where family and community members come together to offer support, assist with funeral arrangements, and participate in customs, prayers, and meal preparation. This expands on the communal aspect of African collectivism, underscored through literature by emphasising community and collective mourning as crucial features of African bereavement (Aiseng, 2024; Thomas, 2021).

This study's findings highlight the challenges of fully engaging in customs due to geographic distance and urban life’s demands. Some participants portrayed urban areas as lacking cultural richness and inadequate space for individuals engaging with their grief. This aligns with existing literature, highlighting Black Africans’ reliance on rituals to demonstrate social cohesion (Aiseng, 2024). It emphasises the significance of communal mourning in reaffirming social identity and organisation. Participants grappled with balancing their "cultural selves" and "urban selves," often finding themselves in ambivalent positions as societal expectations conflicted with personal grieving processes. This conflict may stem from contrasting collectivist and individualistic cultural frameworks in rural versus urban Westernised settings. The inaccessibility of cultural identity inhibited the grieving process for some, leading to suppressed emotions and a need to move on swiftly.

Conversely, one participant expressed relief at being geographically separated from her cultural identity, citing the alleviation of pressure and release from burdensome cultural practices. Participants' failure to effectively process their grief may lead to emotional repression and social isolation, compounded by the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one, increasing susceptibility to prolonged and complicated grief. The barrier between loss-oriented coping and restoration- oriented bereavement, as identified by Stroebe and Schut, can lead to pathological grief (Hunt, 2004; Stroebe & Schut, 2015). As demonstrated in the extant literature, these risk factors impede individuals' capacity to adjust to loss, resulting in a feeling of obligation to continue life despite challenges in seeking and receiving assistance (Hilberdink et al., 2023; Pitman et al., 2018; Szuhany et al., 2021; Zareiyan et al., 2024).

The only male participant in the study emphasised the importance of solitary grieving, highlighting the need for individuals to process their emotions independently. This reflects the influence of gender socialisation on how grief is expressed and navigated, emphasising a more individualistic approach to bereavement. Solitary grieving suggests that personal attitudes, rather than societal norms, play a significant role in how individuals experience and cope with loss (R. A. Neimeyer et al., 2014). This research underscores the contradictory nature of societal expectations, which promote communal support for bereavement while simultaneously socialising males to view emotional expression and processing as a private and isolating process.

Exploring the concept of support revealed diverse experiences. Some participants appreciated the structure and support from family and community. In contrast, others felt overwhelmed, alienated, judged, and marginalised due to the stigma of losing a loved one in a road accident. This research highlights the presence of shame linked to fatal road traffic accidents, evident through overt displays of grief, reluctance among family members to discuss the cause of death and scrutiny in the aftermath. The perception of being different reinforced feelings of being cursed and shunned, leading to social isolation and stigma. This study supports previous claims that feeling pitied, socially embarrassed, and uncomfortable affects interactions after a sudden loss, resulting in efforts to avoid awkwardness, the topic of death, and the burden of maintaining secrecy (Eisma, 2018; Mathieu et al., 2022; Pitman et al., 2018).

The participants reflected on the complex process of adjusting to life after losing a loved one while managing the ongoing demands of daily life amidst their grief. This research highlighted how they assumed the roles and responsibilities previously held by the deceased within the family and took on new obligations. These observations resonate with previous research, showing that navigating bereavement involves reevaluating priorities, adopting alternate roles, and recalibrating one's understanding of the world (Nakajima, 2018; Scott et al., 2020).

### 6.4. Limitations of the Study

The study sample consisted primarily of female participants, which resulted in an imbalance in gender representation. This imbalance may limit the study's ability to fully capture diverse experiences, potentially introducing a bias that could affect its generalizability to a more balanced or male population. With only one male participant included the study may have overlooked important insights into gender dynamics, leading to an incomplete understanding of how individuals experience bereavement in the context of fatal road accidents.

The study's initial goal was to involve individuals of various ages to understand how age intersects with roles in bereavement. However, most of the participants who volunteered were young undergraduate students, except for one older female. Exploring the perspectives of older individuals to observe generational differences in attitudes, beliefs, roles, and behaviours would have been valuable. The study's narrow age ranges and contextual limitations (conducted within a university environment) restrict the generalisability of the insights to other geographical settings and broader age groups.

Given the sensitive nature of the research, the study's reliance on a volunteer population may have limited the perspectives obtained to only those individuals who opted to participate. This approach could potentially introduce bias and limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, it was challenging to recruit participants due to the sensitive nature of the topic and prevailing taboos surrounding discussions of death. Additionally, the study restricted participation to Black South Africans who lived in a specific urban setting, aiming to reflect cultural homogeneity. However, this approach excluded the experiences of other racial and cultural groups, signifying a lack of diversity and exploration of alternative experiences.

The exploration of death and culture presents significant challenges due to the sensitivity and complexity of these subjects. Research has revealed that participants often feel uncomfortable discussing their thoughts and experiences related to the loss of loved ones, partly due to societal stigmas and the perception that death is not a suitable topic of conversation in certain Black African cultures – death taboo. Participants may have hesitated to fully engage with the researcher, as they assumed a shared understanding, potentially leading to oversimplified interpretations of their unique experiences. It is worth noting that the study focused on a specific aspect of grief (road-related accidents), potentially limiting its ability to capture the full spectrum of cultural practices related to loss.

### 6.5. Recommendations for Future Research

The focus of this research was to explore the impact of bereavement following fatal road accidents, specifically within the Black South African community. This study aimed to understand how individuals navigate this culturally situated experience, shedding light on a unique perspective of bereavement within the context of road accidents. This research contributes to an underexplored area of study.

Given the centrality of gender to the study's findings, it is recommended that future research explore this aspect more directly by including both men and women in the sample. Additionally, future studies should aim for a more diverse age range to understand better how age intersects with roles in bereavement. Conducting research in various geographical settings beyond a university environment could enhance the generalisability of the findings to broader age groups and contexts.

Future research could delve into the intricate connection between cultural beliefs and practices in South Africa and the implementation of road safety policies and measures. By thoroughly examining these factors, the ultimate aim would be to effectively reduce the frequency of road accidents on South African roads.

### 6.6. Conclusion

This study highlights the significance of understanding the sociocultural perspective of Black South Africans in the context of fatal road accidents. The findings reveal that cultural narratives, social norms, and pressures play a role in the prevalence of road accidents

in these communities. Furthermore, it emphasises the need for culturally informed interventions considering Black South African populations' unique experiences and challenges. Emphasising the interconnectedness of mourning, remembrance, cultural beliefs, community practices, and social networks underscores the importance of communal grieving rituals, spiritual and religious beliefs, and collective support systems in shaping grief outcomes.

The study also revealed that fatal road accidents have far-reaching effects, impacting individuals and entire communities and altering social dynamics. This interconnectedness underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to providing grief support and intervention. It highlights the necessity for policymakers, road safety advocates, and healthcare providers to work closely with these communities to prioritise education, infrastructure development, and community awareness. Additionally, it underscores the need to develop bereavement support services that consider sociocultural factors, ensuring that they resonate with the affected communities. Effective communication in an accessible and relatable manner is crucial. This approach can effectively address the sociocultural aspects of road safety, leading to more successful strategies, decreased fatal road accidents, and improved public health.

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Appendix A

# INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

**Biographical questions:**

1. **How old are you?**
2. **How long ago was the passing of _____?**
3. **What cultural group do you belong to?**

**Interview questions:**

1. Can you describe the mourning process you had to undergo after realizing that _____ died from a fatal RTA?

2. What practices and customs did you have to follow?

   **2.1.** Where do you understand these procedures and customs come from?

   2.2. What was it like for you to follow these practices and customs?

3. How did you experience the loss of your loved one through the road accident?

4. How did your culture and family understand and make sense of this death? Were there particular customs that had to be followed?

5. What was it like for you to have these cultural understandings?

6. Did you feel like you could have done things differently, or wish you could have done things differently?

7. What do you believe causes fatal road accidents?

8. How do you think that the society/ cultural played a role in how you grieved for _____?

9. Is there anything else that you feel is important for you that we have not discussed?

10. What was it like talking to me today?

**11.** Was there anything you ended up talking about that surprised you?

**12.** What was the easiest part of about the interview?

**13.** What was the most difficult part about the interview?

**14.** What was it like talking to me as a young woman?

Appendix B

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Lesedi Malete. I am a Masters student in Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I am conducting a research study about the sociocultural impact of bereavement resulting from a fatal car accident. The study title is Sociocultural Experiences of Bereavement following Fatal Road Traffic Accidents for Urban Black South Africans

I would like to invite you to participate in my study if you have experienced the death of a family member more than a year ago. Participation will involve an interview of approximately 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes. During the interview, I will ask you some questions about your experiences of losing a relative in a fatal road accident. I will also ask you to tell me about how your culture has influenced your experience.

If you do decide to take part, the interview will take place in your home or at another preferred private setting of your choice. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview. This data will be stored on my laptop which will be password protected. Only I will hear this recording. My supervisor will also read a transcript of this recording but will not know your name or any details about you that could identify you.

When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. I will only include some quotes from your interview. With your permission other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

Participation in the study is voluntary. You may stop being in the study at any time and you do not have to answer questions if you do not want to. You will not receive any direct benefits if you choose to join the study. Taking part in the study will not cost you anything. Careful consideration has been taken to prevent harm by ensuring that you have experienced a loss for more than one year ago, have not been diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder and that you have not involved in the same car accident as the deceased to prevent delayed adverse trauma and loss reactions.

The risks for this research study are about your personal bereavement and the loss you have experienced, some of the questions may make you feel sad or upset. If this happens, a distress protocol will be observed. I will stop the interview and continue another time. If you feel that you cannot proceed with the interview, the interview will be discontinued. If you need some support or counselling services following the interview, these are available free of charge at Mbhalati Wellness Services. The name of the counsellor is Nsuku Mbhalati and the contact details for the counselling services are +27(0) 76 499 1421

If you have any questions during or afterwards about the study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor. Should you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of the study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za

Yours Sincerely

Miss Lesedi Malete
Email: 1842368@students.wits.ac.za
+27(0) 73 165 0634

Professor Carol Long
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Appendix C

## CONSENT FORM

**Sociocultural Experiences of Bereavement following Fatal Road Traffic Accidents for Urban Black South Africans**

I _____ (name & surname) consent to taking part in the interview for Lesedi Malete as part as her Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology study, that will be exploring the sociocultural impact of bereavement as a result of a fatal road accident. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve.
As a participant in this study, I understand that:

| | Please tick |
|---|---|
| Participation is voluntary. | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| I am able to withdraw from the study at any time prior to data analysis. | YES. ☐ NO ☐ |
| I do not have to answer any question(s) I do not wish to. | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| I may stop the interview if I am under distress as a result of the study | YES. ☐ NO ☐ |
| I must have experienced the loss of a family member through a fatal car accident for than a year ago | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| I have access to counselling services that are free of charge | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| I must not be diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| I must not have been involved in the car accident with the deceased | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| All the personal details and information will remain confidential and anonymous, although I may be quoted in the final report. However, if I am quoted, it will be under a pseudonym. | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| Participation involves the audio recording of the interview. | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| The recordings and transcripts from the interview discussion will remain confidential and stored in a password-protected file accessible to Lesedi Malete and her supervisor Carol Long | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| The results of the study will be used in the research report that is required for the completion of the Master's in Clinical Psychology Degree. | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| I am able and willing to have the study conducted in my home or another preferred private setting of my choice. | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| That the findings may be published in additional associated publications | YES ☐ NO ☐ |
| Findings may be used for secondary data analysis | YES ☐ NO ☐ |

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D

# DISTRESS PROTOCOL

## Pre-data Collection

- I took into consideration the potential of any psychological and emotional impacts that may be experienced by the participants during the study.
- The study may be deemed 'MEDIUM RISK' as there is a likely risk of some harm (psychological/emotional/emotional distress) for the participants. However, appropriate steps can be taken to mitigate the risk involved.
- Ethical Clearance Application to the HREC (Non-Medical) will include information about free, accessible, and appropriate support/ counselling that will be provided to the participants, of which this information will be provided in the information sheet. In addition, a statement about the potential risk (emotional distress) due to the nature of the questions asked will also be included in the information sheet
- Ethical clearance will be obtained from the HREC (Non-Medical) before commencement of the study.
- As the researcher, I will be cognizant of the adverse risks of the study that may impact me such as emotional exhaustion in response to the participant's descriptions of their life experiences. I will also take into consideration how many interviews I will be able to undertake in a week.

## Distress

- Distress can be observed during the interview, by a participant experiencing stress or emotional distress, by exhibiting behaviors such as uncontrollable crying, shaking, trembling voice etc. *Stage 1: Response* will be observed.

## Stage 1: Response

- The interview will be stopped immediately
- Immediate support will be offered. Skills obtained during the course in relation to containment will be used.
- The participants mental status will be assessed, and probing questions will be asked:
  "Tell me how you are feeling right now"
  "Let's talk about the thoughts you are having"

"Do you feel safe."

**Review**

- In the event that the participant is able to continue, the interview will be resumed.
- In the event that the participants are unable to continue with the interview, the *Stage 2: Response* will be observed.

**Stage 2: Response**

- The interview will be further discontinued.
- The relevant support/ counselling services offered in the information will be contacted for intervention.
- The interview may or may not be commenced depending on the participant's mental status.
- In the event that the participant would like to reschedule the interviews after a few days, *Stage 1: Response* will be observed followed by *Review.*

**Follow-up**

- I will follow up with the participants by means of a courtesy call, only if they have consented to this.
- Participants will be encouraged to contact the offered counselling if they experience any adverse distress after completion of the interview (hours/days).

Appendix E

**ADVERT**

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY MASTERS STUDY

# ROAD ACCIDENTS

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED THE DEATH OF A FAMILY MEMBER THROUGH A FATAL ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENT?

## Criteria

- Must be over the age of 18 years old
- Black South African individual
- Has experienced the death of a family member due to a road accident more than 1 year ago
- Was not involved in the car accident with the decease
- Not diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder
- Must be available for a 90 min interview
- Must reside in Kagiso, Gauteng, South Africa




## Contact

**Lesedi Malete**

+27 73 165 0634

1842368@students.wits.ac.za



Appendix F

# ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

**HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)**
R14/49 Malete

| | |
|---|---|
| **CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE** | **PROTOCOL NUMBER: H23/05/14** |
| **PROJECT TITLE** | Sociocultural Experiences of Bereavement following Fatal Road Traffic Accidents for Urban Black South Africans |
| **INVESTIGATOR(S)** | Ms L Malete |
| **SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT** | Human and Community Development/ |
| **DATE CONSIDERED** | 19 May 2023 |
| **DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE** | Approved<br>Risk Level: Medium |
| **EXPIRY DATE** | 02 July 2026 |

**DATE** 03 July 2023 **CHAIRPERSON** _____
(Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Professor C Long

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**DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)**

To be completed in duplicate and **A SIGNED COPY** returned to the Secretary electronically. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I/we agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low Risk studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

_____ _____/_____/_____
**Signature** **Date**



**PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES**