

Finding Faith & Relationships of Love:
**An Ethnography of spirituality in experiences of loss
amongst women in Grassy Park**

A summary presentation of the Thesis in Social Anthropology

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2015



UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP

The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project with Love in Action.

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Presentation Outline:

1. Question

- My initial research question was to look at the way faith is used as a coping tool to assist women, such as yourselves, who have been in abusive or traumatic situations.
- My reasons for choosing this particular topic comes from a very personal experience for me. As I have already told some of the ladies, and through sharing my experiences in the interview process, was that my mother was in an abusive relationship. And one day after her husband, my stepfather, hit her, I saw her sitting on her prayer mat and crying. After she had prayed however, she seemed content and at ease. This one memory has always stayed with me.
- This is why I thought it would be important to explore the relationship between faith and religious beliefs and situations of abuse or trauma. I am hoping with this research to shed light on the ways in which people live and practice and believe in particular ways that help them to get through difficult circumstances but to also find meaning in their lives.
- I hope this research could provide avenues into understanding the importance of faith in people's lives and why this should be an important consideration when considering modes of therapy, care or healing practices for people in similar situations. I think my research is the first step in this process.
- I think another reason I am interested in this topic is because there does not seem to be too much academic papers on the relationship between faith or religious belief and people who have experienced abusive situations or trauma. Some studies have been done but they all just provide very broad statistics and don't actually look at the real way people enact their beliefs in their everyday lives. Because of this I think there is the space for exploring these relationships with testimonies from real people giving detailed accounts of how they believe and why it is important and meaningful.

- More so, I think I identify strongly for women's rights and the issues women face in society. I hope that my research sheds some light on the way women cope in the face of struggles.
- However, going back to my research question of faith as a coping mechanism, I have found that I need to review my question. This is because through the interview process with the five lovely ladies that I worked with, I found that this question I came with in the beginning does not show the active ways in which the ladies believe and pray. I will go into these findings shortly but I would first like to state my new question.
- My new research question, and this is something that I am still working on
PRAYER, PRACTICE AND BELIEF AS A WAY OF MAKING
MEANING AND CREATING CONNECTIONS IN SITUATIONS OF
LOSS OR TRAUMA.
- I will explain more of what I mean by this in the last part of this presentation but I am hoping that this is accurate, or more accurate than my initial question. and I hope more than anything that this is a discussion so I would really value your feedback at the end of my presentation.
- Before going into this, it is important to take note of a few things. So firstly, with what I am studying there is a strong focus on explaining who you have worked with and where you have worked and the conditions in which you did as well as the importance or difference of myself on the research collected. What I mean by this is that the women I interviewed, the questions asked, my own personality, all affect the information that is given. So it is important to recognise this. So if I was speaking to a group of men, perhaps the research would have been very different.
- I worked with 5 ladies who very willingly accommodated me and my questions and I am very grateful for their time and valuable insights.

2. Methods

- So just to explain a bit more about what I am studying and the reason we do the interviews in the way that we do. We use a method called ethnography. We do in depth interviews generally with a smaller group of people for an extended period of time. As you progress in your studies you

spend more time with the people you interview but for now I did a few interviews with each of the five ladies I worked with.

- What we hope to achieve with this type of research is that it allows you to really connect with people and get their ideas about a certain topic. It is more personal and it deals with how people feel about and act in the world and why this is important to understand. to compare, some studies in other disciplines just do surveys to get people's once off opinions on particular matters. And this information is then put together statistically and shown in a graph or something. This reduces people to numbers and statistics and we believe it isn't true or it doesn't properly represent how people actually think and feel.
- I think this especially important with the questions that I posed in the interviews and the information given to me by the ladies. We talked a lot about their faith, beliefs and prayer practices. Believing god and god himself is not something that you can see in this world but it is something that is felt. It is an emotional and mental and very personal experience that is very meaningful to people. So in this sense I think it was important to really spend time with what the women told me and try to understand, and do justice to what the ladies told me.
- So the interviews were very interesting and insightful and im so grateful for the ladies allowing me into their spaces and sharing intimate, personal and dearly held things with me.
- So in doing research in this particular way and especially because it deals with a sensitive and personal topic, there were a few ethical things that I needed to consider seriously.
- I had to firstly receive ethical clearance from my department to ensure that I was in the right mental and emotional space to deal with this topic. I mean from this alone you can tell that it is important for me to recognise myself and my own influences and experiences in this work. This is another reason why I would like the output of this research to be one of collaboration and dialogue with the ladies being involved in what I eventually write up.

- So some of the technicalities and the ethics were that I would keep the ladies anonymous, I would not include certain things that they would not want to be said, and I would also not write about events that could identify the ladies. There is a strong focus for me on consent and the ladies having an active process in the information I will use. So I hope today also helps me clarify or pinpoint anything that someone might be uncomfortable with.
- I would like to just interject and say this was easy because I am focussing more on the religious beliefs and practices which the ladies have told me about. I plan to write up about this, while acknowledging their particular life experiences as influencing them greatly, but not focussing in detail on any traumatic events.
- The reason I think that my research question has changed and also the information I received was different than what I expected, was because of the method I used in the interviews.
- As the ladies might have noticed I preferred to let them speak about the things they were comfortable with in the beginning. I didn't want to ask any direct questions that might have made the ladies uncomfortable, and I do hope I was correct in this. So once I noticed that religion and faith was such a big factor in their lives, I chose to explore this more deeply. And we had lots of lovely discussions around their beliefs and what it means to be a part of the Baptist church and how god is so impactful and powerful in their lives.
- I was introduced to the ladies through the gracious help of Eleanor. I proceeded to do about two or three interviews with each of the ladies, time constraints and schedule allowing. I spoke to the ladies over the course of winter in June and July. I know on one occasion the weather affected my ability to go to the ladies. I had to hire a car in order to be able to get to the ladies because I live a bit of a distance away from Grassy Park. Sometimes I would stay at a friends place in order to be able to get to the ladies easily. I think it's just interesting to note all the different conditions and events at play surrounding this whole process and the constraints felt by either myself or the ladies with regards to the interviews. I also briefly attended a

church service here and some of the meetings with Eleanor which gave me a sense of the outside experiences for the ladies.

- So after the interviews took place I transcribed the recordings myself. So I sat and listened and typed everything out. This again I think is the important part of the method we use as anthropologists, it allowed me to relive the lively and interesting conversations I had with the ladies. And to really get in touch with what they told me.
- Thereafter, I just sat with the interviews and started looking for common themes or things that were said in order to help me better understand what the ladies told me. This is the analysing process where I just sit and really think about the meanings about what was shared. I think this approach allows for a really in touch depiction or story to be told that is focussed on the personal and real experiences that people go through.
- I am currently in the process of doing this before I actually start writing up my thesis but I hope to share with you what I have so far and maybe you can give me feedback or even just your opinions or state if you think what I am finding is accurate.

3. Findings

- So I am going to share with you some of the key themes that I have found with a description of each. So far I have found three main themes based on all the information I received from the ladies. I am still working on these but this is what I have at the moment.

The first theme is called DISCONNECTION.

- So what I have been finding from all the interviews is that there is a common theme of loss or trauma, or what I am going to call disconnection as I feel it more broadly covers the differently experiences of loss or trauma that each of the ladies have experienced.
- I want to ensure that I don't put all of the experiences under one umbrella because that will not do justice to the pain and strength of endurance experienced by each lady. So in order to do this I will not give any names away or anything but I will briefly explain some of the experiences of loss

or trauma by the ladies. And thereafter why this is important in understand the faith of the ladies.

- So the first lady spoke of her experience with the loss of her partnership at the end of her marriage. It was a traumatic process with a lot of legal and financial issues that resulted in the lady having to experience a big separation in her life – the separation of her partner from her life. In this too, the lady experienced health problems and while she is currently in a more secure and stable space, she also partly experienced the loss of her health. This was in part made worse by the emotional and mental strain of going through the loss of her marriage.
- The second lady told me about how she decided to end her employment at her job as it was proving to not be good for her. The stresses of the job was putting pressure on her mental, emotional and physical health and it took her some time to realise that the right thing to do was to leave the job. While this is a more active or purposeful letting go of something, it is still loss and marks the end of something.
- The other three ladies experienced a common situation of traumatic loss in terms of losing their partners due to them passing away. These very emotionally and mentally difficult situations were made worse by the fact that they also experienced legal financial difficulties surrounding the death of their partners.
- So my first point about disconnection then is that the ladies all went through particular situations where there was a break in their lives, a kind of separation that was difficult and made a very big impact on their lives – that of losing something that was very dear to them in the past or from which they gained a sense of stability at the time, before the separation or loss happened.
- The second point I want to make in terms of disconnection is that a change or strengthening of faith happened.
- So for example, many of the ladies explained to me that they were all raised and lived their lives as Christians but not in the way that they are currently doing so.

- Now the ladies all have a very strong sense of faith, a very firm belief in the power of god to strengthen them, and very strong religious practices in the church and in their everyday lives.
- So there is a timeline happening here, in the past things were a certain way and the ladies were living their lives in a certain way until a break happened. A loss of something or someone. This break was caused by factors outside of their control but which the ladies were still very much actively involved in. they still made their own decisions and held firm to particular things in these difficult situations.
- In this timeline of the ladies lives, while they experienced the loss or even afterwards, there was a transformation for the better in their faith and beliefs. There is a disconnection between how they practiced before and how they practice their faith now. And this faith change for the better goes hand in hand with the ladies traumatic experiences of loss in their lives.
- I hope to now show how this makes sense and why it is so important in understanding the important ways that the ladies practice their faith and believe in god.

So my second theme is called A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

- As I mentioned, all of the ladies have experienced a change for the better in their faith. Most of the ladies describe having grown up either in Catholic or Anglican backgrounds where you would just so stand and recite the prayers without really understanding the real meaning behind them. Or the scriptures would be preached in church and you couldn't always understand what was meant by them.
- But now, all of the ladies told me about the importance of them finding a real and very true personal relationship with god, which has a lot to do with the Baptist church as well and the way that the pastor explains and helps you to understand the word of god.
- So the ladies explained to me the importance of knowing to trust in the holy spirit and recognising that god is within you and with you. The importance of understanding the scripture and talking about it with others in the church but also helping to spread the word. And also the importance of regular prayer.

- Another important point is to recognise that you need to trust in the lord and his will and his plan for you. And to also trust and recognise and be grateful to god for the good things that come your way. The ladies explained that sometimes bad things are allowed to happen by god in order for you or them to learn something from that. Or it can also be a way in which you need to recognise that you need to start building a relationship with god.
- This leads me to the point that there is a strong emphasis on a RELATIONSHIP with god. It is a give and take, it works both ways. The ladies explained to me that you cannot expect god to give you, or pray for things to happen without being transformed or trying to make a change in your own life in order to serve god.
- So this personal relationship with god, which for the ladies came about especially at a time when they experienced very severe burdens or loss in their lives, leads me to my next theme.

My third and final theme is called CONNECTION

- So like I said, the ladies experienced an invigoration in their faith and a strong and deep connection to god in the face of losing people or things which had for some time allowed stability in their lives.
- This loss meant that the ladies lives were disrupted or there was or is a sense of stability but this change in their faith allowed them to become stable and strong again.
- I think I would like to call this a connection. What I am seeing is a strong and powerful connection to god, and THROUGH this, a strong and powerful connection to other people in the ladies lives.
- Let me explain a little bit more what I mean
- This personal relationship with god means that the ladies are no longer alone, despite having experienced loss. They are stronger, despite having experienced things that makes one weak. They are defended and protected, comforted and they find solace and answers in god and by praying to god.
- Also, by speaking with others about god, they are able to understand the word better. Which then allows for a deeper understanding of god and a more personal relationship with him

- The word and the scripture, prayer, god and the holy spirit are all the ways that the women find stability and a way to direct their lives. These provide guidelines which are meaningful and important and provide a particular way in which the ladies can judge and live their lives in the best way that serves god.
- This is especially important because it provides a grounding, a sense of stability.
- This creation of and a connection to god is a way of creating new and meaningful connections in or after situations in which material and earthly connections have been lost.
- It is also a way of making meaning and making sense or understanding the situations that the ladies have experienced.
- So basically, and finally, I would like to end off my summarising what I am finding so far. And before I do that I would like to say that I would deeply appreciate your input and thoughts about whether you feel, so far, I am understanding and doing justice to your experiences.
- So in **conclusion**, we can see that the ladies have been through situations, specifically difficult and traumatic situations of material or bodily or relationship loss, which have allowed the ladies to create a new and better relationship with god. All the women always knew some sense of god, but they now have a more personal relationship with god. So in connecting with god in a personal way, the ladies are connecting with a god that they have always known, and because of this they are able to proceed in their lives with strength and a deeper understanding of their life experiences.