

Veiled Bereavement: The Experience of Lesbian Widows from an Existential-Phenomenological Perspective

Ana Carolina Arima^{1,*}
Joanneliese de Lucas Freitas¹

¹*Universidade Federal do Paraná, Curitiba, PR, Brazil*

Abstract

The aim of the present study was to understand the experience of lesbian widows from a phenomenological-existential perspective. Two unstructured phenomenological interviews were performed, with the following starter question: “What was it like to lose your wife?” The interviews were analyzed according to the phenomenological method described by Giorgi. Data were categorized into the following essential constituents of the structure of the experience of lesbian widowhood: Discrimination, Loss of meaning of the life-world, Loneliness, Changes in mood and health, Restructuring daily life, Changes in the projects of their love lives, Lack of recognition as a couple, the Invisibility of suffering, Being silenced, Restrictions on the expression of pain, Social support, Rejection or acceptance by families, Need to secure personal rights, and Need for self-respect and self-recognition as a lesbian. The results revealed significant psychological suffering in homosexual widows due to the lack of social recognition of the legitimacy of their relationship, love, and loss. We conclude that structured support networks and health care resources are essential to minimize the suffering of lesbian widows and aid the construction of new meanings during bereavement.

Keywords: Bereavement, widowhood, lesbianism, Phenomenological-Existential Psychology.

O Luto Velado: A Experiência de Viúvas Lésbicas em uma Perspectiva Fenomenológico-Existencial

Resumo

O presente trabalho buscou compreender as vivências de viúvas lésbicas desde uma perspectiva fenomenológico-existencial. Foram realizadas duas entrevistas fenomenológicas abertas, com a seguinte pergunta disparadora: “Como foi para você perder a sua esposa?”. As entrevistas foram analisadas de acordo com o método fenomenológico de Giorgi. Os dados foram agrupados nas seguintes constituintes essenciais que descrevem a estrutura da vivência da viuvez feminina homossexual: Discriminação, Perda de sentido do mundo-da-vida, Solidão, Mudanças no humor e na saúde, Reestruturando a rotina, Alterações no projeto de vida afetiva, Falta de reconhecimento do ser-casal, Invisibilidade do sofrimento, Silenciamento, Limitação da expressão da dor, Suporte da rede de apoio, Rejeitada ou acolhida pelas famílias, Necessidade de buscar seus direitos e Necessidade de autorrespeito e autorreconhecimento como lésbica. Os resultados evidenciam indicativos de sofrimento mental na viuvez lésbica, haja vista o não reconhecimento social e a deslegitimação do afeto e da perda entre estes casais. Conclui-se que redes de apoio fortes e estruturadas e espaços de acolhimento estruturados são fundamentais para a ressignificação da experiência de luto e a minimização de seu sofrimento.

Palavras-chaves: Luto, viuvez, lesbianismo, Psicologia Fenomenológico-Existencial.

* Mailing address: Praça Santos Andrade, 50, Sl. 215, Ala Alfredo Buffren, Centro, Curitiba, PR, Brazil 80060-240. Phone/fax: 33102625. E-mail: anaarima@gmail.com and joanneliese@gmail.com

El Duelo Velado: La Experiencia de las Viudas Lesbianas en una Perspectiva Fenomenológica-Existencial

Resumen

Este estudio trata de comprender las experiencias de las viudas lesbianas desde una perspectiva existencial-fenomenológica. Dos entrevistas fenomenológicas abiertas se llevaron a cabo con la siguiente pregunta desencadenante: “¿Cómo fue para usted la pérdida de su esposa?”. Se analizarán las entrevistas de acuerdo con el método fenomenológico de Giorgi. Los datos se agrupan en los siguientes componentes esenciales que describen la estructura de la experiencia de la viudez femenina homosexual: Discriminación, Pérdida del sentido del mundo de la vida, Soledad, Cambios de estado de ánimo y de la salud, Cambios en la rutina, Cambios en el proyecto de vida afectiva, Ausencia de reconocimiento de ser-pareja, Invisibilidad del sufrimiento, Silenciamiento, Limitación de la expresión del dolor, Soporte de la red de apoyo, Rechazada o aceptada por las familias, Necesidad de hacerse oír por sus derechos y Necesidad de auto-respeto y auto-reconocimiento como lesbiana. Los resultados indican sufrimiento mental en la viudez homosexual, frente a su no reconocimiento social y a la deslegitimación del afecto y de la pérdida entre estas parejas. En conclusión, una red de apoyo fuerte y espacios de cuidado estructurados son fundamentales para nuevos sentidos del duelo y para la reducción de su sufrimiento.

Palabras clave: Duelo, viudez, lesbianismo, Psicología fenomenológica-existencial.

Bereavement is described in the literature as a normal and expected reaction to a significant loss (Parkes, 1998). The death of a close friend or relative severs an emotional bond, changing the routine of the bereaved, their values and the meaning of their lives, often leading them to question their own existence (Freitas, 2013). Bereavement and grief have a disorganizing effect on the bereaved, and occur in different ways for each individual, without necessarily reaching an end (Broderick, Birbilis, & Steger, 2008; Hart, 2008; Kovács, 1992). As a result, bereavement is not a generalizable process, since the bond between the bereaved and the deceased is unique, as are the causes and circumstances of death (Kovács, 1992). Culture is known to have an impact on the experience of bereavement (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Freitas, 2013; Parkes, 1998). Death is a taboo subject in modern Western society, which avoids any discussion or reflection on the end of life (Freitas, 2013).

Bereavement can be examined from several different psychological perspectives. The existential-phenomenological approach adopted in the present study evidences the lived experience of bereavement, and its modes of articulation with its context and culture.

According to Freitas (2013), existential-phenomenological psychology investigates the lived experience and meaning of the relationship which, for the bereaved, ended as a result of death, describing this situation as a phenomenon in itself. Phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience that arises from the intertwining of the being and the world, and as such, its focus in the study of bereavement is the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased (Freitas, Michel, & Zomkowski, 2015). The concept of alterity and the loss of a shared world are crucial for the existential-phenomenological understanding of bereavement. As a result of its strong intersubjective orientation, this perspective holds that, when we experience interpersonal loss, we also lose aspects of ourselves, our personhood and our world. Unlike other traditional perspectives, existential-phenomenological psychology claims that there is no recovery following bereavement, but a resignification, which gives way to “a new relationship with what was lost in the death of the other and, consequently, with the lost possibilities of existence as a being-in-the-world” (Freitas, 2013, p. 104). According to Freitas et al. (2015), bereavement is painful and abrupt,

and often leads to an experience of senselessness as a result of its intersubjective nature. The bereaved is therefore faced with the existential task of resignifying his/her experiences as he/she develops the autonomy and gains the strength to cope with future difficulties, creating the space for new possibilities (Ferreira, Leão, & Andrade, 2008).

Widowhood is a common type of bereavement, which, according to the literature, tends to be especially stressful for women (Broderick et al., 2008). According to Parkes (1998), widows often experience a decrease in appetite, weight loss, trouble sleeping, irritability, anxiety and tension. They may also feel insecure, incapable of facing life, unprotected, and lonely, with no one to share their everyday life. After the death of a partner, the survivor must learn to take on new roles and responsibilities, changing several plans, habits, circumstances and behaviors (Ferreira et al., 2008).

Lesbian Widowhood

Studies of bereavement in same-sex couples are still vastly outnumbered by investigations of heterosexual widowhood (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins, Edmundson, Averett, & Yoon, 2014; Whipple, 2006). Those that do study same-sex couples tend to focus on gay men who lost their partners, often as a result of HIV (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Bristowe, Marshall, & Harding, 2016; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014).

The experiences of heterosexual couples differ from those of couples composed of two men or two women, which, in turn, also differ from one another (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014). In some cases, for instance, families may be unaware or disapproving of their relative's homosexual relationship, which directly affects the support network of the bereaved, one of the greatest facilitators of the resignification process. Nevertheless, according to Bristowe et al. (2016), the social support network of homosexual couples is more strongly tied to the LGBT community than to their families of origin.

The idea that certain features of widowhood are common to all couples should be considered with caution, since the need to consider the characteristics of different patient groups has also been strongly emphasized in the mental health literature. When these specificities are not understood, the heterosexual perspective may be taken as the norm, leading to the invisibility of certain forms of suffering, as in the case of aging in transsexual populations and lesbian widowhood (Bristowe et al., 2016; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014; Stevens & Hall, 1998; Whipple, 2007).

Studies of widowhood in lesbian couples have found that feelings of loneliness and isolation are stronger in women who have not publicly revealed the nature of their relationship. In these disenfranchised and invisible relationships, the bereavement becomes as invisible as the relationship itself (Bristowe et al., 2016; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014; Whipple, 2007). Women in this situation are often unable to notice that they require time and support to go through the bereavement process, which is often considered symbolic rather than real (Jenkins et al., 2014; Lenhardt, 1997).

Disenfranchised bereavement is that which is experienced in relationships that are not socially legitimated. It is a complicated grief involving the exclusion from specialized care, limited social support, and the exclusion from funeral rituals, all of which raise several practical and legal issues (Jenkins et al., 2014; Lenhardt, 1997). The public disclosure of the relationship has both advantages and disadvantages, in addition to several risks; According to Broderick et al. (2008), as well as Whitman, Cormier, and Boyd (2000), the consequences of coming out as a lesbian include suffering due to inter and intrapersonal loss, such as a distancing of the family, as well as religious and ethnic communities. These authors also alert that the disclosure of sexual orientation can go so far as to threaten women's lives, economic security, personal safety, and familial relationships. The threat of these losses is accompanied by concerns over the exposure of one's sexual identity in public

settings such as work, school and the family, and the fear of losing custody of their children. Lesbians feel tasked with constantly reevaluating their emotional and physical safety, leading to different types of stress throughout their life cycles (Whitman et al., 2000).

The support received by lesbian widows is strongly related to the extent to which the relationship was publicly known (Bristowe et al., 2016; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014). Social networks consisting of close friends who support the couple are important, especially when the families of origin do not accept the relationship. The literature reports that in many cases, in addition to family opposition to the relationship, there is no legal documentation of the marriage or civil union. In these cases, after the death of the wife, the family tends to deny the bereaved any access to funeral rights, refusing to recognize them as a couple (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014). The absence of marriage documentation has also led some women to be denied access to their spouse in the final moments before death. Other challenges often faced by lesbian widows include legal battles over inheritance with the family of the deceased and financial issues due to a lack of recognition of the relationship (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2014).

In Brazil, common law unions for same-sex couples have been recognized by the Federal Supreme Court since May 2011, when a ruling on Direct Unconstitutionality Act (*Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade*; ADI) 4277 and Argument of Non-compliance of Fundamental Rights 132 led to the recognition of civil unions for same-sex couples. The Supreme Court decision was based on article 3; section IV of the Federal Constitution, which prohibits discrimination due to gender, race, or skin color, thereby forbidding the exclusion or discrimination of any individual as a result of their sexual preference (*Supremo Tribunal Federal* [STF], 2011). In 2013, the National Council of Justice prohibited public authorities from refusing to perform civil unions or convert existing unions into marriages for same-sex couples (STF, 2013). According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and

Statistics (IBGE, 2013), 2013 and 2014 saw a 31.2% increase in same-sex marriages, which in raw numbers amounts to 1153 unions, of which 50.3% were sought by female couples and 49.7% between male couples. Although we believe that relationships can be defined in several different ways and should be recognized as such regardless of their legal status, this issue has become increasingly relevant in recent years due to debates in society at large, as well as the impact of public and legal recognition of marriage rights on the lives of homosexual widows and widowers. Brazilian society tends to recognize homosexual relationships characterized by love. This attitude is reinforced by the legal system. Heterosexual relationships, on the other hand, are recognized as a consequence of human rights to liberty, equality and non-discrimination, and do not require romantic love to be acknowledged and recognized as a family (Costa & Nardi, 2015).

According to the literature, many lesbian individuals seek a balance of power in their relationships, including an egalitarian division of labor and financial responsibilities, emotional intimacy and personal autonomy (Whitman et al., 2000). Studies of lesbian couples suggest that, as a result of their close relational intimacy and the aforementioned losses in social support, women who lose their partners are left not only without a wife, but also without an integral and fundamental part of their identity, their emotional and social world (Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014; Whipple, 2006, 2007).

Psychologists and social workers have identified a lack of literature on the subject of lesbian widows, and as a result, began to write on the topic, providing recommendations for their clinical management (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014). Interestingly, a search of the CAPES and Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) databases retrieved no articles on the topic in Portuguese, which underscores the need for studies of lesbian bereavement on a national level. A systematic literature review of widowhood in gay, lesbian and transsexual couples performed by Bristowe et al. (2016) revealed that these studies are scarce

even in English language publications. These investigations underscore the need for additional knowledge on how to care for this population, who is often in need of assistance after being neglected and excluded from social support networks, as in the case of lesbian widows (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Bristowe et al., 2016; Jenkins et al., 2014).

As for the psychological management of these individuals, Broderick et al. (2008) claim that, although many lesbians will not seek professional help, mental health care workers must be aware of the potential influence of social conditions on the coping, adaptation and meaning making of death among lesbian widows after the loss of a partner. According to the authors, the death of a partner can also resonate with previous losses, including those linked with homophobia (friends, family, and religious communities), leading the bereaved to feel even more isolated, abandoned and rejected. Health professionals who care for these widows must carefully evaluate their support networks and help them find new existential meaning in their lives, encouraging them to engage in their personal choice of rituals and traditions, be they related to her ethnicity or the LGBT culture, and encouraging the transition into new roles and identities, and to a new world perspective. Bristowe et al. (2016) proposed a new model for the care of gay, lesbian, and transsexual individuals who have lost a partner, based on an assessment of the extent to which their identity was known and accepted by their social network. However, the model does not discuss the specificities of lesbian bereavement, although it does emphasize the need to acknowledge and study the differences between the experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual individuals.

The study of lesbian bereavement and understanding of its characteristics may contribute to decreasing the invisibility of lesbian relationships and their challenges. It may also help psychologists and other health professionals to develop more appropriate interventions and programs for widows, which are currently unavailable in Brazil. The only international study of this issue performed according to a phenom-

enological perspective corroborated the findings of previous investigations, and underscored the importance of knowing whether the relationship was publicly known in comprehending the experience of bereavement (Bent & Magilvy, 2006). According to the authors, the social recognition of the relationship can influence three important aspects of lesbian grief, namely: the possibilities for reflecting on and resignifying the experience, access to social support (or lack thereof) and the aggravation of problems and situations related to being in an unrecognized relationship, such as legal issues or exclusion from rites and rituals.

The comprehension of lesbian grief experiences may open up a new area of research into the difficulties faced by these women and the specific nature of their suffering, and may shed light on a problem that has received only limited attention from Brazilian public policy: the rights of LGBT populations. The aim of this study was therefore to comprehend and discuss the specificities and meaning of lesbian widowhood experiences from a phenomenological perspective, contributing to current knowledge on the subject and to the visibility of their suffering.

Method

This was an exploratory and qualitative phenomenological study. It was used the phenomenological method of Giorgi (Giorgi & Sousa, 2010).

Participants were recruited by announcing the study in the following social network groups: *mães pela igualdade* (“mothers for equality”), Brazilian association of homocultural studies, *cafezinho* (relationship group for women interested in women in the city of Curitiba), *colmeia* (“beehive”), Dignity NGO, Anglican Pastoral for Diversity in Curitiba, and the Brazilian League of Lesbians. The study was also advertised through personal contacts, friends and acquaintances. The following inclusion criteria were applied: (a) experiencing the loss of a partner while in a relationship; (b) duration of said relationship was at least one year.

Although the study was announced on both social networks and among personal contacts with

individuals who were believed to have ties with the LGBT community such as the aforementioned social groups, few individuals claimed to know lesbian women who had been widowed. Given the difficulty in recruiting participants, only two interviews were conducted. Similar recruitment difficulties have also been discussed by Bristowe et al. (2016), who suggested the development of more effective recruitment methods for research involving minority groups.

Participants

Hippolyta is a black woman who is 62 years old, and was widowed 15 years ago. After undergoing stomach surgery, her wife discovered she had cancer. It soon spread to the liver and pancreas, eventually leading to her death. The couple lived together for four years. They shared an apartment with two children from Hippolyta's first marriage. Although the families of both women were aware of the relationship, Hippolyta said that, at the time, she had not come out publicly as a lesbian. She has since married another woman.

Artemis is a 57 year old psychologist who has been a widow for two years. Her wife died from cancer despite undergoing chemotherapy and one surgery. The couple was not legally married, and had been together for 26 years. The family of the deceased knew they lived together, but did not recognize their union.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Demographic data such as name, age, duration of the relationship, and time since widowhood were collected during participant interviews. To guarantee the focus on the lived experience of participants, as determined by the phenomenological method, the interviews began with the following starter question: "What was it like to lose your wife?" Participants were first introduced to the study via e-mail. They then provided written consent to participation and publication of their data. The interviews began with the collection of demographic data, followed by the starter question. Hippolyta's interview occurred in a room at her workplace, and had a du-

ration of 23 minutes. Artemis was interviewed via Skype. Her interview had a duration of 53 minutes. Both were recorded with the consent of participants, and transcribed for later analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the phenomenological method described by Giorgi (Giorgi & Souza, 2010). The method involves the following four steps:

1. Getting a general sense of the whole;
2. Discrimination of meaning units within a psychological perspective;
3. Transformation of meaning units into psychological language;
4. Synthesis of transformed meaning units into a general structure of the lived experience of lesbian widowhood, through the determination of its essential constituents.

Ethical Procedures

The present study was approved by a Research Ethics Committee under project number CAAE 45088815.1.0000.0102. Guidelines and Standards for Human Research described in National Health Council resolution 251/97 were closely followed. Both subjects provided written consent for participation. Participants were given fictitious names to protect their identity.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of participant interviews revealed 14 essential constituents which describe the structure of the lived experience of lesbian widowhood. Constituents were divided into two axes, emphasizing the affective relationship in which the experience of mourning unfolds. The axes describe two aspects of the lesbian grief experience, and are henceforth referred to as "The World of the Relationship" and "The Relationship in the World". The former focuses on "The World of the Relationship" and the disruption of the world shared by the couple. This category comprises the following constituents: Loss of meaning of the life-world, Loneliness, Changes in mood and health, Restructuring daily life, and Changes in the projects of their love

lives. The second axis speaks to the experiences associated with being a lesbian couple in the world, or “The Relationship in the World,” and comprises the following essential constituents: Lack of recognition as a couple, the Invisibility of suffering, Being silenced, Restrictions on the expression of pain, Social support, Rejection or acceptance by families, Need to secure personal rights, and Need for self-respect and self-recognition as a lesbian. The lived experience and signification of bereavement was also found to be permeated by Discrimination, sometimes as figure, others as ground. This was therefore a significant constituent and a relevant feature of participant experiences. Since the experience of discrimination permeated both axes of the bereavement experience, it will be discussed prior to the description of each individual axis.

The Lived Experience of Discrimination

Participants reported to have been discriminated against for having been widowed by women rather than men, corroborating the idea that grief in homosexual relationships cannot be compared to that which occurs in heterosexual partnerships, as has been previously discussed in the literature (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014). Hippolyta reported that she chose not to reveal to some people that she was the widow of a woman to compare their reactions to different types of widowhood. Both Artemis and Hippolyta reported that they were not asked as to their partner’s cause of death, their own wellbeing or that of their children, although these questions are often posed to most widows and widowers:

. . . I don’t think people feel that relationship was as strong, or as serious to us as [they would think of] a “hetero” marriage. A lesbian widow is not really a heterosexual widow, you know? . . . So all those questions that would have been asked, “What a shame, how did she die?”, “And how are the children doing?”, which would be part of normal conversation, right? With a widow... No, in the lesbian world, it doesn’t happen. It doesn’t happen.

The interviews show that the discrimination faced by lesbian widows is not limited to work or social settings, and is also deeply present within family relationships themselves. Previous studies have shown that widows are often prevented from sharing their partner’s last moments, or from fully participating in funeral rituals, both of which were reported by Artemis (Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014). According to the participant, she and her wife had no privacy as a couple throughout her illness, since the family of the deceased prevented or interfered with any private moments between them. The participant explained she had to claim to be her wife’s psychologist in order to access her room and be with her at the hospital.

This type of discrimination has been described by Bent and Magilvy (2006), who showed that social networks are strongly supportive of heterosexual widows, but still exclude and neglect lesbian widows who are in equal need of support. The nature of their relationship may also increase the distance between lesbian women and members of their family, work environment and religious community, all of which are common sources of support for widows, thereby strengthening women’s ties to the LGBT community (Broderick et al., 2008).

First Axis: The World of the Relationship

Loss of Meaning of the Life-World

The main existential aspect of bereavement is the loss of meaning of the life-world (Freitas et al., 2015). Artemis reported that the death of her spouse precluded important travel and work plans, as well as their expectation of growing old together, leading to feelings of loneliness and loss of meaning:

. . . the absence of meaning is that we had a project, you know? As most couples do, right? The dream of growing old together. The things we would do, our dreams and travel plans that didn’t come true!

Death is a disorganizing experience, which leads survivors to question and reevaluate sev-

eral aspects of their own life attitudes (Broderick et al., 2008; Freitas et al., 2015; Hart, 2008; Kovács, 1992). After the death of a loved one, we lose both a person and a way of being that was experienced in the relationship, affecting the existential field of the survivor (Freitas, 2013). In the words of Artemis, “*I still feel her presence very strongly. So I practice keeping the good things I got from her, you know? She taught me a lot about the happiness of life*”. The limitations imposed by death prevent the implementation of personal projects, leading to a lack of future perspective on the part of the bereaved, even though she may come to resignify her convictions, values, and even her existential meaning.

Loneliness

Both participants reported feelings of loneliness and isolation. Feelings of isolation and the absence of opportunities to share their experiences are often discussed in studies of lesbian widowhood, and were reported by both participants in the present study (Bristowe et al., 2016; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014). Although loneliness is usually discussed in connection with the need to rebuild a life without the deceased partner and with no one to share their life with, the social isolation lived by lesbian widows as a result of discrimination intensifies the feelings of loneliness associated with widowhood (Jenkins et al., 2014), as reported by Hippolyta:

Maybe the absence of someone to share your pain with is worse, you know? . . . you can't just call someone and say, “Oh, I feel terrible today”. You have to think, “Who am I going to call? To talk about how terrible I'm feeling?” This really happens!

Changes in Mood and Health

Both participants reported alterations in their mood and health following the loss of their wives, which corroborates previous findings (Broderick et al., 2008; Hart, 2008; Parkes, 1998; Whipple, 2006). According to Turatti (2012), widowhood is often accompanied by illness and physical disability, especially in relationships involving a strong emotional bond.

Both participants reported losing weight and feeling depressed. Artemis said that after she was widowed, she no longer felt pleasure in eating. Hippolyta reported the following: “*I felt very anguished and anxious. I slept very little. I lived in a state of extreme fatigue, I slept little and I had depression, I had everything*”.

Invisible suffering is associated with severe limitations in health care, with traditionally offered health services and legal alternatives often proving insufficient, and additional resources being required to obtain an adequate level of assistance. When Hippolyta lost her wife, for instance, she was able to stay home from work and recover by requesting a leave of absence with the help of a doctor who was aware of her relationship and, as such, her suffering. Bereavement leave was not available for homosexual couples at the time in Brazil.

Restructuring Daily Life

Although both participants obtained support from close relations who acknowledged their relationship, it was left to them alone to restructure their daily life. This was described by participants as a difficult process, permeated by loneliness, which included the following: financial restructuring, moving out or making changes to the house, reorganizing objects belonging to the couple, occupying their time and engaging in leisure activities. All of these may become especially challenging when legal issues arise, a common occurrence for widows of same-sex spouses (Bristowe et al., 2016; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014). Artemis, for instance, reported the following:

That's another difficult thing, you know? Which I think surrounds relationships which have homophobia as a backdrop... Two days after she died, her daughter and son-in-law came to my house, saying they were thinking of selling the apartment, and wanted to have it appraised before they left. They were only waiting for the seventh day mass. So I started talking about how nobody else would be going there, how the apartment was mine and all that. . . . and back then I couldn't really of anything else, right? In

the first months, more than two months in fact, I wasn't myself, and they pressured me to sign over the rights to everything, you know? The right to live there, to improve it, to everything I had done, and that I would only register our civil union, because we didn't have it on paper, after the inventory was carried out, which they claimed was to avoid any delays.

The difficult process of turning from “us” into “me” is discussed by several widowhood studies (Parkes, 1998; Turatti, 2012; Whipple, 2006). Existentially, “us” refers to the presence of a significant other in the life-world of the bereaved, with whom they shared a common spatiality and temporality, thereby inhabiting a shared world (Freitas et al., 2015). The restructuring of daily life sheds a harsh light on the absence of the spouse, as well as the forms of oppression and discrimination experienced by the couple. There is no longer an “us” to project life, only an “I” to reorganize the common life, in a difficult process aggravated by legal battles and a lack of recognition of the couple.

Changes in the Project of their Love Lives

Participants had been widows for different periods of time. While Hippolyta had lost her wife 15 years ago, Artemis had only been a widow for two years, which significantly influenced their projects for their love lives. Hippolyta has remarried and feels she can cope well with her memories of the deceased. Artemis felt disillusioned with her love life, but demonstrated a wish to rebuild it, accepting her wife's death and its place in her history, so as to eventually plan out a new love life with a different partner.

Artemis stated that the memory of her wife is still too fresh and vivid, so that she is unable to seek a new relationship for the time being. According to Whipple (2006), lesbian widows often fear what “moving on” with life might mean, and what a new relationship could bring to their lives. In conclusion, this constituent speaks of bereavement as a process that includes resignification and new existential possibilities to love again.

Second Axis: The Relationship in the World

Lack of Recognition as a Couple

The lack of social recognition as a couple was emphasized by both participants, and remained in the background of their social relationships. This is a crucial part of the continued discrimination suffered by lesbian women, and has been widely documented in the literature as having an important impact on the lived experience of bereavement (Bristowe et al., 2016; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014; Whipple, 2007). Artemis reported that she was deprived of the right to be publicly acknowledged as the wife of the deceased, to register her civil union, and to be informed of what was happening to her wife during her illness: “*The whole disease process was crazy, you know? The family denied our relationship*”. Knowing about the relationship does not necessarily mean acknowledging its legitimacy. The lack of recognition as a couple, even if the family acknowledged the love in the relationship, resulted in significant family interference in the relationship, a lack of privacy for the couple, and a delegitimization of the bereavement process:

So when I walked in, when the mass was going to start . . . the widowed sit in the front row, together, the family and all that, and there was no room for me. So there was this awkwardness, where am I going to sit? The whole family was sitting on one side of the church, and I sat, alone, on the other. . . . So it's veiled, the ritual is not the same for you . . . I was so shocked, I might have still been sitting there today! I couldn't do anything, I was paralyzed. The discrimination was so strong!

Artemis said her pain was associated with having had a happy relationship, and pointed out that being a couple has nothing to do with gender, but with affection:

I don't see a difference between being a widow in a homosexual marriage and in a heterosexual one, you know? I would say that my pain has to do with having a happy

marriage. It doesn't matter if it's homo- or heterosexual!

Not being recognized as a couple can be especially damaging in widowhood, as it influences the (im)possibility of expressing the pain of bereavement and the recognition of one's love and suffering.

The Invisibility of Suffering

Participants discussed the invisibility of their suffering, their sexuality, and affection, with the suffering of widowhood appearing to be intensified by discrimination. Hippolyta remembered she was encouraged to move on to new relationships, while the pain of her loss was ignored. Artemis saw her bereavement as a veiled process, with little social visibility: *"Worse than bereavement, is bereavement with a feeling of becoming actually invisible, you know?"*. This remark can be illustrated by the participant's experience in the seventh-day mass, when she could not take her place as the widow and sat far from the family of the deceased. Another issue raised by the participants was the constant encouragement to enter into a new relationship, as if their previous one had not existed or was unimportant, ignoring their suffering during the bereavement process.

The invisibility of the suffering experienced by these women reflects the denial and non-recognition of their homosexual relationships. Both participants felt that society disregarded the seriousness of their relationships, denying the existence of their lives as couples and addressing their widowhood as a process from which one could quickly and easily recover, as described by Hippolyta:

The general reaction was "You're so beautiful!", "You'll soon find somebody else!" Just "somebody else", no name, you know? [sarcastic] It's a person, right? "You'll find somebody else" . . . As if it were very easy, you know what I mean? Leaving a relationship in which someone had died and moving on to another one, which is very different from the reaction I would have received if I had been widowed by a husband, you know? It would have seemed far more emotional,

you know? "He was a good husband", "He died so young". There would be many aspects, many... Many... Many words of comfort.

As for the idea of recovery following bereavement, it is important to note that, as discussed by Freitas (2013), bereavement is not a period to be overcome, but rather, a period of resignification of the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved. In the words of Freitas et al. (2015), "Bereavement does not end: it changes its mode of presentation. The experience is *incorporated* into the life of the bereaved" (p. 23), though we would amend this to convey the importance of the cultural world in the process. The incorporation of this experience, and the subsequent acquisition of new roles and responsibilities, as discussed by Ferreira et al. (2008), is complicated by the question of how to change plans, habits, circumstances and behaviors in a world where you were invisible as a couple? In other words, finding new existential possibilities, new ways of being, which did not exist prior to the death of a loved one, become very challenging issues in disenfranchised grief.

Being Silenced

Participants reported that lesbian widowhood is not well incorporated in society, or even the LGBT community, so that their pain and experiences as widows were often silenced, as suggested by previous studies (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2014): *"So how will you construct this widowhood? It's not constructed, right? It's not constructed! Within the lesbian movement, it's not constructed!"* (Hippolyta).

Artemis and Hippolyta reported that most people around them - save for their closest friends - avoided talking about the deceased. According to Hippolyta, homosexuality and bereavement are both dealt with by silence, a silence which, in her own words, *"protects no one"*. She claims that both gay and lesbian individuals, as well as widows and widowers, are silenced by society when it treats these issues as taboo rather than discussing them openly. Contrary to common sense, silence does not prevent suffering and, in this case, leads individuals to experience twice

as much of it as they ordinarily would, both due to discrimination against their sexual orientation, and the loss of a loved one, resulting in the experience of disenfranchised grief. Participants therefore experienced a double taboo, and were silenced as both widows and lesbians.

Restrictions on the Expression of Pain

Restrictions on the expression of pain are observed in lesbian widowhood as a result of its disenfranchisement, invisible suffering, silencing, and ensuing lack of social support, as described by Hippolyta:

Those who knew about it, knew that was the reason I wasn't well. To those who didn't know and tried to find out, I would say, "No, I lost someone very close to me". I lied. Then as soon as I said [it was a woman], "Oh, what a shame," and the subject was dropped.

The participants felt they had no opportunities or people with whom to share their feelings after bereavement. Hippolyta said she avoided crying and expressing her suffering in public places such as her building and at work. The lived experience of veiled mourning led participants to wait and cry when they got home, seeking support only from those who acknowledged and accepted their relationship. As reported by Hippolyta: *"For me, the hardest part was not being able to get to work and be public about your widowhood . . . Maybe the inability to share your pain is worse, you know?"*

The limited possibilities of expressing the pain of bereavement are not healthy for widows. As discussed in the literature (Ferreira et al., 2008; Hart, 2008; Parkes, 1998), expressing one's feelings is a crucial part of coping with the changes brought about by the death of a spouse, allowing survivors to accept death, deal with the pain, and handle the challenges brought on by their new lives.

Social Support

The role of social support networks as facilitators of the grieving process has been widely discussed in the literature (Broderick et al., 2008; Ferreira et al., 2008; Parkes, 1998;

Whipple, 2008). In the present study, participants noted that their interaction with people who acknowledged their pain was a crucial source of comfort, underscoring the relevance of social recognition as a couple. Artemis, for instance, described the crucial role played by a group of friends in helping her cope with widowhood by demonstrating care and affection, and bringing her strength in a time of pain and suffering:

In the period when I couldn't eat... Well, I was beginning to get physically compromised. If I ate, I would vomit, and when I did so, I would have an irritated stomach, and couldn't go without eating. So they [Artemis's friends] simply said "Every day for a week, a bowl of soup will appear in your building lobby". And that was wonderful, right?! [happy]. Because people saw that I wasn't well, even the doormen, who had worked in the building all these years, would tell me, "Hey, your soup is here!". So the first day was crazy, because I would cry while drinking the soup, "but I can do it!", you know? I took two, three days to finish the soup meant for one day only. That made me strong, you know? The care they had for me. So I allowed myself to receive this affection.

The social network that supported the couple's bond continues to be relevant in bereavement, especially when the families of origin do not accept the relationship, and are therefore one of the few sources of support for lesbian widows (Broderick et al., 2008). In the case of Artemis, it went so far as to help her maintain her physical health.

Rejection or Acceptance by Families

The interviews showed the extent to which their rejection or acceptance by the family of their relationship would influence the relationship between the bereaved and her wife's family after death. Our study identified descriptions of acceptance, in the case of Hippolyta, and rejection, in the case of Artemis. Hippolyta described the importance of the care and support she received from the family of the deceased:

. . . but I think that her family never abandoning me had a lot to do with their acceptance of her as a lesbian, you know? Since they accepted it, and they did accept it, they really accepted it, see? We were welcomed like any other family member, no one ever said “no, no”. They were three daughters, all married, all married, see? And it was fine, so there was that!

Artemis, on the other hand, felt that her partner’s family had always demonstrated some degree of homophobia, hidden behind a veil of acceptance. As a result, her relationship with the family of the deceased was terminated. After the death of her spouse, the rupture of emotional bonds and the disregard for her rights as a widow led Artemis to feel disrespected and emotionally abused:

In my bereavement therapy, specifically, I began to realize that we, my partner and I, downplayed our relationship, and maybe we weren’t loved by her daughter as a couple, and in reality, I was necessary. When she didn’t have her mother, and I see that now, I was no longer necessary, I was disposable and a burden to them, since I lived in an apartment which she was legally entitled to inherit, you know?

The excessive interference of the family in inheritance issues when the civil union or marriage has not been legally registered has already been discussed by Whipple (2006). Similar instances in which the family of origin or biological family of the deceased disregarded the couple’s wishes and financial plans, resulting in legal charges against the deceased and an even greater amount of suffering, have also been documented (Bent & Magilvy, 2006; Broderick et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2014).

Need to Secure Personal Rights

The interviews revealed that participants felt a need to seek and exercise their rights. To do so, they resorted to unconventional means and legal battles, since their respective relationships were not legally recognized. As a result, a right that a widow would normally take for granted, such as a seven-day leave from work, had to be ob-

tained with the help of a medical request from a professional who knew Hippolyta and her wife. Artemis was only allowed to spend two hours with her partner in the ICU after claiming to be her psychologist. The inheritance to which Artemis was entitled gave rise to a complex and frustrating legal battle, with evidence of their partnership having to be hurriedly gathered after the death of her spouse. As previously demonstrated, these legal battles and hurdles to the access of her sick spouse and funeral rituals intensified her suffering. However, these experiences also encouraged participants to become the subjects of their own lives and seek to exercise their rights and be adequately acknowledged:

Then I decided to pay tribute to her. I was studying, and taking a course on sexuality, so I wrote about the rights of same-sex couples. I started to do it for others, you know? A type of resilience, like doing for others what I couldn’t do for myself, see? So I was really happy. Since I wrote my dissertation, I found out about three people who got married. Two obtained a civil union and one got married. Legally. So I thought, “Great! The dissertation was worth it”. (Artemis)

Need for Self-Respect and Self-Recognition as a Lesbian

Both participants discussed the importance of self-recognition and self-respect as lesbians. Artemis and Hippolyta both claimed that the attitude and respect toward their sexuality should come from themselves. To accept and respect themselves as lesbians implies that they will no longer be threatened or silenced by heteronormative society. The silence protects no one; to the contrary, it masks and conceals the lives of these women, preventing them from participating freely in society. The participants claimed that not disclosing their sexuality or disrespecting themselves out of respect for another leads to an uncomfortable situation both while the couple is together (since the relationship will not be recognized as legitimate, and external factors may interfere with the relationship), and after the death of one of the spouses (at which point their widowhood may not be recognized). As a result,

both participants highlighted the importance of the social position of the couple before death, revealing one aspect of the opportunities for personal growth and transformation which arise from the pain of bereavement. In the words of Hippolyta:

. . . and as for the silence, it's a silence that doesn't protect us, you know? Protect us from what? You know I became much happier in life over the past ten years when I really became an activist, after her death. I really did take this on, and I am a lot, a lot calmer now when I say, "Oh, I am a lesbian", you know? My heart is much lighter. When you can say, "Who cares about discrimination, who cares"? Because this in between thing, where you say it and don't say it... What is it, really?

The couple's social attitude, as discussed in the literature (Broderick et al., 2008), will influence the degree of support received by the widow, since disclosing the relationship is associated with an increase in social support, in spite of potential threats to the woman's safety. Widows who do not disclose the nature of their relationships experience more loneliness and isolation (Jenkins et al., 2014), suggesting that, in spite of the risks involved, this may be a protective factor against suffering in lesbian bereavement.

Broderick et al. (2008) claimed that the loss of a partner may lead survivors to reevaluate the role they took on prior to bereavement, as well as their identity, values and expectations, all of which contribute to the meaning and purpose of their lives. After the death of her wife, Hippolyta became an activist. However, Artemis's reports also provided strong evidence of existential engagement. Her frustrating experience with the family of her wife during her illness and after her death taught her to respect herself after showing her the negative consequences which may arise from placing others' needs before her own. Today, she considers herself very different in this regard: *"Today I see that when we, out of respect for the others, come to disrespect ourselves, that's the consequence, it's what I live, right?"*. Both participants have taken up different forms

of activism since the loss of their wives, showing that bereavement provided a possibility for transforming their own social roles as lesbians.

Conclusion

A search of the Brazilian literature retrieved no articles on lesbian widowhood. Academic publications reflect the issues discussed in society, and in the international setting, far more progress has been made with regard to LGBT rights, including the comprehension of the grieving process in this population. The lack of articles in the Brazilian literature on bereavement in same-sex couples, especially lesbians, reflects the invisibility and non-recognition of these relationships in society, limiting discussions on the topic, as highlighted in the present study, even within activist communities. The literature, together with the results of the present study, highlight the need to focus on social attitudes toward these issues, deconstructing artificial boundaries and the discrimination against same-sex unions, which are still often recognized as an expression of love and affection rather than a civil right in themselves (Costa & Nardi, 2015).

The fact that race, age and the period in which participant experiences took place were not investigated may be seen as a limitation of the present study. These issues should be discussed in future investigations, which should also reconsider the methods used in participant recruitment in order to increase the sample size drawn by future studies. Despite the 15-year interval between the experiences of bereavement analyzed in the present study, both demonstrated several similarities in terms of the challenges faced, their social relationships, and acceptance as a couple.

The present study emphasizes the need to dismantle the invisibility of lesbian bereavement, especially in light of its impact on health and family relationships. One of the most relevant findings identified in the interviews was the extent to which bereavement is affected by the affectionate bond between partners and their social recognition as a legitimate couple, a particularly challenging issue. Participants constantly

sought to have their relationships and affectionate bonds acknowledged, though the process was permeated by disappointment, isolation, loneliness and several other conflicts brought about by the denial of their relationships and sexuality by society and their families. These findings, however, are not exclusive to bereavement, and are part of the existential lived experience of homosexual throughout their lives. "Self-disclosure" is a relevant issue across their lives, and must be constantly reevaluated in terms of its potential benefits and disadvantages, and its role as both a protective and risk factor.

As such, recognition as a couple and, consequently, as lesbians, has clear implications for bereavement. The fact that these issues are not openly addressed by society increases the suffering associated with bereavement, shedding light on the extent to which they are intertwined with subjective experience.

This raises two relevant points, one theoretical, and one practical. The former speaks to the impossibility of considering bereavement outside its horizon of possibilities, where the absence of a loved one takes on a historical dimension as an existential conflict, since it requires that widows reconsider their subjective social roles - disclosing or not disclosing their sexual orientation. This reveals the need to acknowledge the existential dimension as historical rather than constituted as an ideality. The same should be done for bereavement. The second, practical issue, speaks to the fact that health professionals who plan to care for these women must address the visibility of the lesbian relationship and its impact on coping with bereavement and pain, and seek to investigate and understand its influence in the context of each particular widow's life. After all, despite its social characteristics, each instance of bereavement occurs in the context of a life. To understand the impact of these conditions is not equivalent to being "forced to choose" between available coping alternatives, but to question each of their contours and hues. On a similar note, self-disclosure should not be considered an answer to suffering, since legal battles are only part of the difficulties experienced during bereavement. That is not to disregard these legal

issues as significant sources of concern and frustration; however, it must be noted that these are only part of the problem.

The legitimacy of widowhood is closely related to the social position and recognition of the couple before death. However, as mentioned by Hippolyta, her suffering was not fully acknowledged even within the LGBT movement. The participant claimed that lesbian widowhood is not yet part of the social world, so that widows are always assumed to be heterosexual.

In conclusion, social support networks and structured opportunities for assistance are crucial for the legitimization of these women's experience, and the transformation of their loss into an opportunity for the resignification of bereavement and the reduction of their suffering and its consequences. As described in the literature, the loss of a partner may also resonate with previous losses associated with lesbophobia. As such, professionals who care for lesbian widows must also focus on the relationship between their families and its position in the continuum between acceptance and denial of the relationship, identifying her social support network and being available as an overture for the resignification of their lived experience of bereavement.

References

- Bent, K. N., & Magilvy, J. K. (2006). When a partner dies: Lesbian widows. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 27*, 447-459. doi:10.1080/01612840600599960
- Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. (2014). *Estatísticas do registro civil*. Retrieved from <https://ww2.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/registrocivil/2014/default.shtm>
- Bristowe, K., Marshall, S., & Harding, R. (2016). The bereavement experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans people who have lost a partner: A systematic review, thematic synthesis and modelling of the literature. *Palliative Medicine, 30*(8), 730-744. doi:10.1177/02692163166634601
- Broderick, D. J., Birbilis, J. M., & Steger, M. F. (2008). Lesbians grieving the death of a partner: Recommendations for practice. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 12*, 225-235. doi:10.1080/10894160802161380

- Costa, A. B., & Nardi, H. C. (2015). O casamento “homofetivo” e a política da sexualidade: Implicações do afeto como justificativa das uniões de pessoas do mesmo sexo. *Revista Estudos Feministas*, 23, 137-150. doi:10.1590/0104-026X2015v23n1p/137
- Ferreira, L. C., Leão, N. C., & Andrade, C. C. (2008). Viuvez e luto sob a luz da Gestalt-terapia: Experiências de perdas e ganhos. *Revista da Abordagem Gestáltica*, 14, 153-160. Retrieved from http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1809-68672008000200002
- Freitas, J. L. (2013). Luto e fenomenologia: Uma proposta compreensiva. *Revista da Abordagem Gestáltica*, 19, 97-105. Retrieved from http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1809-68672013000100013&lng=pt&tlng=pt.
- Freitas, J. L., Michel, L. H. F., & Zomkowski, T. L. (2015). Eu sem tu: Uma leitura existencial do luto em psicologia. In J. L. Freitas & M. V. F. Cremasco (Eds.), *Mães em Luto* (pp. 16-21). Curitiba, PR: Juruá.
- Giorgi, A., & Sousa, D. (2010). *Método fenomenológico de investigação em psicologia*. Lisboa: Fim de século.
- Hart, C. F. M. (2008). Perdas e Processos de Luto. In M. Paraiba & M. R. da Silva (Eds.), *Câncer: Uma abordagem psicológica* (pp. 153-166). Porto Alegre, RS: AGE.
- Jenkins, C. L., Edmundson, A., Averett, P., & Yoon, I. (2014). Older lesbians and bereavement: Experiencing the loss of a partner. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 57, 273-287. doi: 10.1080/01634372.2013.850583
- Kovács, M. J. (1992). Morte, separação, perdas e o processo de luto. In M. J. Kovács (Ed.), *Morte e desenvolvimento humano* (3rd ed., pp. 149-164). São Paulo, SP: Casa do Psicólogo.
- Lenhardt, A. M. C. (1997). Grieving disenfranchised losses: Background and strategies for counselors. *Journal of Humanistic Education and Development*, 35, 208-216. doi:10.1002/j.2164-4683.1997.tb00371.x
- Parkes, C. M. (1998). *Luto: Estudos sobre a perda na vida adulta*. São Paulo, SP: Summus.
- Stevens, P. E., & Hall, J. M. (1998). Stigma, health beliefs and experiences with health care in lesbian women. *IMAGE: Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 20(2), 69-73. doi:10.1111/j.1547-5069.1988.tb00033.x
- Supremo Tribunal Federal. (2011, May 05). *Supremo reconhece união homoafetiva* [Notice]. Retrieved from <http://www.stf.jus.br/portal/cms/verNoticiaDetalhe.asp?idConteudo=178931>
- Supremo Tribunal Federal. (2013, May 20). *Resolução sobre casamento civil entre pessoas do mesmo sexo é aprovada pelo Conselho Nacional de Justiça* [Notice]. Retrieved from <http://www2.stf.jus.br/portalStfInternacional/cms/destaquesNewsletter.php?sigla=newsletterPortalInternacionalDestaques&idConteudo=238515>
- Turatti, B. O. (2012). Implicações da viuvez na saúde: Uma abordagem fenomenológica em Merleau-Ponty. *Saúde & Transformação Social*, 3, 32-38. Retrieved from http://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2178-70852012000100006&lng=pt&tlng=pt.
- Whipple, V. (2006). *Lesbian widows: Invisible grief*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Whipple, V. (2007). Working with lesbian widows. *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement*, 10(1), 4-7. Retrieved from <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=056427304773984;res=IELHEA>
- Whitman, J. S., Cormier, S., & Boyd, C. (2000). Lesbian identity management at various stages of the coming out process: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 5, 1-104. doi:10.1023/A:1010181416984

Received: 09/06/2016
1st revision: 25/07/2016
Accepted: 26/07/2016