The African Conception of Death: A Cultural Implication

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Abstract

From an African perspective death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible spiritual ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to live in the spirit ancestors' realm dead. It signifies an inextricable spiritual connection between the visible and invisible worlds. This chapter focuses on how traditional Africans conceive and deal with the bereavement process. We adopt the African worldview and philosophy as our framework. We dispute the often held view in mainstream psychology that behavior, in this case the concept of death and the bereavement processes have universal applicability, articulation, representation and meaning. For Africans, death is accompanied by a series of the performance of rituals which connect the living dead and the living. Two case studies are presented and discussed to illustrate the African conception of death, its meaning, significance and accompanying mourning rituals and process. We approach the participants' stories from a qualitative narrative inquiry viewpoint as our methodology. The experiences in the participants' stories in the workplace reveal that African indigenous ways of dealing with death are still not recognized, respected and understood in organizations which have a dominant Western culture.

Introduction

The professional study of psychology in African has been and is still dominated by Euro-American approaches (Nwoye, 2013). Similarly, views on conceptions of death in psychology are based on traditional Euro-American epistemological paradigms. Matoane (2012) argues that a lot of psychological theories from the West are regarded as universal. Subsequently, theories of death in mainstream psychology mirror this dominant thinking which is based on certain assumptions and realities about a person and the social world in which they exist. For example, the assumption that Erickson's theory of development in the field of psychology is applicable to all humanity in general represents this dominant and universalist position. A review of literature in mainstream psychology texts reveals an abysmal ignorance and absence of valid and relevant historical and cultural material and reality on African people (Parham, 2002 & Nobles, 1986 & 2006). For Western or European-centered psychology, the African as a member of an ethnic group does not exist (Parham, 2002). These Euro-American conceptions are mostly presented as having universal applicability to all human diversity (Parham, 2002, Grills, 2002, Mkhize, 2004, Nsamenang, 2006, Nobles & Cooper, 2013). This universal applicability is limited and excludes other realities such as those of Africans whose conceptions of death for example, are different in interpretation, representation and meaning. No measure of imported experience can ever be authentic, unless it is constructed and interpreted from within the context of the lived experiences of the recipients. Amankwantia II in (Parham, (2002, p. xxii) argues that "only arrogance and hegemonic intent can explain the blind application of particular experiences of humanity as if they were valid global models". In understanding the African cultural reality, we have to avoid what Nobles, 2013, calls 'conceptual incarnation' and demonstrate the understanding that there is no normative population or behavior in the world, except for that particular context (Parham, 2002). In our view and experience, the misunderstanding and conflict that often arise in multicultural context especially the workplace, is due to the different conceptions of experiences such as death, its cultural implications and meanings of the rituals performed during and after death. This is so

mainly because there is no or very little dialogical engagements and conversations between the different world-views and realities.

The Work Context

Work, like any other contexts plays a very important role in the life, interaction and meaning of the African people. To this effect**,** work plays a vital role in understanding and facilitating healthy employees and organizations (Bergh, 2011). Consequently, the facilitation of a healthy interaction between employees and their work context leads to positive wellbeing and cosmic order and harmony. By contrast, poor work experiences and the loss of work have been associated with many psychological ill effects for employees (Bergh, 2011). Bergh (2007) suggests that the presence of certain values and the extent to which individuals can identify with their workplace influence their work experiences. Job satisfaction is affected by different sets of factors which assist in understanding why people are satisfied or dissatisfied. Misunderstandings, conflict and unfair treatment arise from lack of supportive policies which take into account the diverse population in the workplace. Instead of seeking clarity, Euro-American thinkers have a tendency of rejecting or negating cultural realities that they do not understand or cannot be proven using Western conventions (Parham, 2002; King, 2013). The "culture-negating dimension of Western psychology" (King, 2013, p. 225) contradicts the overwhelming evidence of the importance that culture plays in understanding human behavior (Holliday, 2009). The question to be asked and addressed in this chapter is: how do employers and employees deal with cultural differences, and why is it important to attend to these cultural differences in the work place. The two case studies presented in this chapter are an example of a culture-negating Western system of thought.

This chapter deals with the African conception of death, the bereavement process, its meaning and significance to the people of African ancestry. The aim is to present the African conception of death as a culturally salient psychological material whose meaning needs to be differently understood in mainstream psychology in general, and in the workplace in particular. Death will therefore be presented using the African epistemological paradigm and worldview as an underlying philosophy. The African ways of knowing, doing and being as well as the understanding of self will be espoused (Ramose, 2002a; Mkhize, 2004; Nobles, 2006; Mariette, 2013). Therefore a communal, interdependent and co-existent sense of being which is based on the philosophy of Ubuntu is presented. Ubuntu is the basis of African philosophy (Ramose, 2002). This framework will provide an understanding on how Africans perceive and make sense of death as a natural transition from this life into the next (Mariette, 2013), as well as an integral part of their being-in-the-world. It is envisaged that this understanding will provide a broader and inclusive conception of death especially in the workplace. This will hopefully create a conversational space that will reduce the often experienced misunderstanding, tension, conflict and hostilities which in most instances result in strained relationships, loss of jobs and psychological trauma on employees. The lack of dialogical engagement in socially and culturally polarized contexts such as South Africa maintains the domination of the knowledge land scape by Euro-American paradigms. The problem arising from this situation has been, as we argue, that African people's cultural experiences have been conceived and theorized from foreign ways of knowing and doing (Grills, 2002; Obasi, 2002; Nobles, 2013; Tlou, 2013). This in our view continues to create epistemological injustice, inconsistencies and has profound cultural implications in multicultural communities and contexts such as South Africa. We argue that a congruent and authentic understanding of death in Africa and the Diaspora contexts, like any other concept and experience, should seriously take into account the cultural experiences and philosophies of the African people. In this way, psychology will become relevant and inclusive of other cultural experiences and represent indigenous life in what Motha (2010), so eloquently refers to as the epistemology and ontology of postcolonial becoming. In our view, postcolonial becoming of previously colonized indigenous people should fully and unconditionally acknowledge African lived experiences and cultural practices as authentic, different and equal to other knowledge systems. Africans should and, must be able to determine, define and present their cultural practices and concepts as part of valid human knowledge experience in the broader psychology landscape and cross-cultural interactions. We will present two case studies to demonstrate the potential conflict, emotional hurt and misunderstanding which

could arise in a multicultural work context if there is lack of dialogical engagement to deal with the culture-negating attitudes and discourse.

The African Philosophy and Worldview

Before we espouse the African worldview, it is important to ask the question: Is there an African epistemology and philosophy? This question has been the subject of critical dialogue by scholars in the field of philosophy for many decades (Wiredu, 1980; Hountondji, 1983; Mbiti, 1990; Gyekye 1995; Kaphagawani & Malherbe, 2002). Despite these questions, there is proof that there is a display of African behavior that continues to maintain cultural connections and traditions, the wellspring flowing from the African ontology and epistemology (Ramose, 2002a, Grills, 2002, Nobles, 2013). To the extent that there is such an animal as an African, there is an African epistemology, ways in which Africans conceive and understand the world as well as the unique ways in which Africans use their knowledge systems to advance their development. According to Obasi (2002), "African philosophy is the study of a particular system of ethics, conduct, thought, nature of the universe, and so on, that has its basis in the culture and experiences of African people" (p. 54). Epistemology is a subset of African philosophy (Kaphagawani & Malherbe, 2002). As Keeney, (1979) plausibly argued, one cannot not have an epistemology. All people, Africans included, have an epistemology and some form of knowledge (Okere, 2005). The African philosophy, epistemology or worldview presented here is not "restricted to a specific African ethnocultural group, but rather reflects a basic historical continuity, historical consciousness and cultural unity which offer an understanding of things African, African culture and cultural adaptations and what it means to be African" (Grills, 2002, p. 12).

The assertion that there is an African philosophy, epistemology or worldview does not in any way dismiss or deny the differences that exists even between African communities in Africa and elsewhere in the world. Amuleru-Marshall and Amuleru-Marshall (2013) warn against overgeneralizations and being prescriptive by arguing that "Even when one presumes to be accessing deep cultural structure, it would not be found that African Caribbean culture is characterized by a common worldview that resembles that which is advanced by American Africentric psychologists" (p. 322). We take cognizance of these differences but still ague that in the main, there are things uniquely African, shared African conceptual frameworks and cultural practices which espouse the African reality which is different from Western conceptions (Biko, 2004 & Nobles, 2013). Ramose, (2002a), maintains that "a persuasive philosophical argument can be made that there is a' family atmosphere' that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa" p.40. African psychological reality and thought is a view that reflects an African orientation to life, the world, and relationships with others and one's self and is prevalent in people of African ancestry and the Diaspora (Grills, 2002; Obasi, 2002).

The African worldview refers to the way in which Africans perceive their world which, in turn, influences their ways of knowing and doing. There is no such thing as a value-free cultural system. All knowledge systems have philosophical underpinnings, are contextual and culture based and to some extent biased. African (Black) philosophy is rooted in the nature of Black culture which is based on particular indigenous philosophical assumptions (Nobles, 2006). Worldviews and cultural systems are by their very nature biased towards other cultural value systems. A worldview is the embodiment of people's cultural beingness and identity. The world view of African people can be conceptualized along the following dimensions (Grills, 2002; Lyons, Bike, Johnson, & Bethea, 2012):

1. Cosmology (i.e., the structure of reality) which may be grounded in interdependence, collectivism and harmony with nature.
2. Ontology (i.e., the nature of being and reality) where there is recognition of the spiritual bases of nature, one's existence, and the universe.
3. Axiology, the primary importance of human to human interaction as a value system
4. Epistemology, a system of truths and a method for revealing or understanding truth or generating knowledge (Grills, 2002)

The above dimensions are supported by Okere (2005) and Battiste (2008) who argue that indigenous people's epistemology is derived from their immediate ecology, experiences, perceptions thoughts and memories and experiences which are shared with others and their spiritual world. From a philosophical, epistemological and ontological viewpoint, inquiry and reality cannot be confined to normative standards and linear reasoning determined by rational laws and rules (Grills & Ajei, 2002). There are things that are beyond the confinements of rationality, things spiritual. For instance, it is difficult to understand why death occurs despite all the possible predictions and technological advancements.

Death and the African Philosophy

Death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible or spiritual ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to live in the spirit ancestors' realm. (King, 2013). The above meaning attached to death is therefore consistent with the African's cultural, historical epistemological and methodological conceptions of being-in-world, and are premised on these dimensions. Perceptions and conceptions about death in any cultural system are based on certain philosophical presuppositions and worldviews. Similarly, conceptions of death particularly in indigenous Sub-Saharan Africa are understood on the above dimensions. Given that there are cultural differences in conceptions of the person, conceptions of humanness can vary across cultures as well (Park, Haslam, & Kashima, 2012). It is for this reason that we are careful not to assume that all Africans conceive death according to the above dimensions of being-in-the-world. All systems are influenced by, and based on a particular epistemological paradigm consistent with that particular cultural context. In line with this worldview, we will attempt to provide an indigenous African conception of death which is based on the African epistemological paradigm. We posit that death ought to be understood within its philosophical-socio-cultural context for its meaningful interpretation and understanding.

According to Mbiti (1990), African philosophy is the understanding, attitude of mind, logic, and perceptions behind the manner in which African people think, act, or speak in different situations of life. The being of an African does not exclude the spiritual connectedness with the world of the living dead or as Mbiti (1990) puts it, the spiritual presence in the affairs of the living or becoming a member in the company of spirits…considered to be in a state of personal immortality (Nobles, 2006). Nsamenang (1992, 2006) states that an African worldview envisions the human life cycle in three phases of selfhood. There is a spiritual selfhood, which begins at conception, or perhaps earlier in an ancestral spirit that reincarnates. Second is a social or experiential selfhood which begins at conception the cycle from rite of incorporation or introduction of the child into the human community through to death, third; an ancestral selfhood which follows biological death.

It is worth noting that from the indigenous African worldview, these selfhoods do not exist as autonomous, independent and in isolation. They are interdependent, interrelated and co-exist in a collaborative and collective way, hence the concept of collective or interdependent self (Mkhize, 2004). The self gets defined and understood in relation to the others, and gets meaning from its relational connectedness to other cosmic life forces. The meaning attributed to the self is based on the meaningful contribution the self makes to the wellbeing of others and the environment. Life experiences and developmental phases, death included, are not viewed as separate from each other, outside of their encompassing context. When people die, they transcend to the spirit world to be in the company of the living dead or ancestors. Ancestors protect and provide guidance to those in the material realm and therefore are highly respected, venerated and very important to the community of the living (King, 2013). There is therefore continuous and unbreakable communication and connectedness between the living and the living dead. For the traditional African people the deceased is believed to be living in the ontology of the invisible intangible beings, dynamically engaging in an evolving state of existence in the world of the animated being (Baloyi, 2008). The belief here is in the actual presence and influence of the deceased, the living dead in the lives of the living. Implied here is spiritual disposition. Spirituality in terms of traditional African thought forms an integral part of the cosmic ontological unity. The spirit of the living dead is embodied in this cosmic unity. The spirit is therefore a member of life forces that constitutes the wholeness of the cosmic unity. Be-ing as a wholeness includes the totality of all beings, animate and inanimate. Viewed from this perspective, Africans do not conceive death and life as two separate phases, instead, there is a har-

monious and interdependent coexistence between the two life forces (Ramose, 2002a). This is approaching the African person in his /her religious understanding of the two dimensional community of the living and the living dead (Bujo, 1998). It is however worth noting that the belief in after life has many variations and is shared by many traditional Western religious and indigenous traditional cultures.

The African Conception of Death

From the Euro-American perspectives, life is seen to be consisting of discrete stages, starting with conception and ending with death. Death therefore marks the end stage of life. On dying, the dead person literally ceases to exist. On the contrary, an African worldview understands death as an integrated and continuous developmental life process which is inseparable from the interwoven connections between the visible and invisible ontologies. People do not cease to exist once they are physically dead, instead, they transcend to the spiritual world to live in the community of the living dead (Mbiti, 1990, Ramose, 2002a & Bujo, 1998). For indigenous African people, dying marks a further developmental milestone which is not separate from life developmental processes and stages. For the indigenous African people, dying is a transition to, or 'growing' to a different phase of being. The dead transcends to the state of collective immortality and exists in the company of the spirits (Nobles, 2006). Motsei (2004) emphasises the spiritual connectedness by reminding us that when we die, we transcend to heaven. This heaven is however here on earth, in Setswana - *legodimo le mo lefatsheng*-earth-bound emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependedness of the two ontologies. She further states that we tend to perceive heaven as a place remote and high above us which we get to inhabit only once we die, yet heaven is in the here and now. Like birth, death is characterised by a series of cultural rituals and rites of passage which at times continue for the duration of the mourning period, as long as the living dead is remembered and continues to influence the actions of the living. The mourning or grieving process cannot therefore be linked or limited to some time span in a discrete sense. It is for this reason that Africans take time off from work when their loved ones are dead, to perform rituals that eternally connect them to the deceased. Therefore from an indigenous African ontological viewpoint, death does not imply an end to life, instead, it marks the beginning of another phase of being (King, 2013). The process of reincarnation, in which Africans belief, allows life process. The meaning of reincarnation here should not be understood in the Western ancestors amongst others, to return to their families in their grandchildren Oluwole (1992), to maintain this never ending evolutionary sense of the dead coming back in a different form or spices. Instead, it emphases different forms of remembering and acknowledging the ever present spiritual beingness of the living dead. Dreams are also forms of communication which maintain these unbreakable connectedness. For traditional Africans, the living dead are an inseparable and influential part of their being. It is for this reason that when Africans perform rituals by the grave side for example, that they do not refer to connecting with the dead person's spirit. They communicate with the living dead as, 'I am talking to my father or mother or grandfather, not the spirit or body of my dead father or dead mother'. This is a clear illustration that the living dead are regarded as genuinely and authentically living with and among the living and having an influence on them.

Rituals and Death

Rituals are representation of cultural performances and rites of passage which mark a people's life experience. Properly construed, rituals are an expression of people's thoughts, emotions, social organization and cultural identities. They are therefore regarded as viable scientific methods of connections and dialogue. Baloyi (2008) posits that rituals are forms of expressions and connections performed by individuals, groups of people or communities in communication with the living-dead and the Supreme Being. In traditional African thought of death, the grieving process is characterized by rituals such as the bereaved family members shaving their hair, and the slaughtering of a domestic animal. Different rituals are performed depending on who is the deceased and how they have died. In South Africa some of the Bapedi tribe that originates from Limpopo province, believe that when a married man dies, his widow is forbidden from arriving home after sunset, visiting neighbors, attending family and community functions and wears black clothes. The black clothes symbolize the dark cloud, death which is associated with loss and pain (*bohloko*) in Sepedi. In case of the wife dying, the widower is also forbidden from having an intimate affair before a stipulated period, usually six months to one

year depending on the cultural group concerned. He is also barred from arriving home after sun set. There are different practices which vary from different ethnic groups and they all have symbolic significance. The performance of these rituals is seen as important in maintaining balance and harmony between the living and the living dead. This is the basis on which the connection between the physical and spiritual ontologies is maintained and enhanced.

Ubuntu, Harmony and Cosmic Order

Every culture is premised on a certain worldview. Mkhize, (2004) defines a worldview as a set of basic assumptions that a group of people develops in order to explain reality and their place and purpose in the world. These assumptions provide a frame of reference to address problems in life. Traditional Africans understand their being-in-the-world as a qualitative tapestry of connected systems which deal with life issues collectively and collaboratively. This connectedness is reflected and manifests itself in people's relationships with the others and their environing context. Human beings are therefore interdependent and are expected to co-exist harmoniously and responsibly in order to promote peace and order. Ramose (2002b) argues that "Peace through the concrete realization of justice is the fundamental law of *Ubuntu* philosophy. Justice without peace is the negation of the strife towards cosmic harmony. But peace without justice is the dislocation of *Umuntu* from the cosmic order" (p. 52). This quality of being-with-and-for-the-others life (Mkhize, 2004), is referred to as ubuntu. Ubuntu is therefore an African philosophy, a way of being-in-the-world. However, the African way of being-in-the-world extends beyond their physical space and include their relationship with the living dead. Therefore, Umuntu cannot attain Ubuntu without the intervention of the living-dead. The living dead are important to the upkeep and protection of the family of the living. This speaks to the Ubuntu understanding of cosmic harmony (Ramose, 2002a). Death cannot therefore fully be understood outside the philosophy of Ubuntu. The philosophy of Ubuntu is inextricably linked to the living dead. Providing food to the masses of people who come to the funeral including slaughtering an animal is an Ubuntu philosophy imperative. The process of burying the dead, the accompanying rituals and the veneration of the living dead constitute performances and conversations as authentic. The methodology through which African experiences and practices are studied and construed should be consistent with the African worldview and philosophy. In this way research in the African context will reflect authentic epistemological and methodological justice and relevance.

Methodology

In line with the traditional African worldview, philosophy and oral tradition, we used the indigenous story-telling as the method of inquiry through which we understood the narratives of the two participants. Oral traditions play an important role in knowledge production, preservation and dissemination, and are not less important that written texts (Oluwole, 1997). Story-telling as a cultural representation in research contexts is usually referred to as narrative inquiry (Stake, 2000; Lee, 2009). Through story-telling, knowledge is produced, preserved and disseminated from one generation to the other. Story-telling has been one of the key cultural ways knowledge was explored, sustained and protected within indigenous communities. "Reclaiming story-telling and retelling our traditional stories is to engage in one form of decolonization" (Lee, 2009, p. 2). Story-telling is embodied within the oral traditions which reflects the memory of indigenous people and encompasses their cultural values. In the context of academy, scholarly research and the science discourse, African indigenous methodologies are faced with the challenge of legitimacy and acceptability in a multicultural research contexts (Weber-Pillwax, 2004). However, indigenous researchers are gradually finding appropriate ways to apply their own tribal epistemologies into their research work. According to Kovach (2010), indigenous researchers have the responsibility to assist others to understand and know indigenous worldviews in a responsible and respectful way.

The two case studies in this chapter provide one way of creating conversations and space for possible learning, creating an understanding of alternative realities and meaning in multicultural contexts. From the traditional African worldview, knowledge is not only acquired through formal learning and education. The Sesotho/Setswana saying; *go tsamaya ke go bona/go ithuta*, moving around or getting out of one's comfort zone opens possibilities to new experiences and learnings. The above idiom indicates the boundless, non-restrictive,

non-informal and spontaneous ways of learning, knowing and being of Africans which is not limited by pre-scriptive laws, time and space. Every encounter is therefore a qualitative knowledge generating and experiential space. The African saying in *Sesotho/Setswana motho ke taba*, a human being is a story or the very nature of being human tells a narrative about people's cultural and historical background. Kovach (2010) maintains that stories remind us of who we are and where we belong. The line of argument here is that stories are an inextricable part of our identity and being. Emphasis here is on the interconnectedness between the value of knowledge and relationships. Therefore the act of listening to people's stories is in itself a knowledge seeking method. Similarly, stories as indigenous inquiry are grounded within a relationship-based approach to research (Kovach, 2010). Inherent in these narratives, ways of knowing and doing are the different non-linear methodologies which contain African philosophical thought, epistemologies, narratives, rituals and performances which are fundamental to the African identity. These forms of knowing and doing then are characterized by indigenous methodologies that are different from the traditional Euro-American research paradigms.

Indigenous methodology can be defined as a research by and for indigenous peoples, using techniques and methodologies obtained from the traditions and knowledge of those peoples, Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson & Sookraj (in Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008). The qualitative nature of these narratives and conversations provide meaning and, by implication very useful sites of knowledge. Lyons, Bike Johnson & Bethea (2012, p.155) point to the "potential congruence that may exist between qualitative research and African cultural values". On this reasoning, these authors argue for the relevance of qualitative research to the life experiences of people of African descent. In support of the qualitative-relationship nature of the-being-of-Africans, Lee (2009) maintains that within each indigenous group there are multiple sites from which to intervene that require a range of research projects that are ethical, respectful for, by and with indigenous people's qualitative approaches. Kovach (2010) concurs with Lee (2009) that indigenous methodologies can be situated within the qualitative landscape because they encompass characteristics congruent with other relational qualitative approaches. In our view, qualitative narrative enquiry is congruent and consistent with the African worldview because it allows the researcher to be subjective and reflexive and therefore in touch with his or her culture and lived experiences. On the other hand, this form of inquiry benefits participants by providing them with a space to be listened to and authentically connect with researchers. In research and therapeutic contexts, pre-existing relationships are therefore deemed significant (Kovach, 2010). The use of story-telling (Purakau) in clinical therapeutic contexts has also been used by other indigenous communities such as the Maori practitioners (Lee, 2009). In the case of our encounter with the two participants presented in this chapter, they narrated their stories in the context of therapeutic conversations. The narrative sessions took place three months apart at different consultation places. Both participants came voluntarily to share their stories with the therapist.[1]

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1 The names used in the two cases are pseudonames.

Case 1:

Presenting problem and background Information:

    Sizwe is a black Shangaan male, aged 35 years. He worked for a Coin Security firm as a security guard. During the conversation he complained about insomnia, loss of appetite, loss of interest in his work and general low mood.

    His sister passed away due to HIV/AIDS related illness. Sizwe was worried about how he was going to provide food for all the relatives and community members who were going to be physically assisting with funeral arrangements (setting up tents, cooking, providing wood for cooking and digging the grave) as well as those that will be providing emotional and spiritual support to the family before and after the funeral. Sizwe was overwhelmed by all these demands and asked for financial assistance from his boss to buy a cow for the funeral ritual. According to Sizwe, slaughtering of an animal and spilling blood symbolizes an unbreakable spiritual connectedness between the leaving and the living-dead and had to be done for Sizwe's sister to rest in peace. Sizwe reported that his boss responded by asking him why is he wasting lots of money feeding the whole nation some of whom did not have any relationship with him or the family. Besides not giving him the advance, the boss reportedly walked away as Sizwe was trying to explain his dilemma and told him, 'you must change your wasteful culture'. Sizwe was badly scared emotionally to the extent of seeking therapy two days before the burial of his sister.

    During the initial conversation with Sizwe, we established that he was not emotionally coping with the death of his sister. He was however mostly disturbed and unhappy with how his employer treated him. When asked what his expectation was, Sizwe told the therapist that given his emotional state, he expected his boss to be empathic, supportive and sensitive to his painful loss. The unmet expectations seemingly resulted in a lot of hurt, frustration, misunderstood, disappointment and general feeling of being undermined and disrespected.

Reflections and Observations on Narratives

Our reflections on the two narratives proved both challenging and interesting. We are inextricably linked to the worldview and epistemological paradigm and culture as those of the participants. This made it easy to connect with the participants. The pre-existing relationship that Kovach (2010) maintains was somehow 'already there' and therefore the negotiation of the relationship and our shared worldviews created deep connections. In this way, we are in essence re-telling a story about the story. We see ourselves in the stories of the participants. Our experiences are in line with the African worldview and narrative inquiry research method (Kovach, 2010) because it allows researchers to be culturally responsive by allowing indigenous stories to be legitimately told and represented (Lee, 2009). The indigenous languages (Sepedi and XiTsonga) adopted by the therapist during his conversation with participants assisted in creating deep connections and meaningful narratives. At the level of participants' process, the following observations were made:

The two cases demonstrate conflicting worldviews and cultural differences between the employers and the employees. Employees and employers were faced with several cultural and organizational challenges. Both employees and their organizations believed in different sets of values which are important for the existence and functioning of each. This invariably created tensions between the two epistemological paradigms.

Case 2:

Presenting problem and background information:

Takalani is a black Venda female, aged 48 yrs. She was employed as an ordinary worker in a textile firm. When she consulted, her husband had been killed in a car accident and she was referred for therapy a month after her husband's burial. The initial conversation with Takalani revealed that she had generalized anxiety and fear, insomnia, exhaustion, persistent headaches and lack of motivation.

Takalani stayed with her two children, aged seven and thirteen. Most of her relatives or support systems were staying in the rural Limpopo province in South Africa. Her culture required that as a widow she was supposed to observe certain prescribed cultural rituals, for example (not arriving home after sunset, performs cleansing rituals every day before sunset for several months, *go aramela go ntsha sefifi* (cleans bad spirits through steaming). It was discovered that Takalani was very worried about losing her job because her employer wanted her to continue with her night duty shift a week after her husband was buried. Takalani mentioned several times that her employer was unsupportive, unreasonable and disrespectful of her traditional practices. On one occasion her boss allegedly asked her 'how long was she going to stay at home for someone who was dead and would not bring her back to life?'. Her boss reportedly blamed her 'backward culture" for her problems. She was caught up between her belief system and cultural practices and her work (organizational demands), and wanted to do the impossible task of satisfying both realities. Takalani felt very vulnerable, confused, ambivalent and worried that she would lose her job.

The difference in the epistemological and ontological realities which result in misunderstanding, hurt, conflict and frustrations cannot be blamed on one particular epistemological paradigm and cultural belief system. Both the African and the Euro-American worldviews have different understanding, meaning and significance they attach to death.

- Despite the employees' attempt to explain their cultural dilemma, there was no interest on the part of the employers to listen to the meaning attached to death. The lack of conversation around death and its meaning created feelings of rejection, lack of support and hostilities.
- Organizational expectations in the above cases are inconsistent/ in conflict with the African employees' cultural belief systems, while on the other hand, the employees' expectations are also at variance with the culture of the organizations.
- Based on the experiences of participant in the two cases presented, the philosophy of Ubuntu (love, respect and caring for fellow human beings), which is the basis of African philosophy and sense of being, does not form part of organizations' culture.
- African culture conceives and perceives death as a grieving process which is not restricted to time. This process is marked by a series of spiritually connecting rituals which have symbolic and material meanings to the living dead and the living, therefore death and mourning are not regarded as discrete activities but circular processes which stretch over time.
- The employees represent an African value and belief system which is based on the African worldview, while the predominant value system of their companies represents the capitalist production based paradigm. None is less valid or more significant to the other. They both have legitimate claims over their respective realities.
- The attempt to explain the significance of death and the accompanying rituals by both employees seem to be dismissed without any attempt to create a conversational space about this African reality.
- Employees, by virtue of their financially dependent position are left with the either/or choice which places them in an untenable paradoxical position, resulting in emotional pain which is manifested in physical symptoms.
- The solution for the above challenges lies in the mutual respect and understanding of cultural differences of the two worldviews on the conception and understanding of death. Therefore, the need for a conversational space and epistemological engagement between the two worldviews is imperative for

the meaningful and peaceful co-existence of employers and employees.

Conclusion

The dominance of Euro-American worldviews and epistemological paradigms has deprived the world from learning each other's diverse cultures. Kincheloe and Steinberg (2008) emphasize the importance of exchanging information between people of different nations because it enhances multiple perspectives in all dimensions of life. The methodologies through which different cultures are studied and understood should also be consistent with indigenous epistemologies. The move from a universalist understanding and application on human behavior and concepts, to a culture appropriate and sensitive praxis is therefore imperative to address the colonial discourse which has dominated the field of psychology and the workplace. The acknowledgement and appreciation of the role of culture in human behavior and in the workplace is likely to create positive working conditions, experience and enhance the quality of relationships through the congruent implementation of policies that support diversity. Diversity are not easy to implement, however, if properly applied diversity can also be a resource (Leung, 2012). The recognition of cultural diversity in our context (for both employer and employee) is not only an African issue, but a human right issue, it is a constitutional imperative. The two cases presented above have illustrated the epistemological and ontological distance that exists between Euro-American and African worldviews and often result in misunderstanding and hostilities. The need for inter-cultural conversations and the openness to listen to the stories of those who are different to one's culture is greater than ever before.

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