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# Explorations of Post-Divorce Experiences: Women's Reconstructions of Self<sup>1</sup>

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In this article I explore from a social constructionist perspective the experiences of women when recovering from divorce. Women have a natural resilience and develop unique ways of coping with the experience of divorce through reconstructing themselves in their linguistic and cultural context. Divorced women often face dominant discourses that elicit intense internal discomfort, conflict, and loss of socially constructed self. This can result in their experiencing themselves as less meaningful and worthy as relational beings. I explore the processes by which four women, single again, have experienced these constraints and emerged as reconstructed selves. The discussion is based on qualitative analysis of textual data obtained from written accounts.

Divorce is never easy for anyone, and women who are subjected to labelling and negative linguistic practices often find it difficult to reconstruct themselves as relational beings after divorce. Hoffman (1995) and others propose that the evolution of both our social and personal selves occurs through a dialogical process whereby we negotiate power, knowledge and truth in relation to social systems of meaning or discourse. Since we construct our roles and identities through conversations and social interaction, the degree to which a particular account of the self is reconstructed and sustained depends on social process, and the strengths and expertise of individual women.

Challenging the historical and cultural constructions of women after divorce demands a critical stance towards the social processes that sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others. My aim is to explore generative alternatives that can explain the diverse constructions and realities that emerge for women after divorce. I also believe that this exploration will give credit to the unique resilience of women who have had similar experiences, and will allow readers of this article to co-construct with me new meanings relevant to the realities of women after divorce. We still have a long road to travel to under-

stand the ways in which we, as 'divorced' women, construct our new selves and give meaning to our experiences. This is particularly relevant to women in South Africa.

In South African society religious and cultural affiliation tends to define the scripts according to which women live their lives. For example, the Dutch Reformed Church perpetuates, through the marriage vows, the notion that the man is 'head of the family' and the woman his nurturing, mostly submissive supporter. Women in the traditional black cultures, upon getting married, become the 'property' of the man and his family when the husband pays 'lobola'<sup>2</sup> to her father. The social-cultural scripts for both white and black women are thus that of someone who has to take the husband's family name, someone without agency, and of being 'second-class' citizens with minimal rights to property (land) and other social goods, in the absence of a spouse. Being an independent woman, a woman who brings up her children single-handedly, maintains her own property, or sustains a professional career is considered out of the ordinary.

## The Project

My interest in women's reconstruction of self after divorce began a number of years ago when I got divorced myself. Actually, it began even before this when I lost my first husband through an early death. Since I had to rely heavily on my resilient nature to



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reconstruct a new sense of self, I feel particularly sensitive to the issues that women in similar positions have to face. It is specifically the internal discomfort, conflict, labelling, and loss of self-worth that called me to explore this topic.

Along the road, I met and talked with many women who have had similar, yet unique, stories. For all of us there were specific experiences leading up to the eventual dissolving of the relationship. We also had our own individual ways of dealing with the discourses that kept our voices as single women marginalised. Our voices were even completely silenced, and this made it very difficult to reclaim a sense of agency once we had dealt with the formalities and emotional trauma of the divorce. My conversations with these women informed the co-constructions that empowered me to accept a new self as a woman 'single again'.

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Social constructionism provides me with an epistemological framework for analysing and interpreting the stories women tell (Atkinson, 1998; Riessman, 1993). I accept the notion that

All research is 'grounded', because no researcher can separate herself from personhood and thus from deriving second order constructs from experience' (Stanley & Wise, 1991: 267).

This project has been influenced by my own positioning in the qualitative research paradigm, and by the theories I developed over time connecting previous events and understandings with the stories I collected. I used an action research design in order to gather in-depth, detailed and vivid descriptions.

### Assumptions Revisited

I wish to elaborate a little on why I prefer to refer to myself and other women as 'single again' and why I refrain, as far as possible, from using the terms 'divorcée' or 'divorced'. I do not discount the many dilemmas and negative constructions that a woman has to face if she has never married, and the ways in which dominant discourses impact on how a never-married woman constructs her sense of self (Zeeman, 2000). I see that as scope for another paper. However,

I distinguish between a woman who remains single throughout her life, and a woman who has, after divorce or the death of a spouse, 'become single again'. This woman has been involved in marriage, a committed relationship that has accorded her a particular positioning in society, and has constructed her life according to the beliefs, values and prescriptions of the traditional culture to which she belongs. When she divorces or when her partner dies, she regains a positioning in society that she occupied before getting married, an earlier state which is not construed negatively, instead of perpetuating the value-loaded opposition implied by married/divorced. Thus 'single again'.

Women's management of their personal and professional lives after divorce is sometimes an extended struggle to reconstruct their selves for the sake of self-preservation. Becoming single again refers to a continuing construction of our positions through conversational practices, and reconstructing our selves depends on the roles we play and the way other people treat us in different contexts (Burman, 1994; Burr, 1995; Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Hoffman, 1995; Siann, 1996; Unger & Crawford, 1992). Through challenging the conventions and understandings of the 'divorced woman' category, we simultaneously construct new meanings and actions in order to find alternative conceptions of self that might render the socio-cultural and linguistic context less chilling and silencing.

### Getting the Stories and Finding Ways to do Analysis

I asked four women to respond in writing to the question: 'How did you cope and rebuild your life after divorce of a loved one?' Two black women and two white women from Gauteng in South Africa, all professionals who had become single again between 1990 and 1999, agreed to give me a written account of their experiences. The black women were not originally from Gauteng, but moved there after their respective divorces. None of the women were first-language English speakers, although three presented their experiences in English, while one woman's account had to be translated from Afrikaans. These accounts formed the basis for analysis and interpretation. I did not classify the stories except for the headings that the women themselves added, and their language usage was preserved unaltered, including errors.

Using the lens provided by social constructionism, I describe here some of the 'themes' that emerged. In fact, it is somewhat misleading to classify the multiple realities that evolved from the different stories under

any series of discrete headings. Too rigid an insistence on searching for similarities, characteristics or typologies would merely render the women's individual voices silent. I have assigned my four co-researchers familiar names, but have protected their identities. Although I tried to put my own experiences on hold and allow the women to speak for themselves, it was not entirely possible. We are all changed through our engagement with our conversational partners, and in my recounting of their experiences you will most likely also hear my own voice.

One of the themes that emerged is that the black women experienced particular difficulty because they were living in a country that discounted the multiple voices of non-dominant groups prior to democratic elections in 1994. It was thus not only the patriarchal discourse that silenced them, but also the social and legal discourse that denied some groups the privileges that others took for granted. In this article, however, I will focus on the themes relevant to the reconstruction of these women alongside their white counterparts after they became single again.

### Dominant Discourses

'Every community supports certain forms of discourse and resists others' (Gergen, 2001: 31), and these discourses influence the ways in which we construct our individual and relational selves as women. These discourses are inherited from our mothers and their mothers before them — also from our fathers and their views on our womanhood. Such discourses are culturally defined and sustained through binary formulations (e.g. single/married, married/divorced), and perpetuated through the many contexts that we inhabit from day to day. The ways in which we talk of our selves and allow others to talk to, and of, us need to be explored if we are to enter into generative reconstruction of ourselves as relational beings (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 2000). In the South African context the dominant discourses presume that women can only make any worthwhile claim to an ontological (sense of being) and ethical self (having values and norms to live by) when she is married. These discourses tend to isolate women by relegating them to caring for home and children, and make it difficult for them to co-construct new representations and gain ontological status in society should they become single again.

In South Africa, the male way of meaning-making dominates the theories of self and womanhood both in the personal and the social realm. The male dominant discourse prevails, for

example, through the overvaluing of men's achievements in the media (Fausto-Sterling, 1992), and by shaping our social world according to male assumptions (Siann, 1994; Unger & Crawford, 1992). For a long time this discourse has provided a supposedly safe boundary within which we South African women could make meaning, define our selves and construct realities. Notions of submissiveness, emotionality, marriage, and dependency provided the scripts for our roles as women in society, prescribing our actions and relationships, delineating what others expected of us, and how they related to us. Although some changes are at work in our society, particularly since the transition to a fully democratic system, these dominant discourses still exert a disempowering effect on a divorced woman.

### The Stories

The ideas and knowledge we often encounter pertaining to women's role in marriage imply a co-creation of reality and relational patterns between two (or more) persons in dialogue on the subject. They are social constructions (Fruggeri, 1992; Hoffman, 1995), and 'marriage' is a social product emerging in a context of communal constructions between a man and a woman (Gergen & Kaye, 1992; McNamee, 1992). Marriage is an example of how shared conventions of discourse, or 'textual histories' (McNamee & Gergen, 1992: 4) emerge as supposedly enduring, absolute and universal 'truths'. As such, the discourse of marriage constricts women (and men) into fixed, predetermined categories.

I was struck in my analysis by how the discourse of marriage impacted on the sense of self and the way in which we constructed our positioning as not-married women. Four themes emerged that told me of internal discomfort, confusion, loss, fear, isolation, and feelings of worthlessness. Through divorce, previous construction of self, particularly of self as relational being, is largely lost. Sometimes the sense of loss appears before the actual divorce, leading to negative talk about the self, and devaluing the self:

**Lena:** I then started [prior to the divorce] to hate myself and did not see the value of being alive. Life was getting more bitter everyday ... I felt so ashamed, angry, insulted, dehumanised, and worthless of life ... I just wanted myself dead because I thought I could not survive or do without my husband ... I was now getting sick every now and then because of the battering

**Sara:** I lost trust in a person ... And I also lost confidence in myself, I wondered if I was still worthy of anything.

**Rhoda:** I regarded divorce as a sort of failure — as though we are giving up on something special — or even something better that we could not manage to achieve ... I am afraid of divorce ... will I ever be able to trust again?

While working through their feelings of loss and disengaging from the relationship, women experience both physical and psychological effects that negatively impact on their sense of self:

**Maggie:** [It is] like the live amputation of a limb ... the process of disentanglement is slower than one thinks.

**Sara:** It took me a whole two years to recover from the initial shock of losing my marriage ... It gave me a chance to mourn my loss and to focus on the road ahead.

Tiredness, illness, a feeling that life is not worth living, self-hate, and depression emerge as ways in which women express their sense of themselves as helpless in face of supposedly insoluble problems. It is as though they construct the self only in terms of language that emphasises their feelings of despair.

**Lena:** Initially after the first separation I got into bed for six weeks at 6 pm every day — depressed for the first time in my life and crying all the time.

**Maggie:** I had to face the truth that my ex didn't love me anymore and that my life was miserable with him ... but I will be very careful about living together or marriage.

**Sara:** I had lost a friend and a lover ... when the hormones started raging I had but no one to attend to my needs.

In her exploration of 'Womanstories' and 'Manstories' in the autobiographies of respected authors, Mary Gergen concludes by saying that 'in general, the important aspects of women's autobiographies depend heavily on their affiliative relationships with others' (2001: 66). We tend to accept responsibility for the success or failure of these involvements. The loss also extends to the impact of divorce on other relationships such as children, family, and even ex-spouse, as expressed by Rhoda:

**Rhoda:** ... financial implications for the children ... deny children a family home ... for the rest of my life I will not have a partner, physical or otherwise ... no-one to help.

I don't want to hurt you, the children, parents and family ... everybody is hurting so much ... Poor, poor

F [her ex-husband] ... the first holiday alone with the children ... uncomfortable when he arrives ...

Ryff (1991) also refers to the relational self as a dimension through which adults experience psychological well-being when they establish (and sometimes renew) warm and satisfying relationships with people, concern themselves with the welfare of others, and thus construct interdependent selves as women who care. The loss of a relational self thus brings a sense of failure. In this regard the dominant discourse becomes clear: the expectation that women should subordinate themselves to those they are supposed to care for including spouse and family. As women, we feel a need to do everything in our power to 'make it work' — take care of and support a spouse, fit in with convention, compromise, take second place, even suffer abuse, and accept full responsibility for the failure of the relationship.

**Lena:** I tried to compromise for the sake of the children and my marriage and I was totally wrong ... I started blaming myself for everything that was happening but couldn't explain my contribution to this situation ...

**Sara:** I do not intend to get married at this juncture because I think deep down I'm still afraid of commitment, afraid of being hurt again ... I am afraid to commit myself to a long time love relationship ... I still cannot trust any man 100%.

It was also traumatic for me and the children [moving to a new city]... Supporting the kids alone was uphill ... It is very difficult to discipline/keep order when you are a single parent ... My ex communicated a lot and he asked for forgiveness ... died in the year 2002 due to a stress related condition [heart failure].

**Rhoda:** That I was too weak ... the damage I have done to you and the children ... the immense pain, dissatisfaction ... only we knew about the disease. I don't want to go through the disgrace of a divorce. I don't like acknowledging failure.

In my own experience, reconstruction could only really start once I managed to forgive myself for my supposed failure in the relationships and share the responsibility. Through forgiveness of herself and the other party a woman regains a sense of self that has agency and she can start rebuilding her life, disallowing the 'failure' discourse power over her future actions and relationships.

The sense of failure and loss of self-worth that women experience after divorce are closely connected with fear that often emerges even before the actual break-up, particularly where violence or emotional



abuse dominates the spouse's behaviour. Fear also emerges with particular vividness when women have to position themselves as 'single again' in society.

**Lena:** Something clicked on my mind to get out of the relationship before been killed but I did not have the guts to do that either. I felt really trapped but could not budge ... That was when hell broke loose ... I guessed I collapsed for a while, and when I came around I was forced to get out [of] the room through the window. I was scared to death ... I was so hysteric, scared thinking I was going to lose my baby!

**Rhoda:** ... that you are don't have any respect for me as a person, want to force me to be the way you see me ... all forms of oppression ... scares me that the children may experience the same emotions regarding me ... I am afraid of poverty ... the anxiety of being dependent on myself ... fearing that I am possibly not as OK as I think I am ... anxiety to be someone.

Again, fear-talk becomes evident in the way that a woman constructs her sense of self, and leads to experiencing herself as lacking control over her life and her environment (Ryff, 1991). There is also fear about the future — having to cope by herself, loneliness, and having to raise children single-handedly. Apart from fear for herself and for her children, some women also feel a strong sense of responsibility for their spouse and fear that he may not be able to cope with the changes.

Describing a woman as 'divorcée' subjects her to a sense of failure, and perpetuates the married/divorced binary. Women tend to use the same kind of language to describe themselves, and to negatively construct their roles and relationships which leads to role confusion, condemnation and further isolation.

**Lena:** ... and I was regarded as a stubborn, uncultured and unmannered individual.

**Rhoda:** I don't want to get divorced and be part of the extended/step/divorced members of the family ... at every wedding/graduation/birth of a grandchild ...

### The Stories of Reconstruction

In the patriarchal South African society, social processes do not provide us with alternative ways to construct our lives, as we have to live them after divorce. When developing a theory of self as a woman who is single again, we struggle to exercise a degree of agency in the construction of our realities. However, new roles and relationships evolve, that impact on the ways in which we reconstruct our selves. Our use of

language is a first step towards a new way of talking about ourselves, and allows others to talk to and about us differently. We make a conscious decision to draw on our natural resources, change our language, and rebuild our lives.

**Maggie:** I was amazed to learn that the correct term for my status was 'single again'.

For me it was very important to be the plaintiff in the divorce case (though I couldn't imagine paying the lawyers then but eventually succeeded) ...

**Lena:** I talked to my parents that I live only once and would like to make use while I still can ... I never got back and I filed for a divorce, which took six years to be granted.

**Rhoda:** Today it struck me that it's actually a compliment. A compliment because I am regarded as the positive party who divorced the negative party ... this brought a feeling of calmness even though divorce is still not something nice.

Constructing a new sense of direction for our lives by feeling that present and past experiences have meaning and contribute to our reason for being alive (Ryff, 1991) is also a starting point for engagement with new conversational partners who can positively impact on our sense of self as relational being. So it is appropriate now to move on to the stories of reconstruction.

Retelling the stories we live by is a way in which we reconstruct our sense of self as women who are single again. Through the telling we recognise that the 'failed' relationship was not just due to our own supposed 'weaknesses' and we begin to reconceptualise our ex-partners, looking differently at the person with whom we constructed certain realities and without whom we now have to face the future. We begin to tell a new story, create new memories, find new spaces in which to express our talents and uniqueness, and make new friends to support our reconstructed selves. Drawing on our strengths and expertise to manage our personal and professional lives, we do not allow the past to maintain any form of power over us.

**Maggie:** I was also speechless to recognise my ex as being described as a 'crazy maker' and to understand the impact of that on my identity.

**Sara:** I have a very supportive family. They accepted me back and made life easier by not blaming and reminding me of the divorce ...

**Rhoda:** I have the right to be happy or will I allow him to reign over my life even in his absence. The pain of the divorce could not have been for nothing... Life is going forward and I can make a difference.

Physical living space is one area where we start to reconstruct a sense of self and manage our personal lives.

**Rhoda:** It is better to be happy and calm, than to lie alone when your spouse is sleeping or not sharing or wants to end the day with sex.

On the other hand, and particularly when faced with severe financial difficulties (as Lena was when she 'escaped' from her abusive husband and waited six years for the divorce to be granted) a woman may have to go back to live with her parents in spite of their discontent:

**Lena:** I eventually forced myself to go back home to my family no matter what they say ... They were disappointed but they have not option as I was now insisting to stay home with them.

Financial independence enables the woman who is single again to transform the house previously shared with another into something she wants for herself. Creating or re-creating physical space thus comes to represent a way of building a new life without the constraints of societal labelling, guilt, and self-blaming:

**Maggie:** After a year I divided my house in two and made a flat on the one side of it. I had to move out of the old communal bedroom to the other side of the house. In the process the whole house changed – the layout and the décor – to what I wanted. Today I can say that the house only reflects my taste. It gave me a kick that I could do it on my own (and with the emotional support of friends).

**Sara:** For social reasons I had to move house and got a job in another town ... It was traumatic for me and the children ... I own a house (paying through a bond). ... I can buy whatever I can afford without any person jeopardising my plans.

**Rhoda:** I bought a new lawnmower. It is a battle of sorts when you try your hand at mowing the lawn for the first time but it gives me some kind of satisfaction to see how neatly I managed ... And the people are staring! In this suburb they don't know women who mow their own lawns.

In the process of rebuilding herself, another dimension of psychological well-being becomes apparent. Although informed to some extent by social constructions of how women are expected to appear in public and the overt expressions of self in our clothing and appearance, women who are single again use their physical appearance as another way of regaining a sense of agency. We take control of our reconstructed self by re-valuing ourselves, restoring positive constructions of self ('Naturally I'm a positive person'), and re-creating a public self that we wish to present to society.

**Rhoda:** I have started to pay attention to myself, deciding what to wear instead of just grabbing the first thing that comes to hand, changing my hair-style, putting on make-up, feel good about myself. I see myself as worthwhile again. Spend time with myself. Don't talk myself down. Participate in the talking rather than keeping silent all the time...A... said that he finds me attractive and it makes feel more feminine than I did in many years past...We are all survivors.

The work environment becomes another space in which a woman who is single again actively constructs a story that assists with the rebuilding process. Apart from bringing financial freedom, work life means pursuing a career as opposed to just doing 'a job' or a part-time activity (e.g. Maggie), and building a career (e.g. Lena) becomes one of the most significant contexts in which we reconstruct ourselves.

**Maggie:** I now view my job differently – as a career and not only a part-time activity. Career wise I wanted to be part of a team and contribute to something practical ... There is a mutual feeling of trust and respect, which is important to me. I have just registered for my Ph.D.

**Lena:** I started by doing part-time jobs at the mission bookshop as a shelf-packer, earning about R35.00<sup>3</sup> a week, which I used to buy my kids milk, bread and little bit of meat ... I then continue to look for better job with failure and I worked in the furniture shop ... then worked for a clothing wholesaler ... I opted to apply for nursing, which was also one of my likings. My family encouraged me and assisted me in picking up the pieces, including the lady friend I had ... I then started to apply for nursing and wore off the self-pity and fear in me and pick up courage. I was then called to a nursing training college where I started as a student nurse for general nursing diploma and since then I never looked back up to so far ... I decided to direct my stress on books and at least there's worth living for and I am presently in second (final year) master degree. The passion of my life. Praise God.

**Sara:** ... started to work in a new area, met new people in a new environment. I had enough time to focus on the new job and less time to blues. [Sara is also currently busy with her Master's degree in nursing.]

Finding new social spaces and relationships is perhaps the most difficult for women living in a society where a patriarchal discourse dominates. For the most part it is unacceptable and often even dangerous for women to go out alone at night, and married friends sometimes find it difficult to accommodate in their social activities

women who are single again. However, we need social engagement not only to boost our self-esteem and help us regain confidence in our selves, but to reconstruct our relational sense of self. We need the support of those who accept us for who we are (women who are single again) and find courage when engaging with conversational partners whom we can trust and who respect us as human beings in our own right.

Social discourses about divorced women still inform how we, as single again women, are viewed and stereotyped. Often we are seen as a threat to other people's relationships, and even though some social contexts provide a space for meeting and socialising with other people, it is not always easy for women who are single again to establish a social network or new friendships. However, in reconstructing our relational selves we need to feel that we are still capable of establishing and maintaining warm satisfying relationships, not only with our own gender but also across genders.

**Maggie:** I gradually befriended a gay second cousin of mine and that relationship gave me the opportunity to go out, and be treated well without any strings attached. It was a good boost for my self-esteem ... I had foreigners as tenants that broadened my horizon and two years later led to a visit to Norway ... went to the USA on my own and attended a course ... went with a friend on two local archaeological trips to 'look for my roots' and discovered that there are other ways to get closer to nature ... My new relationship is an adventure for me ...

**Lena:** I met a lady friend who was also a divorcee and we started sharing our experiences and grieve.

**Sara:** I had also moved away from the circle of friends who made me feel uneasy because I was now single ... I made many new friends with new ideas ... and I also grew spiritually and otherwise ... I also met an old flame which became a new flame. He was instrumental in building up my confidence, assisting me to learn to trust again and teaching me how to forgive and to move on with my life ... My life has changed for the better ... I have a boyfriend who is a friend, lover and a companion. We have been together for the last 10 years and we are going through menopause together.

**Rhoda:** It is good to be there [therapy group for divorcees]. It is good to share with other people even if I am still frail.

### The Way Forward

Apparent in the stories is the way in which the four women used language to construct their past, present and future. The process of disentanglement from the

relationship directly after divorce is marked by negative talk, maybe best summarised in Sara's words when she expresses her final humiliation as divorcee: 'The bottom line is you become a social outcast ... Your family feels ashamed that your marriage has failed ... The neighbours also become distant ... Yes everybody becomes distant'.

However, the self-descriptions change when the women find an alternative language for the new relational self. Maggie expresses this in her re-evaluation of the past, seeing an ex-husband as a 'crazy-maker', and discovering that she could say she was 'single again' rather than 'divorced'. In this they show an ability to develop individual ways to cope with the discomfort and disempowering experience of divorce and utilise their natural resources to create positive descriptions of themselves, their assertiveness, passion, courage, confidence and sense of change for the better. Re-constructing the self for these women implies a new positioning, a new language, new memories, and a new sense of personhood that challenges the dominant discourses.

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I do not claim that these reconstructions in any way represent the full story of how women reconstruct themselves after divorce. I also appreciate that no generalisations can be made from recounting the stories of only four women. I see this project as the beginning of a process. Further endeavours will follow in an attempt to give voice to the many unique women of South Africa who are challenging the dominant discourses of our society. I also see this as a way in which I can give service providers some greater understanding of women who become single again and are in the process of re-constructing their sense of self as relational beings. For example, the powerful positive impact on Maggie of the new terms 'crazy-maker' and 'single again' shows how influential linguistic reframing can be in assisting the construction of a new self.

We still have a long road to travel in the process of generating alternative constructions of our lives and giving meaning to our experiences that are not negative

and dehumanising. Many new questions can emerge from the stories of women who are single again in the 21st century. How will we construct our lives ten years from now, particularly when exposed to the knowledge we gain from this and future projects? What other discourses have to be challenged to allow us to become the unique women God intended us to be?

### Endnotes

- 1 This article is based on a paper: *Reconstruction of women after divorce*, presented at the Women's World 2002 Congress, Kampala, Uganda, July 21-26, 2002. I wish to thank Dr S. J. C. van der Walt of the Department of Nursing Science, University of Pretoria for her assistance during the initial stages of the project. The study on which the paper and this article is based was undertaken and completed while the author was at the Department of Psychology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0002, South Africa.
- 2 Bride price, usually paid in cattle
- 3 R35.00 is equivalent to approximately US\$5.00 at the time of preparing this article.

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