

**An exploration of the relationship experiences of older black women: Applying the
Mmogo-methodTM**

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Preface

The candidate opted to propose an article, with the support of his supervisor.

Prof Vera Roos

CONSENT

PERMISSION TO SUBMIT THE ARTICLE FOR EXAMINATION PURPOSES

I, the supervisor, hereby declare that the input and effort of MV Mabunda, in writing this article, reflects research done by him on this topic. I hereby grant permission that he may submit this article for examination purposes in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Magister Artium in Research Psychology.

Signed on this day 22 November 2010 at the North-West University.

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Prof V. Roos

Supervisor

Summary

An exploration of the relationship experiences of older black women: Applying the Mmogo-methodTM

Relationships are important for older black people in their endeavours to understand the world. The relationships of older black people have, however, undergone many changes. This article attempts to explore the relational experiences of older black women using the Mmogo-methodTM as a projective technique to obtain insight into the meanings they attach to the changed relations. The Mmogo-methodTM (Roos, 2008; 2011) is a culturally sensitive research tool. Eight Swazi-speaking women from eMalahleni in Mpumalanga, South Africa, with ages ranging from 68 to 88, participated in the research. The research participants were asked to create visual representations using malleable clay, beads and dry grass stalks to illustrate aspects of their experiences of relationships with those around them. They then took part in focus group discussions. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data.

The findings revealed that the older women in the study contributed to relationships by providing financial support and by taking care of their families and extended families. They provided financial support by using their government grants to look after their households. In turn, they received selective physical, emotional and spiritual support. The research revealed that the older women generally identified one particular person with whom they established a close relationship. They felt understood in this relationship, which they described as comforting because their needs were perceived and met by the particular person. The older women also emphasised the emotional support they received from the community, which came mainly from people of the same age thus giving them the opportunity to share information and experiences with their peers while taking part in various activities and while relaxing. Spiritual support was also a key factor in the relationships among the older people – they could, for example, share their experiences of life with fellow church members, and church members also looked after and supported each other in times of illness.

The relational challenges experienced by the older black women were a lack of protection, a lack of help and support in taking care of their houses, the absence of men, changed norms and values, and the loss of relationships. The older women said that they felt overwhelmed and stressed by these challenges. They also felt estranged from intergenerational

relationships, which were traditionally regarded as a potential sources of support and care for older persons. They also did not know how to approach the relationships differently because the familiar norms and values that had guided intergenerational relationships had changed. The older women in the study said that they had felt cared for and safe in previous intergenerational relationships. They longed for the past when, in their view, clear norms and values guided relational interactions. They felt stressed and overwhelmed by the absence of men in their traditional roles as providers. Contemporary men also did not fulfil their duties when compared with men in the old days.

The Mmogo-methodTM which was applied as a projective technique, revealed the meanings the older black women attached to relationships in their lives. As part of a cross-cultural, intergenerational research project, this method gave valuable insight into how older black women perceive their contributions and the challenges related to their relationships.

Opsomming

Verhoudings is belangrik in die lewens van ouer swart mense – ten einde die wêreld te kan verstaan. Waarneming het egter aan die lig gebring dat die verhoudings wat swart ouer persone het, aan baie veranderinge onderworpe was. Die doel van hierdie artikel is om ouer swart vrouens se ervaring van verhoudings, te ondersoek. Die Mmogo-metodeTM is toegepas as 'n projektiewe tegniek aan die hand waarvan insig verkry kan word in die betekenis wat ouer vrouens aan veranderde verhoudings heg. Agt Swazi-sprekende vrouens uit eMalahleni in Mpumalanga, Suid-Afrika en tussen die ouderdomme van 68 en 88, het aan die navorsing deelgeneem. Die kultuursensitiewe Mmogo-metodeTM (Roos, 2008; 2011) is gebruik. Deelnemers is gevra om modelleerklei, krale en droë grasstingels te gebruik en visuele voorstellings te skep wat enige aspek van hulle ervaring van verhoudings met die mense wat hulle direk omring, illustreer. Hierna is hulle betrek by fokusgroepbesprekings. Data is op grond van tematiese inhoudsanalise geanaliseer.

Die bevindinge het daarop gedui dat ouer vrouens bydra tot verhoudings deur die finansiële ondersteuning wat hulle verskaf, en ook deur vir hulle familie en uitgebreide familie te sorg. Die ouer vroue het bygedra tot die verhoudings waarvoor hulle finansiële ondersteuning bied, deur die regeringstoelae wat hulle ontvang, vir die onderhoud van die huishouding te gebruik. Op hulle beurt het die ouer vrouens dan selektief fisiese, emosionele en geestelike ondersteuning ontvang. Die navorsing het uitgewys dat ouer vrouens met een spesifieke persoon geïdentifiseer het, met wie hulle dan 'n nuwe verhouding gevestig het. In hierdie verhouding het hulle gevoel dat hulle begryp word en omdat hulle behoeftes geëien en aangespreek is deur die bepaalde persoon, het hulle dié verhouding as vertroostend beskryf. Ouer vrouens het die emosionele ondersteuning wat hulle uit die gemeenskap ontvang, beklemtoon. Hierdie emosionele ondersteuning word ervaar vanaf mense met 'n ooreenstemmende ouderdom, wat aan hulle die geleentheid bied om, wanneer hulle ontspanne is en hulleself veroorloof om aan bepaalde aktiwiteite deel te neem, inligting en ervarings onder mekaar as ouer mense te deel. Geestelike ondersteuning is ook uitgewys as 'n deel van die ondersteuningstelsel wat die verhoudings tussen ouer mense verryk, aangesien dit hulle toelaat om hulle lewenservaring met lede van die kerk te deel – iets wat vir hulle belangrik gebly het. Hierdie vorm van ondersteuning is as uitsonderlik aangedui, omdat die lede van die kerk, byvoorbeeld in geval van siekte, vir mekaar sorg en mekaar ondersteun.

Die uitdagings wat ouer swart vrouens in terme van verhoudings in die gesig staar, sluit die volgende in: 'n tekort aan beskerming, sorg en ondersteuning om na hulle huise om te sien; die afwesigheid van mans; veranderde norme en waardes; en die verlies aan verhoudings. Hierdie uitdagings wek kommer, aangesien ouer vrouens aangedui het dat hulle oorweldig en gespanne voel. Voorts het dit ook geblyk dat alhoewel tussen-generasie verhoudings as potensiële bronne vir die ondersteuning en versorging van ouer mense beskou word, dit so is dat ouer persone voel asof hulle van hierdie verhoudings vervreemd is. Hulle weet ook nie hoe om die verhoudings op 'n ander manier te benader nie, aangesien die vertroude norme en waardes wat tussen-generasie verhoudings gerig het, verander het. Ouer vrouens het gemeld dat hulle in die vorige tussen-generasie verhoudings veilig en versorg gevoel het. Ouer vrouens verlang daarom na die verlede, toe (volgens hulle persepsie) duidelike norme en waardes rigting verskaf het aan die interaksie in verhoudings. Die gevolg hiervan is dat ouer vrouens gespanne en oorweldig voel deur die afwesigheid van mans wat nie hulle tradisionele rolle as die voorsieners vir die familie se behoeftes en sorg / as die voorsieners en versorgers vir die familie uitvoer nie en ook afwesig is uit die verhoudingsdefinisie aangesien hulle, in vergelyking met die mans in die ou dae, nie hulle pligte uitvoer nie.

Die Mmogo-metodeTM wat as 'n projektiewe tegniek toegepas is, het die betekenis wat ouer vrouens aan verhoudings in hulle lewens heg, aan die lig gebring. Die metode was baie nuttig om binne 'n kruiskulturele, tussen-generasie navorsingsprojek insig te verwerf oor 'n onderwerp wat as vaag en dubbelsinnig beskryf kan word. Binne hierdie konteks, het die Mmogo-metodeTM die deelnemers egter gehelp om uitdrukking te gee aan dit wat hulle binne hul verhoudings ervaar.

Manuscript for examination with contact details

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An exploration of the relationship experiences of older black women: Applying the Mmogo-method™

Abstract

Relationships are central to older black people's understanding of the world. Their relationships have, however, undergone many changes in recent times, and this article aims to explore the relational experiences of older black women in particular. The Mmogo-method™ (Roos, 2008; 2011), a culturally sensitive research tool, was applied as a projective technique to gain insight into the meanings that older black women attach to their relational experiences. Eight Swazi-speaking women from eMalahleni in Mpumalanga, South Africa, with ages ranging from 68 to 88, participated in the research. The research participants were asked to create visual representations using malleable clay, beads and dry grass stalks to illustrate aspects of their experiences of relationships with those around them. They then took part in focus group discussions, and the resultant data were analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings revealed that the older women contributed to their relationships with others by providing financial support and by taking care of their families and extended families. In return, they received selective physical, emotional and spiritual support. The relational challenges they experienced were a lack of protection, a lack of help and support in taking care of their houses, the absence of men, changed norms and values, and the loss of relationships.

Keywords: experiences, relationships, older black women, relational contributions, relational returns, relational challenges

Social relationships are beneficial, and therefore important, to older black people (people 60 years and older). “Social relationships are recurrent patterns of interaction with other individuals” (Krause, 2006, p. 182). Social relationships include social networks, which are important sources of support, and are broader than social support. Social support is linked to participation in social networks and carrying out social roles that contribute to older persons’ well-being and health (Krause, 2006; Sagie & Schwartz, 2000; Schatz & Ogunmefun, 2007; Thomése, Van Tilburg, Van Groenou & Knipscheer, 2005). Ryff (1995) contends that psychological well-being is enhanced when older people have positive relationships with others. Many older persons perceive the relational support they receive as a strength that helps them deal with stress (Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Schatz & Ogunmefun, 2007). Older persons are not merely passive recipients in relationships; they also provide emotional, financial, informational and relational support to others in the relationships they have with them (Barnnet et al., 2010).

Older black people are the products of and exist within the different layers of social relationships, which include relatives, friends, neighbours and the broader community (Mbiti, 1969). Older black people cannot exist alone – they are shaped through and by the interpersonal relationships in their lives (Krause, 2006; Ryff & Singer, 1998). In other words, they are embedded in their social networks. The study that is discussed here is based on the theory of socio-emotional selectivity, which holds that older people tend increasingly to prefer meaningful emotional relationships as they grow older (Krause, 2006; Thomése et al., 2005).

During the past decade, the relational world of older black people has changed markedly owing to the migration of many younger black people to urban areas. This migration is often accompanied by the spread of HIV/AIDS, frequently resulting in older black women having to take care of several other people in their overcrowded households

with limited financial resources (their pensions) (Aboderin, 2005; Schatz & Ogunmefun, 2007). Also, many younger black women are unmarried mothers with children from different relationships who leave their children in the care of their mothers (Schatz & Ogunmefun, 2007). The relational experiences of older black men have also changed with many older black men having to deal with, for example, status decline, abuse, poverty, urbanisation and living outside the traditional family context (Strydom, 2005). According to the convoy model, the people that older black women traditionally related to in terms of closeness has changed significantly owing to their new individual needs and the situational factors that have changed their relational experiences (Thomése et al., 2005).

It is not clear how older people and older black women in particular make sense of their relationships with others. In terms of the phenomenological approach adopted in the study, which was used to explore and interpret the meaning that older black women give to their experiences of relationships in their everyday lives (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008), the question was asked: How do older black women perceive their current relationships? It is hoped that this research will provide insight into the relational experiences of older black women and cast light on current intergenerational relationships and future expectations of support.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research method was followed to gain insight into the relational experiences of older black women. According to Neuman (2000), qualitative data are rich in detail, sensitive to context and can reflect complex processes or sequences in social life thus making qualitative research the most appropriate method for this kind of study. The researcher believed that a phenomenological approach would best uncover the meaning that the older black women in the study attached to their everyday experiences of relationships. The researcher accordingly had to enter the participants' life world and place himself in their

shoes. This could be achieved through naturalistic methods of study and by analysing the conversations and interaction he had with the participants (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2007). According to Snape and Spencer (2003), a phenomenological approach can explain the constructs people use in everyday life to make sense of their world and can uncover the meanings contained within relational experiences.

Research context and participants

The study was conducted at the Mthimkhulu Centre in eMalahleni in South Africa. The Mthimkhulu Centre is a community centre in a semi-urban environment. It has day care facilities as well as residential care facilities for older black people with limited financial resources. The older black women participants were purposively selected on the basis of their ability to give in-depth accounts of their experiences of different relationships (Creswell, 2007; Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2009). They had to be able to express themselves clearly and participate in making visual representations.

Eight of the older women aged between 68 and 88 were Swazi's and lived in the area. They were all widows and resided with their children and grandchildren in overcrowded households numbering between five and nine people in each household (including the older women).

Data gathering

The Mmogo-methodTM was used to gather the data. It is a culturally sensitive method that explores the symbolic, contextual groundedness of meanings and yields information about meanings on an interpersonal level (Roos, 2008; 2011). It is considered a useful research tool for gathering cross-cultural data as it can provide crucial information on the social and interpersonal aspects of community relationships. The Mmogo-methodTM makes use of familiar items such as modelling clay, dry grass sticks and coloured beads and is based on the theoretical principles of social constructivism, symbolic interaction and community

psychology (Roos, 2008). The visual representations that formed part of the research were considered visual narratives through which the participants could project the meaning of their experiences within a specific context (Roos, 2011). Stanzack (2007) maintains that visual methodologies are appropriate for exploring human experiences and for conveying the lived experiential components of social life.

The Mmogo-methodTM requires the participants to create their own data by making visual representations in response to a specific request such as, in this case: *Please use the material to make anything that will tell us more about your experiences of the relationships in your life.* The representations are regarded as visual constructions of the participants' perceptions of social realities and interpersonal relationships by portraying cultural meanings and projected contextual realities (Roos, 2008, 2011). The representations in the present study gave insight into the meanings that the older black women attached to their relationships.

When the visual representations had been completed, the participants were asked to explain the meanings they ascribed to them. Each older woman was asked to talk about her visual representation after which the group joined in the discussion. Such group interaction allowed other participants to discuss and interpret key terms and to indicate their agreement or not with the issues raised. The focus group was thus used to facilitate a process of sharing and comparing the perceptions of the older black women (Bless & Smith, 1995; Creswell, 2007; Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The confirmation of the obtained information also served as the first verification of the provisional themes that emerged from the group discussions and helped ensure the integrity of the findings.

Procedure

The management of the Mthimkhulu Centre was contacted, and their informed consent was obtained. Informed consent was also obtained from the participants after the

Mmogo-methodTM had been introduced and explained to them. The participants were given clay, dry grass stalks, colourful beads and cloths and asked to make visual representations. When all the participants had completed their representations, they were asked what the representations meant (including the colours), and their responses were recorded. During the focus group discussions, perceptions were shared and compared.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is based on interpretive philosophy aimed at examining the symbolic content of visual representations (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). In this research, the data analysis established the perceptions, attitudes, understanding, knowledge, values, feelings and experiences of the older black women in terms of their relationships. The idea was to allow the emergence of the research findings from the frequent, dominant or significant themes in the raw data. The textual data were analysed using thematic content analysis which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is appropriate for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes in particular data. The analysis started with a detailed observation and explanation of the representations and proceeded to deductions and abstract generalisations about the representations. The researcher read through all the data and made notes and marked words and sentences to produce initial codes from the data. Themes were identified by sorting the different codes into potential themes, and the themes were reviewed and refined to tell a coherent story about the data. Finally, the essence of each theme was determined and presented as a final report. Vivid examples or extracts that captured the essence of the themes were included to demonstrate the analytic narrative story.

The visual data analysis followed an inductive form of analysis. The analysis began with detailed observations and explanations of the visual representations, and the visual data were then analysed by means of denotation and connotation (Marvasti, 2004). Denotation refers to the participant's description and explanation of the representation, and connotation

to the deeper meanings reflecting the conscious and unconscious content communicated through the visual representations (Lawes, 2002). Any sign, symbol or object can be seen as a substitute for meaning on a deeper level (Jamieson, 2007).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, the guidelines proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed.

Table 1: Guidelines for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study

Triangulation	Triangulation is a strategy for enhancing the quality of research, particularly its credibility. Data were obtained from a literature study, applying the Mmogo-method TM and group interviews. According to Neuman (2000), the integrity of findings is heightened if data are obtained from different sources.
Credibility ‘truth value’	The researcher demonstrated that the multiple realities of the participants had been represented adequately by the inclusion of verbatim quotes and visual data (photos).
Transferability	The researcher used the Mmogo-method TM to obtain a wide range of information to ensure adequate ‘thick’ descriptions.
Dependability	The help of colleagues and methodological experts in checking the research plan ensured the dependability and consistency of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study was part of an ongoing research project for which ethical approval had been obtained from the Ethics Committee of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus.

The project title is: *An exploration of enabling community contexts* (ethical number 05k14). In the study, the ethical standards established for psychological practice and research by the Health Professions Council of South Africa were also adhered to including confidentiality, participant anonymity and voluntary participation. The participants thus had the right to participate voluntarily and to withdraw from the research at any time (<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx?item=11>).

Findings

The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and subthemes on experiences of relationships

Themes	Subthemes
Older black women's contributions	Financial support Taking care of the family and extended family
Relational returns	Physical support of people in close proximity Companionship Spiritual support
Relational challenges	Perceived lack of protection, care and support Absence of men Changed norms and values impacting on relationships Loss of relationships

The older black women's relational contributions

The older women in the study contributed to relationships by investing their money, time and energy in taking care of their families and extended families and in maintaining their homes.

Financial support. The financial support the older women received as government grants was used to support themselves and their families. One participant reported as follows: *I'm on by myself, I get grant from government, and then I live on government grant. I also take care of the little ones with the government grant. (GM 1)* The money was used to buy food for the family. *I have to take care of my grandchildren who were left by their mothers, buying food, clothes and everything. (GM 2)*

Taking care of the family and the extended family. Taking care of the family and the extended family meant that the older black women in the study assumed family responsibilities: *I am taking care of my family members, others are in their own families, it is me who stays there with my brother and I am the one who takes care of my brother and children. (GM 3)*

Relational returns

Relationships in the study were reciprocal in nature – the older black women perceived that the investments in their relationships gave them something in return. Relational support here refers to the support the older women received such as being taken care of physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Physical support of people in close proximity. Physical support in the study refers to the support the older black women received from people in close physical proximity to them. According to one participant said: *The grandchildren who stay with me are the ones who take care of me. Yes, they do take good care of me; they are looking well after me, no trouble. (GM3)*

The older women apparently also established a relational link with one particular person they could trust to look after them. The participants identified different people in this regard as indicated in the following statements.

It is my child. It is my one son. He does everything, if I feel sick; he takes me to the doctor. (GM6)

A great grandchild, I'm looking after, this great grandchild of mine, is the one who help me. (GM7)

I have a daughter who is married, she is the one who looks after me, but she stays in her own house and they do come and visit. Ja, she helps me. (GM1)

There's only one child that at least when I talk; she listens, eh ... this daughter of mine. (GM8)

Companionship. Companionship in the study refers to the social interaction that the older people engaged in primarily for the sake of enjoyment (Krause, 2006). The participants said that they enjoyed sharing experiences with other older people. They regarded it as their time to relax with people of the same age where they could just be themselves and take part in activities they considered age-appropriate. According to one participant:

When I made this, it shows that I am old, it is my time to sit under the tree and relax. When I'm under the tree I get fresh air that makes me to refresh my body, because am attending here at Mthimkulu I really want to come here and I'm able to exercise and to meet other people. So is better when we are around Mthimukhulu where we have the people of our same age then we are able to share all the things. (GM1)

In her representation, the same participant created a tree, a playground and a doily (a small ornamental mat, usually of lace or linen – <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/doily>). She described it as the playground and the tree under which she sat and relaxed at Mtimkhulu where she could reflect on being an older person. She wanted to engage in activities that made her happy such as making doilies.



Figure 1: Visual representation of emotional support from the community

Religious support from church members. Religious membership support in the study refers to the relationships the older women established with church members. The research findings suggest that such relationships were particularly important to the older women. In these relationships, the women cared for each other, visited each other and looked after each other in times of illness. One participant said:

Yes, they take care of me too much. They visit me; I am at Roman church now. I have church people who look after me when I'm sick. (GM3)

Relational challenges

Relational challenges refer to the obstacles encountered in building effective relationships with people. In the study, relational challenges were identified as a perceived lack of protection, care and support; the absence of men; changed norms and values that guided relationships; and the loss of relationships.

Perceived lack of protection, care and support. The perceived lack of protection and care referred to the absence of emotional care and support of the younger generation. The older black women apparently felt that they were not protected and well looked after by the younger generation:

The younger generation do not look after us. (GM2)

Yes ... yes our children just leave us ..., we don't know what is going on, because everything is difficult (the whole group confirmed this statement).

The older women compared being looked after in current relationships with previous intergenerational experiences. They said that when their grandfathers and parents were still alive, they had felt protected, looked after and safe:

I thought that my father is still alive, because then I wouldn't suffer, because in this life (present) it is different ... the world has change ..., we were never afraid. (GM6)

Yes when I was still growing up, when my father and mother were still raising us, it was very nice. I miss my parents. (GM6)

The representation in Figure 2 shows a grandfather sitting at home as a symbol of protection and care. A participant described the representation as follows: *The grandfather was important. So when grandfathers are there, they protect us as children from being beaten. (GM4)*



Figure 2: A clay image depicting a grandfather

The perceived lack of protection was also expressed in terms of their vulnerability to crime:

Life was good, we lived happily, and we haven't been scared to walk around.

There weren't any thieves. Not now, if you close your eyes something is taken.

(GM6)

The older black women also experienced a perceived lack of support when they assumed sole responsibility for the maintenance of the homes where they and their families lived. In the visual representation in Figure 3, the participant depicts a dilapidated house that she inherited from her parents. The house appears in need of ongoing maintenance, but she is apparently solely responsible for maintaining the house with very limited support and money:

This house is bad, and it put us in danger because it has cracks at the back,

people ..., people don't, but I know that there's something that needs to be

done. But I don't have means. Do you see this house? It should be nice, not that I

should go away, it is the house that I'm given by my parents. So I don't have money to beautify it ... so I don't have a means to make it nice. (GM5)



Figure 3: Representation of a dilapidated house

Feeling unprotected and unsupported led to severe stress among the older black women: *I was very sick before I come to Mthimkulu, stress. I had 11 children, 9 died, only 2 are left.(GM1)*

Absence of men. Traditionally, men had to look after, support and provide a sense of security for the family, but the study findings suggest that men were perceived by the older women as no longer fulfilling these functions:

Some men are heavy drunkard, they drink all kinds of liquor, brandy, African beer ... all and these damage their liver, that's why they die. Men are nowhere to be found and they are not participating in the community activities.(GM4)

The discussion below suggests that men were perceived as ignoring their duties in contrast to the men in the old days. Their behaviour contributed to relational tension and showed a disregard for what they should do and what they should not do:

Participant: *If you compare fathers of those days and fathers today, what is it that you can say? Most of the men go to the beer hall, they don't go to church and when they come back there is a conflict in the house*

Researcher: *How do they differ from grandfathers of olden days, what makes them different?*

Participant: *Grandfathers of the olden days used to take care of each other. You would never go hungry, they could help.*

Changed norms and values impacting on relationships. Norms and values guide behaviour, social life and the relational dynamics between people. However, these norms and values were experienced by the older black women in the study as having changed: *The world has changed; everything has changed unlike in the old days (the past).* Another participant added: *Life is very tough for us now during this time unlike what we used to do.*(GM2)

Previously, the younger generation had apparently respected, looked after and supported older people, but the older women in the study said that this had changed: *Children nowadays do not recognise us, they don't care for us, and they want us to help them. (GM6).* *Children nowadays do not recognise us, they don't care for us, they want us to help them.*(GM4).

The older women said that, formerly, the norms and values that guided relational dynamics were clear – people knew what to expect and how to interact with other people unlike in current relationships: *Life these days is different from that of the old days, you can't discipline your children, they say they have rights, they are always right. I blame the government which came with these rights ... they just do not want to be controlled (GM4).* (The whole group supported this statement.) *Yes ... yes, our children just leave us, they just do not want to be controlled. They say they've got rights, they've got rights (GM2).* (The whole group supported this statement.)

The changed norms were also noted on a community level where the older women said that the African value of *ubuntu* had been replaced by individualism:

No ... no, no one everybody is for himself or herself, even the African people, they copy the lifestyle of whites, everybody for himself. Everybody is for himself or herself, even the African people copy the lifestyle of whites, everybody for himself. (GM8)

Loss of relationships. A major challenge for all the participants was the loss of relationships through death or through children moving away due to marriage. The loss of the relationships through death was expressed as follows:

I had 11 children, 9 died, only 2 are left. (GM1)

Children who were taking care of me, God has taken them ... I had 2 sons and 5 girls, the 2 boys who were taking care of me have passed away and girls are married. (GM3)

My father died when I was still young ... my mother is also dead. (GM2)

The older women also experienced a loss of relationships as a consequence of the relocation of family members to start their own families:

All my children are married.(GM2)

My sister got married.(GM5)

A great grandchild, I'm looking after this great grandchild of mine ... her mother is married.(GM7)

She is married and according to our African culture you cannot just look after your mom when you are married, you must look after your own life but she does something, take something and help me out.(GM1)

The loss of relationships made the older people realise that they had to carry on with their own lives by themselves:

The kind of life that we live these days, you find that in the morning there's nobody so you should wake up and do it yourself.(GM8)

Discussion of Findings

The relational experiences of the older black women were indicated in the reciprocal nature of their interpersonal relationships. The older women contributed to the relationships they were in, but they also received support (Thomése et al., 2005). The tangible contributions of the older women were that they invested their time and energy in looking after and supporting their families and extended families with the pensions they received from the state. In keeping with the reciprocal nature of relationships, the older black women indicated that they received physical support, particularly from those in close proximity to them. An interesting finding was that the older women apparently identified one particular person with whom they could establish a special relational bond and whom they felt they could trust to take care of them. The older women consequently maintained relationships with people who provided them with positive, reliable support. According to Carr (2004), social support from relatives and friends and periodic custodian care are important coping resources for older people. This care is, however, often of a physical rather than an emotional nature. The older black women in the study seemed rather to receive emotional support from their spiritual support systems and from companionship with their peers with whom they could share age-appropriate activities. In line with socio-emotional selective theory, the older women in the study preferred to engage with outside social networks and a selective few in their core network because of the apparently more rewarding nature of the outside social networks (Thomése et al., 2005). According to McIntosh, Sykes and Kubena (2002), greater involvement in religion, as measured by frequency of church attendance, increases the opportunity of older people to get to know more people and to interact with those they are already acquainted with. Interaction with the church and church members helps them cope

better with life's challenges. Religion also provides a coherent belief system that assists people in finding meaning in life and hope for the future and in making sense of the adversities, stresses and losses that inevitably occur in life (Seligman, 2002). Westerhof and Tulle (2007) maintain that spirituality is a personal way of understanding and finding answers to ultimate questions about life.

The major contribution of the study concerns the perceived challenges experienced by older black women in their relationships. Apart from the challenges associated with the loss of relationships, the older women in the study also experienced a lack of care, support and protection. On an intergenerational level, this is cause for concern. In contrast to previous intergenerational relations – where clear values and norms guided the interactions of people across and between generations – current intergenerational relationships are largely unpredictable. Traditionally, the younger generation was expected to take care of the older generation, and, in turn, the older generation was expected to provide guidance and security. In other words, relationships could be described in terms of predictable interactions between people. Oppong (2006) states that, traditionally, respect for parents and grandparents and cooperation and reciprocity within and between generations were key values in African socio-cultural systems. This situation has changed, and Møller and Sotshongaye (2002) warn that this tendency could impact on the availability and quality of care for ageing people.

Concern is also raised about the changed norms and values that guide the interactions between older people and the younger generation – it seems as if the communal values of collective care and support have been replaced by individualistic values. Consequently, the older black women in the study felt stressed and overwhelmed – feelings that were heightened by the perceived absence of men. According to the older women, men had abandoned their traditional role as providers – a view also supported by Oppong (2006).

The application of the Mmogo-methodTM was particularly useful as it more fully revealed the older black women's experiences of relationships. As a projective research instrument, it elicited interpersonal meanings and experiences related to the interactions between the participants in the study. Through this process, the participants could contribute in their own unique way and share their thoughts on older black women's experiences of relationships with those close to them.

Recommendations for Further Research and Limitations of the Study

The findings indicate that intergenerational interventions should be instituted to promote the effective negotiation of intergenerational relationships between older persons and the younger generation. Further research is therefore needed to explore the needs and expectations of members of both generations. The aim of such research and interventions should be to facilitate the social networks, social interaction and social support between book-end generations. A research method should be applied that is appropriate for both generations.

A possible limitation of the research was that although the Mmogo-methodTM worked well in this particular context, more data-gathering methods could have been used. Also, a more diverse group of older people, including men as well as older people from different socio-cultural contexts, could have contributed to a deeper understanding of the relational experiences of older people.

Conclusion

The study explored the relational experiences of older black women in a community in Mpumalanga. Traditionally, interpersonal relationships have been very important for older black people. The older black women in the study contributed to these relationships and received support in return. However, their experiences of their current relationships, which have undergone many changes, are cause for concern as the women felt overwhelmed and

lost in these 'new' relationships. Because of the importance of intergenerational support for older people, social interventions that promote intergenerational relationships between older people and younger generations require urgent attention.

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