

## **Exploring Botswana Bridal Showers through a Relational-Cultural Connections Lens**

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### **Abstract**

*Since the introduction of economic practices and the ideas of neo-liberalism in many African countries, the indigenous ideas of mutual empowerment have become a dominant feature and the backbone of many societies. Though bridal showers have been in existence for a long while, few studies have investigated how people forge or reproduce mutually reinforcing practices in urban areas. The study*

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*investigated the Botho/Ubuntu driven practices of community-building in the urban space in the form of Bridal Showers in Gaborone. Showers are gendered cultural, relational celebrations organized by women for a mother or father who will either receive a daughter or a son-in-law; a woman who is engaged to be married or one who is about to become a mother respectively. Themes such as mutually enhancing and growth-fostering relationships among participants, reciprocity, social support, mutual trust and empathy appeared in the study. Results show that participation in the showers could bring satisfaction, improved social relations, an increased sense of control and empowerment.*

**Key Words:** *Botho/Ubuntu, Bridal Showers, Social Capital, Urban Space, Botswana*

### **Introduction**

Evidence suggests that natural or created groups, networks and ties transcending kinship and other forms of connectedness have become the persistent systems of care among human beings (Kropotkin, 1955; Reeves, 2007; Trichon, 2007; Yaruss, Quesal, & Reeves, 2007). Mutual aid groups have been created as a defence against a common enemy or oppressor since time immemorial. Mutual aid groups are seen as,

“Action taken by individuals based on their own internal resources or experiences to help themselves effect personal change . . . . Support, encouragement, and the sharing of

experiential knowledge from a group to assist in effecting individual or group change” (Reeves, 2007: 5).

These groups have provided material, informational, spiritual and emotional support during disasters. Groups organised by women have continued to serve as the primary economic safety cushion for the African urban poor (Modie Moroka et. al 2020). In 1955, Kropotkin wrote a masterwork entitled, “*Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution,*” in which he concluded that,

...The practice of mutual aid has attained the greatest development... [and] is invariably the most numerous, the most prosperous and the most open to further progress .... [In] the ethical progress of man, mutual support-not mutual struggle-has had the leading part.

Since the introduction of economic practices and the ideas of neo-liberalism in many African countries, the indigenous idea of mutual empowerment have become a dominant feature and the backbone of many societies. Generally, and regarding urban women in particular, research and clinical observations show that most women are socialized toward connection, affiliation, relatedness, emotional closeness, and emotional flexibility than do most men (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; 1987; Jordan, 1986; 1987; 1989; 1992a; 1992b; Miller, 1976, 1986, 1990). The capacity for empathy can be seen as the central organizing concept in women’s relational

experiences (Surrey, 1984; 1987). Bridal showers are primarily based on relational-empowering, mutual-enhancing and growth-fostering relationships organised around women. Bridal showers carry a code of mutual aid since they are,

“Voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose . . . usually formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem and bringing about desired social and/or personal change” (Yaruss, 2007: 257).

Though showers have been in existence for a while, few studies have investigated how people forge or reproduce mutually reinforcing practices in urban areas. This paper is a result of a project that investigated how the *Botho/Ubuntu* driven practices of community-building are expressed in the urban space in the form of Bridal showers. The next section will briefly explore the origins and practices of bridal showers.

### **The Origins and Elements of Bridal Showers**

Though the true origins of bridal showers remain unknown, the roots have been traced to the 1890s in countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, UK, Denmark, and India and the African continent. The earliest stories of bridal showers date back to the 16th or 17th Century in the Netherlands, Belgium, around

the 1860s (Montemurro, 2006). The central idea of a bridal shower has been to bring women together to give gifts and counsel to a woman who is about to get married, referred to as the “bride-to-be.” The custom and practice does not only provide gifts for the “bride-to-be,” but also provide support and guidance to ensure that the wedding takes place. Montemurro (2006) contends that though highly applauded, the bridal shower tends to socialize women into the feminine traditional wife role, with its emphasis on the future role of the bride-to-be as the cook, homemaker, and sexual partner. Pleck (2000) states that bridal shower gifts were given primarily for the bedroom or the kitchen.

Different customs around the world have developed the practice of bridal showers, but the basic format stresses traditional gender roles. In Botswana, these showers usually would start in the afternoon or evening. An organising committee is selected, comprising mostly of friends, workmates, church members and/or relatives. In the invitation, there is a note indicating the dates of the occasion, attire, and a gate pass (which is usually an entrance fee in the value of either twenty-pula or two-litres of a fizzy drink or juice), which are often used during the wedding. Those who attend the showers are expected to bring a small gift. Shower organisers often contribute separately and buy more meaningful gifts such as a television, a refrigerator, a washing machine, or a stove, to name but a few such gifts. Food is served at bridal showers, mostly in the form of *phaletshe* (mealie-meal), beef stew, braai, a salad, and a drink. Alcohol may be served depending on the

religious orientation of the organisers and shower recipient. Guests comprise the bride's personal friends, family, and other well-wishers, but men are not invited to bridal showers. People who are invited to a bridal shower are often invited to the wedding ceremony. The showers have become a standard female-centred practice in Botswana, supposedly expressing the *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic and spirituality, especially in urban areas.

### **The Objectives of the *Botho/Ubuntu* Research**

The objectives of the *Botho/Ubuntu* research were as follows: to explore and examine the theological and spiritual base of *Botho/Ubuntu* values/ethics; to explore how *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic is understood and manifested in traditional Botswana communities; to analyze how *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic is expressed in urban settings of Botswana, and to investigate how *Botho/Ubuntu* activities in the urban space construct and deconstruct gender. The project further intended to identify how a *Botho/Ubuntu* ethic could inform the building and maintenance of justice-loving communities in the long-term. On one hand, the Naomi–Laban showers are gendered celebrations organized by women for a mother or father who will receive a daughter or son-in-law; the bridal and baby shower, on the other hand, bridal showers are made for a female who is engaged to be married or who is about to become a mother, respectively. The *Botho/Ubuntu* research highlights the benefits of the relationships between shower recipients, organisers and attendees. These encounters may be opportune

and not always understood or appreciated, but over time and upon reflection, these encounters have provided a safety net for those involved. The paper uses data collected in Gaborone over six months to infuse concepts of relational-cultural theory and develop an understanding of Bridal showers. It is highlighted that bridal showers promote mutual engagement, empathy and empowerment among the women themselves and the community at large. Though there were others emerging from the data, in this paper, we elect to focus on concepts within Relational Cultural Theory to enrich our understanding of the participants' perspectives from that perspective.

### **Method**

The study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry. The study first carried out a secondary desktop analysis and second, conducted fieldwork-based research. The analysis of the findings constituted the last two objectives. The quantitative approach of the study was used to explain the relationship between the central study variables such as sociodemographic characteristics, *Botho/Ubuntu*, and other participants' behaviour at showers. Quantitative data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire from individuals who were attending the different showers. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to solicit in-depth descriptions, explanations, and narrations of the experiences of the respondents. Qualitative methods emphasize learning from people's perspective, the point of view, vision, and reality of

the world (Creswell, 1994). The qualitative data methods helped enrich the variables under study by linking them to specific incidents and observations and the meanings attached to those observations. Exact quotations were used to maximize understanding of the respondent's experiences. Qualitative content analysis of the interviews revealed concepts critical to understanding the experiences of showers attendees. Conclusions were then drawn based on this analysis.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Botswana Internal Review Board [UB-IRB]. The board analyzed the proposal and saw it fit for the study to be conducted. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. The researchers made sure that every participant understands the consent form clearly. In this manner, participants knew what to expect from the study. Participants were also informed that information about them would be kept confidential, and their names would not be revealed to anyone or expressed in the study. Study participants were informed that their responses would be kept separate from their socio-demographic data to break the link between them and the research. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the research for whichever reason they could have.



### **Sampling Participants and Data Collection Processes**

Convenience sampling was used to choose Gaborone as a site in which to carry out the study because of its proximity to the researchers. The target population was bridal shower attendants. All attendees were eligible for participation. The questionnaires were distributed by the researchers themselves at the separate showers. The researchers attended the showers, solicited consent, made observations, and conducted the interviews. Where consent was secured, video cameras were used to capture data from the participants. The researchers took notes during showers and interviews. Qualitative data were also collected through in-depth interviews with key informants from each shower such as organizers and the recipient of the shower. Researchers collected data about ideas, experiences, beliefs, and behaviours of the participants at the showers. Information about sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents will be provided in the results section.

### **Results of Quantitative Data**

Upon receipt, the questionnaires were examined for correctness and completeness; the data were coded and entered SPSS Version 25. For each research question, descriptive statistics using measures of central tendency and dispersion were used. The descriptive phase, which is provided through quantitative data, provides a broad context of the characteristics and profiles of the sample. Information collected from the quantitative data

includes correlations and other relationships between variables.

### **Socio-demographic Characteristics**

Respondents ranged in age from 20-50 years. All respondents were women (N=110). Sixty-eight per cent of the respondents were single (N=73), the currently married comprised 29%, separated (2.5%), widowed (2%) and divorced (2%). Two respondents did not indicate their marital status. All respondents had some form of formal education. More than ten per cent had more than a Form Five level of education (12.2%), Certificate and Diploma level (39.8%), Bachelors (33.3%), Masters (3%) and doctoral level (2%). Two respondents did not indicate their level of education.

### **Instruments**

The study used two instruments: the questionnaire and the in-depth interview guide, together with participatory observation, were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively. The instruments were prepared beforehand and piloted before the study was carried out. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. The researchers recorded the events and teachings on video and audio. Interviews allowed researchers to collect data about ideas, experiences, beliefs, views, opinions, and behaviours of the shower participants.

### ***Botho/Ubuntu Shower Observation Instrument***

The Shower Observation Instrument included a description of the location of the shower, the setting,

how the organizers received and greeted the guests, “off-camera” conversations before and after the shower, an indication of who was invited, the mode of invitations; activities, games, refreshments, and gifts that were given to the recipient in the shower. Some of the items tapped on who the designated speakers were and reasons for their selection and the content of their counselling. Theory-driven questions included power dynamics, community-building, the capacity to create and maintain mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships, and connections and strategies that encourage engagement in the shower.

### **Shower Observation Checklist**

A Shower Observation Checklist was developed consisting of 14 items to which the researcher indicated with a “Yes” or “No,” if they observed a particular behaviour during the shower. The items addressed 14 specific areas such as the behaviour of shower organisers about guests, and other socio-demographic variables such as age, sex, church membership, kin/relation, ethnicity, the guest behaviours and the types of gifts that were brought to the shower. The mean was 7.4 (SD=2.3). The scores ranged was from 0 to 14.

### **Bridal Shower Participants Questionnaire**

A Bridal Shower Participants Questionnaire was developed to establish respondent’s understanding of the bridal showers. That included the purpose of the shower, whether it assists in community-building and whether it furthers the cultural tradition of *Botho* or it offer a new social gathering altogether. The survey instrument asked respondents to indicate their

sex, marital status, educational status, their role in the shower and their relationship to the shower recipient. The scale consists of 18 items in which respondents indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with statements on bridal showers. These items were scored on a 5-point scale labelled at the endpoints from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Higher scores indicated more adherence to statements on bridal showers. Scores range from 40 to 200 with high scores reflecting more stringent cultural beliefs. Some of the items on this scale are "*Bridal showers offer moral and social support,*" "*I usually have a long-term relationship with people whose Bridal-showers I have attended their Bridal-showers.*" Reliability of the scale was  $\alpha = .94$ . Items in the study ranged from 18 to 90, suggesting that on the whole, respondents adhered to most sociocultural beliefs on the item list. The mean score in this study was 50.03; (SD=5.6). Scores ranged from 36-72. Results from higher mean scores show that Bridal showers offer moral and social support (Mean=3.78; SD= .42), that they are intended to give advice\counselling to the wife-to-be on being a wife and mother support (Mean= 3.78; SD=.42); that bridal showers are necessary (Mean= 3.71; SD=.50); that bridal showers we demonstrate *Botho* (Mean =3.45; SD= .58); that they are a modern development (Mean = 3.07; SD=.80); and that they are for women only (Mean = 3.09; SD =1.1).

### **Norms of reciprocity**

Quantitative data confirmed that there were positive correlations associated with items that typify the norms of reciprocity. Respondents who believed that

if they have attended a bridal shower for X, they would expect X to attend their shower as well, also believed that they would feel offended if they organised a bridal shower for X and then X would refuse to organise their bridal shower ( $r = .65$ ,  $p < .001$ ). People who would feel offended if they organized a bridal shower for someone who would later refuse to organize their bridal shower were also likely to feel that it was okay to attend bridal shower without bringing a present ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Respondents who believed that if they attend a bridal shower for X, they would expect X to attend their shower as well did not believe that that it was okay to attend bridal shower without bringing a present ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Positive correlations were found among people who thought that bridal showers are necessary. These category also believed bridal showers offer moral and social support ( $r = .67$ ,  $p < .001$ ); that showers are meant to give advice/counselling ( $r = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ ); that showers demonstrate *Botho* ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and that bridal showers allow for the opportunity for community-building in the urban space ( $r = .28$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

Social networks of family, friends, church members, co-workers and others provide resources that are needed in times of need to protect married couples and their families from marital conflict and divorce. Social networks embedded in showers allow access to instrumental, spiritual, financial, and emotional support. Information sharing may be beneficial for individuals who need help on marriage and family life, living with in-laws, to name but a few. Inter-generational and inter-household exchange networks

have a long history in Botswana (Dube et. al. 2016:1-7). In this study, we note that the ability of these networks to assist has remained stable and norms of mutuality and reciprocity more possible to maintain.

### **Results of Qualitative Data**

This study employs both critical and interpretive qualitative methods of inquiry to elicit participants' accounts and experiences as they exist or occurred (Mitchell & Cody, 1993; Sandelowski, 1986, 1993). We note that the relationship between theory and research is a give-and-take dynamic in that research may be used to support the theory and vice-versa (Young, Taylor, & McLaughlin-Renpenning, 2001; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). In this study, the theory was used to conceptualise the research problem and to guide the investigations on the truthfulness of theoretical propositions. We applied the core concepts or principles to collect, analyse, and interpret the data, such as drawing connections. We then articulated the theoretical framework that fits the phenomenon being studied, in this case, RCT. The leading theoretical framework in the study was a relational-cultural theory (RCT). Originally called "Self in Relation theory," the theory is now called "Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT)" (Miller, 1976, 1986; 2015; Gilligan, 1982; 1993). Miller (1976; 1986) and Chodorow (1978, 1989) initiated a feminist re-evaluation with her thesis which argued that women are socialised toward an ethic of care and connection, although these strengths often are unrecognised or devalued. The central concern in the lives of most women can be described as active participation in the development of other people,

referred to as taking part in growth-fostering relationships.” (Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1976). Concepts of RCT drove questions in the face-to-face interviews. Although qualitative data is tiring and laborious, theory helped to shape and explain the ideas (Anfara & Mertz, 2006).

Shower experiences are based on the personal meaning of events, and these meanings are influenced by the convergence of beliefs, norms, and interests of the respondents. Bridal shower experiences are context-dependent, diverse and, therefore, well-suited for an approach where meanings may become elusive and require interpretative efforts. The qualitative method supported the exploration of shower experiences of women to find meanings and significance through the interpreted narratives of the participants. The data collected through the observations and voice recorders were transcribed into text first, then coded to make sense of them. The process of data analysis involved searching for meaningful units of data that could stand on their own and were associated with the overall purpose of the study. Investigators read all of the interviews, discussed each interview and noted themes. Where comments were addressed in more than one category, they were cross-referenced. Coding allowed the data (the transcripts) to be broken down and conceptualized. Information obtained from the survey provided a general description and profile of the women. This study used the data analysis plan by Miles & Huberman (1994) which consists of three components, namely, data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusion. Data

reduction is the process through which data is selected, focused, simplified, abstracted, and transformed to appear in field notes or transcriptions. The researcher identifies the themes of the research and other processes that are needed for data reduction.

Themes were therefore coded based explicitly on expectations from the theoretical constructs, while still being open to the possibility of new themes. Themes that did not fit within the theoretical frame were coded separately and are not part of this paper. After coding the data relevant to the theoretical propositions, open coding was done through line-by-line analysis, paragraph analysis, or document analysis as the point of analysis allowed for a more in-depth, more thorough look into the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Axial coding helps to put categories with subcategories as appropriate and helps to identify the relationships between categories and their connections. An open sampling of the data was then used for open coding, relational sampling for axial coding, and discriminate sampling for selective coding. Themes that emerged were then matched to existing theoretical constructs, if appropriate.

Surrey (1991) states that the connections women have with each other are a result of being in a relationship with oneself, others, and nature. The connection is an interaction between two or more people that are “mutually-empathic” and “mutually-empowering.” Disconnections happen in interactions where mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are lacking, where there are disappointments,



misunderstandings, a sense of violation, or a deadlock (Jordan, 2010). Characteristics that represent central aspects of growth-fostering relationships include mutual engagement, emotional empathy, relational authenticity, differentiation, empowerment, and the ability to thrive in diversity, difference, and conflict. The second concept of RCT that is essential to the developmental process of empowerment is that of mutuality and empathy.

The results of this research are organised under relational cultural and empowerment concepts. Data are organized and analyzed under each research question, which is broken into interview questions. For each question, responses are contrasted. RCT helps to explore the relationships and meanings that knowledge and context may share (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Looking at showers through the relational lens is the core emphasis of this paper. We adopted RCT for the theoretical lens because of its central assumption that women are encouraged, through gender socialisation processes, to adopt relational schemas related to how to create, maintain, and enhance relationships and engage in caring actions in significant relationships. Themes such as mutually enhancing and growth-fostering relationships, reciprocity, mutual trust, empathy, and empowerment among participants were identified in the study. Empowerment theories are especially crucial to the understanding of individual and collective identity and social justice. Results showed that participation in the showers could bring satisfaction, improved social relations, and an increased sense of control and empowerment.

### **Relational Connections, Differentiation and Empathy**

Connection is defined as “an interaction between two or more people that is mutually empathetic and mutually empowering. It involves emotional accessibility and leads to the ‘five good things’ (zest, worth, productivity, clarity and desire for more connection)” (Jordan, 2010: 102). The connection is the core of human growth and development based on CRT. Mutuality is a shared process where all involved are participating as fully as possible, although mutuality does not mean sameness, equality or reciprocity.

Norms of togetherness push us to be part of a group. One is taught during showers that the drive for individuality should be balanced with “living together and in harmony with” others in a healthy, mutually reinforcing transaction that does not depreciate one as they blend into life with the in-laws. Most brides were warned that behaviours that suggest that one is estranged or separated from the in-laws would result in one being less of a person. Shower attendants noted that though it was difficult to leave one’s family and go to live with in-laws, marital problems were not a result of failure to separate but were the results of the difficulties she would experience in trying to maintain connections while also asserting her needs and desires, which is a principle of differentiation. Individuality propels us to follow our advice and instruction to create a unique identity. Asked about why they are involved in showers, one respondent stated,

**Participant:** Yes, I am and because she is my friend and colleague...a group always joins hands whenever there is an event. We usually meet when there is an upcoming wedding. We meet and ask for assistance and make our contributions to assist anyone who is getting married. That is what we usually do, we then send out invitations and invitees bring 2 litres (fizzy drinks). These 2 litres are not consumed in the shower, but instead saved for a wedding celebration.... usually those who attend are close friends... (Shower 1: Voice 011)

Another stated,

It is critical to gather here together as women as we learn to be supportive, be active as women and nurturers of our families. As African women, it is our mandate to support the bride to be in many ways, through knowledge/advice or financial support. Therefore, we organisers had to come together, contribute, and invite friends, families and colleagues who will bring gifts and presents for the bride to be. So I would advise everyone to keep up the support and culture of oneness and unity (Shower 1: Voice 015)

Yet another stated,

... all strangers at showers become “friends.”  
Once you unite people through showers, they

come to know each other (Shower 1: Voice 012)

Shower attendees believed that as individuals, they grow and benefit from the relational experience. Even though people do not know each other, showers enable women to meet and initiate relationships that may go a long way. To illustrate a sense of mutual engagement, one of the shower attendants stated,

...Those who are there maintains a good relationship because we all want to please the bride. We want things to be perfect for that day .... for other people, it is like an outing. They will hang out, and by so doing it loses the meaning of being a bridal shower. So, respect is required during the event.... (Shower 1: Voice 014)

Showers, therefore, are a connective thread through which the women develop meaningful, fruitful lives and enable others to reach their aspirations and goals. These are ways through which women seek external sources of fulfilment and identity. To foster mutual engagement and empathy, the shower organisers must pay attention to connections and disconnections among the shower attendants. To illustrate a sense of mutual differentiation, one of the shower attendants stated,

*I:* When you mention accountability, what could make other people not to commit?

*P:* As I said, I think it is an individual decision whether or not you put much effort

into making sure you fulfil your promise. Regarding organizers, some didn't contribute at all, whereas some didn't bring the plates as they pledged. So, one can question the relationship between these people and the bride... When you come to the shower, you should bring something, whether or not it is a gate pass, a present is a must. An invite means to bring something and share your love with the bride to be.

*I:* For those attendees, what do you expect from them?

*P:* ...to show up on time. People are not showing up on time, delay the whole process and inconvenience the proceedings of the shower. Just be courteous, maintaining a quiet environment, but when you are given the floor, you can speak freely. It is not a formal setting, but we expect people to be casual yet attentive at the same time.

When these two life forces for individuality and togetherness are expressed in balanced, healthy ways, the result is a meaningful relationship that does not deteriorate into emotional fusion. Giving up one's individuality and togetherness is as defeating in the end as giving up one's relationship to maintain one's individuality. In showers, since there is a public and private side of showers, respondents reported feeling pressured to agree, conform and adapt. One of the respondents stated,

... to some extent, they (referring to the behaviours of some shower attendants), contradict *Botho*. You find that everything is left to the organisers. The bride should not prescribe what she wants because at times she makes unreasonable demands (of things she wants) which others cannot afford. Based on *Botho*, supporting the bride requires mutual respect, appreciation, humility and sacrifice for the other (Shower 8: Voice 034).

One wishes that well-differentiated people can agree without feeling like they are “losing themselves.” Well-differentiated people can disagree without feeling alienated and embittered. Well-differentiated people can stay connected with people who disagree with them and still “know who they are.” They do not have to leave the relationship in order to hold onto their sense of self.

Asked how bridal showers develop women, one respondent stated,

Bridal showers develop women through the support we get from each other like financial support. For example, when I need some help with something, the group will be able to assist accordingly. As people, we are raised ka *Botho*. We carry ourselves into other relationships as well, to give tangible support. We are therefore relational, and we show *Botho* (Shower 5: Voice 019)

A respondent stated,

... We help in the form of finances. We ask for her financial needs, and when we help, that is *Botho*. I am because we are. Her wellbeing becomes our concern ...so that she knows she is not alone in her new journey (Shower 5: Voice 020)

For another evidence of mutual empathy,

...no person should stand alone. People do that in urban areas. *Ko gae o ya* (at home you go) even when not invited. In urban areas, we lose this, and therefore, in bridal showers we are saying we are behind you. We women want you to settle in your marriage.... I am because we are. Her wellbeing becomes our concern (Shower 5: Voice 021)

The development of mutual respect during showers was crucial to the creation of a sense of mutuality and safety. Phrases like “being there for her,” “caring for each other,” “sharing information with her,” “doing it for her” and “we are behind you” implied that the shower participants were willing to provide help for the new bride or mother. For support to happen, mutuality must be established within the relationship with a degree of empathy, to meet the recipient’s identified needs. Showers are spaces for negotiating ones’ relational authenticity under the controlling cultural images, relational images, or how we perceive ourselves about others. Women, who are generally expected to carry primary relational responsibility, may sacrifice authenticity to maintain relationships (Miller, 1986).

### **Norms of Obligation in Showers**

Showers are built on a bed of social networks and interactions. A bridal shower event exemplifies a network, and that interpersonal communication among individuals resembles a relationship between a node and another nesting in the network. One respondent asked about the role of showers stated,

...As a bride, *ga re a tshwanela go itebatsa batho ba ba re thusitseng* (As a bride we must not forget that other people have helped us in the past) so bridal showers allow us to pay back (Shower 7: Voice 028)

### **Showers and the Expression of Diversity, Difference, and Conflict**

Empathy was central to an understanding of the aspect of the self, which involves “we-ness,” which is the transcendence of the separate and disconnected self. Out of mutual empathy comes mutual empowerment and a willingness to be stimulated by another’s experience and being authentic in that regard (Edwards & Richards, 2002). A recurring theme in the study was the expression of diversity, difference, and conflict on norms regarding marriage. The diversity of marriage systems reflects the traditions, religions, and economic circumstances of a wide variety of distinct cultures. There was an underlying feeling that in recent years, modern life had brought changes to marriages and the roles of men and women. Marriage is between the two families of the bride and groom, and other families help arrange the marriages of their members. However, traditional African system



emphasizes that the union of two individuals must fit into the larger picture of social networks known as kinship, clan or tribal groups, hence the inclusion of adult married women to provide guidance and counsel to the new bride. Each marriage is supposed to create a coalition between or within kinship groups. The urban setting, however, has uprooted people from their traditional kinship groups.

This study found strong support for the influence of social norms on both the production and sustainability of relationships. When participants were asked to explain why they became involved in the showers, they often described themselves as having responsibility or as the manifestation of a set of values or beliefs. The general notion is that when a group of people has a shared group of norms, there is also a shared understanding of the expectations. Individuals are more likely to go along with them, thus fulfilling one another's expectations. Therefore, the individual behaviour must be viewed within the context of a much larger system of rules and traditions that are shared within that person's community. Asked about the diversities they experience in showers, the women reflected,

Bridal Shower Interview B: All women of all ages, single and *bomme ba ba nyetsweng*, (married women) all have something to add, to contribute towards *go laya* (to provide counsel). Married women know what is; they can advise her with authority. Single women also learn how to behave well so that they can also find a husband; we also learn why

couples are not always happy, why when they are driving in the morning, they do not hold hands as they used to.

Here are the views of yet another respondent:

Married women talk to the new bride from experience; they are in it. They have experience. With a single woman, we hope to get married. We are learning now so that one day we will be there. In traffic we see couples looking sad, and later we ask why, so we learn, they might scare us as well (Shower 9: Voice 019).

Several others also shared their views,

...The advice we get builds both the married and unmarried. Married people know exactly what marriage is. As single women, we are advised to wait for marriage before sex. We get advice like “not all is rosy in marriage.” So, we strengthen ourselves in patience and long suffering...*Ko gae they reproduce roles – bo monna o a apeelwa, o a tlhatswetswa.* What about the woman? (At home, they reproduce roles – rules like having to cook and wash for your man). So, one way or the other we remain the same. We act like our parents. At home *mosadi ke mosadi* she remains under the authority of the man (Shower 9: Voice 020)

Relationship Differentiation involves balancing the drive for independence with togetherness, closeness, and inseparability. It is the ability to stay in connection without being consumed by another person. Emotional fusion is the opposite of differentiation. Fusion is an invisible-but-tenacious emotional connection. Individuality propels us to follow our directions, be on our own and to create a unique identity. Togetherness pushes us to follow the directives of others and to be part of the group. The capacity and willingness of each person to change and grow fosters development. Differentiation is one's ability to maintain one's sense of self when one is emotionally and physically close to others. There were some reflections on differences between traditional cultural ways of preparing for marriage and bridal showers such as the following:

... Culturally, the advice was given by married senior women only, according to stringent firm rules; but bridal showers are in a more jovial atmosphere. The timing of the shower and that of cultural *go laya* differ. Showers are done before the marriage while traditional counselling is done during or after *lenyalo* (Shower 4, Voice 12).

...In traditional culture, there are no presents. There is very strict traditional attire (*mogagolwane and tukwi*), but showers allow various casual wear – we can wear short skirts and jeans). In traditional culture, advice comes from only married women

while with bridal showers it is “freestyle.” (Shower 4: Voice 14).

... *ka Setswana* they set terms and conditions and specific roles that are defined for the women. Ga Setswana go a *tshosa* (The Setswana version of go laya is very intimidating), while bridal showers lack *serite* (dignity). The dress code is casual. At showers, women encourage each other not to be docile. There is a bit of feminism because Bridal showers give the bride insight on how to do things. It is like peaceful feminism (Shower 4, Voice 15).

...bridal showers are more liberal. Marital status is not a big deal. It is more relaxed than the Setswana version. In the Setswana version, tension *ya teng ke mathata* (the tension is terrible). We can feel the tension *re le ko di-kitchening kwa, gotwe rona bo ma-Single le go feta gaufi re seka ra leka (...we can feel the tension while busy cooking in the kitchen. Us singles are told not to even pass by the place where they are giving counsel to the new bride)*. *Kana* here at the shower we can say what we want, but *kwa ba ya go mo apesa kobo le sekopelo*. That is what is going to work in their home (At the traditional ceremony they drape over her a blanket secured it with a safety pin). *Ebile kana le monna o a laiwa. Rona fa re laya mosadi fela* (Even men are given counsel, but we only

focus on the women here). This cannot work at home (Shower 4: Voice 17).

...even when not married, one can share advice with the bride. Bridal showers offer close relatives who are not married an opportunity to advise their sister or close cousin. For instance, in my case, there was no one who was already married in my family. Even my mother, her sisters, cousins, etc. Nothing! I was the first to get married. Therefore, when it got to counselling at home, they were not allowed to advise; but at showers, they are free to advise. So, when it got to counselling at home, I was left with 'strangers.' Those people were not close to me at all *ka gore go tile go tsena batho baba nyetsweng fela* (because only the married can-do traditional counselling)' (Shower 4: Voice 13).

Both married and single women should participate as they occupy different spaces in their experiences and lack thereof. Single women should attend to learn so that they know what to expect from married life. Married women should attend to share their experiences that have been there because they know the "hardships." Many of the investments that participants brought to the showers reflected the level of integration with others into their lives in a way that made them both transparent and obligated. That is, many of the participants did not think of their participation as forced, but rather as just another part of their routine. Social norms of obligation and

collective efficacy are already knitted in their being, that they did not stand out as something extra. This result is consistent with Haley's (2004) notion that social norms are often unconscious because they are genuinely embedded into a shared point of view within a particular context. Several participants saw showers as not only a mode through which they could demonstrate their *Botho* and sense of togetherness values. Showers were perceived as a conduit for enacting those values in their network.

Showers are therefore a primary source and a producer of social capital, as they involve developing connections that provide instrumental, informational, and emotional support to members of the network. Informal social control is a sub-theme of social capital, measured by the community's ability to monitor each other's behaviour and to intervene for the common interest. Mutual trust and solidarity among kin and neighbours enhance informal social control.

### **Getting the Best of Showers**

Results suggest that bridal showers combine aspects of relational competence to understand how women engage with one another in order to increase their sense of personal, interpersonal power. Women are active participants in the development of themselves and other people. A key lesson is that bridal showers are a basis for a woman to self-empathise in a mutual, interactive process, being emotionally available, attentive, and responsive to other people in a relationship.

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