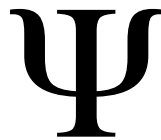




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Creating agency: A qualitative study of how women of Okurase in Ghana deal with their challenges through their everyday lives

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Sammendrag

I denne hovedoppgaven utforsker vi hvordan kvinner som lever under begrensede livsbetingelser håndterer utfordringer i sine hverdagsliv. For å få kunnskap om dette har vi gjennomført semistrukturerte intervjuer med åtte kvinner fra en landsby i Ghana, som alle hadde store livsutfordringer. Intervjuene var inspirert av Livsformsintervjuet (Haavind, 1987), hvor kvinnenes hverdagsliv brukes som utgangspunkt for å utforske deres opplevelser, og for å forstå deres utfordringer og hvordan de håndterte dem. I analysearbeidet trakk vi veksler på tematisk analyse som foreslått av Braun og Clark (2006; 2013) og kulturpsykologiske perspektiver. Gjennom detaljert lesning av det empiriske materialet i lys av teori som gjorde oss oppmerksomme på kvinnenes agens, har vi generert tre tema som belyser hvordan kvinnene håndterer utfordringer de står overfor i hverdagen; betydningen av arbeid, betydningen av andre og betydningen av håp. Selv om kvinnenes arbeidsdager var veldig tøffe, ga arbeid kvinnene mulighet til å være uavhengig av andre, og til å forsørge seg selv og sine familiemedlemmer. Betydningen av andre viste seg gjennom hvordan kvinnene ofte benyttet seg av hjelp og støtte fra familie og venner for å håndtere utfordringer. Kvinnene brukte sin religiøse tro og forestilte seg en bedre fremtid som måter til å påvirke sin opplevelse av mulighet for endring. Analysen viser at hvordan kvinnene forstod og ga mening til sin situasjon bidro til å skape agens. Selv om deres sosiale- og materielle omstendigheter satte begrensninger for hvordan de kunne leve sine liv, fant kvinnene likevel måter å håndtere utfordringene de står overfor og bevare en aktiv rolle i å påvirke sine egne liv.

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore how women living under constraining life conditions deal with their challenges through their everyday life. In order to obtain this knowledge, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight women living in a rural village in Ghana, who all experienced hardships. The interviews were inspired by the Life Mode Interview (Haavind, 1987), where the women's everyday lives served as a starting point for exploring their experiences and to understand their challenges and how they dealt with them. The analysis of the interviews was conducted by drawing on thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clark (2006; 2013) and using concepts and perspectives from Cultural psychology. Detailed reading of the empirical material in light of theory made us aware of the women's agency, and we generated three themes that show how the women dealt with challenges; the importance of working, the importance of others, and the importance of hope. Working, although their work days were often very tough, provided the women with opportunity to be independent of others, to be able to provide for themselves, as well as family members. The importance of others was evident in how the women often made use of help and support from family and friends to cope with challenges. The women used their religious faith and imagined a better future as ways of influencing how they experienced their possibilities of change. The analysis shows different ways the women understood and made sense of their situation that contributed to create agency. Although their social and material circumstances restricted them, the women were nevertheless able to find ways of handling the challenges they were facing, and to keep an active role in influencing their lives.

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During the year this project has lasted, we have received help from so many incredible people, and we wish to use this opportunity to thank everybody.

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Last but not least, we wish to thank the women we interviewed in Okurase for sharing your time and knowledge. Meeting you all was a humbling experience for us.

Vanessa Amorenza Vold Christensen and Selma Heier

Oslo, January 2019

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Preface

This project had been planned for almost a year, before the summer of 2018 when we went to Okurase in Ghana, to conduct interviews for our master thesis. The inspiration to this project came after hearing some very interesting stories about how some women in Ghana were managing their lives after very difficult life events. We wanted to learn more about how the women lived their lives and dealt with their challenges. The opportunity to follow up on this interest opened up for us when we were able to recruit participants at the annual Village Health Outreach (VHO), a free Ghanaian-lead health outreach held by Project OKURASE, a formal NGO in the rural village of Okurase in Upper West Akyem District of the eastern region of Ghana. We are forever grateful to have got this opportunity to meet and interview these women.

This project was planned and conducted by the authors and Nancy Le Trung, a fellow student at the University of Oslo. The empirical material was collected by the three of us and will result in two separate master theses. This thesis is written by Selma and Vanessa. We have worked together in every step of writing this thesis this fall, and submit the thesis at each of our universities, University of Bergen and University of Oslo.

Vanessa Amorenza Vold Christensen and Selma Heier

Oslo, January 2019

1 Introduction

Many women in Ghana experience considerable hardships in their everyday life. The hardships are often tied to economy, work, family and health issues (see e.g. Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008; Cooke, Hague, & McKay, 2016; Stansfeld, & Candy, 2006; Walters & Avotri, 1999). In Ghana, on a societal level there are practices that restrict women's access to productive resources such as credit, land, training and education (Awumbila, 2006). Few women own land, and most of the women work within the informal sector, which is characterized by job insecurity, low wages and long work hours. Their business success and income is highly dependent on their own efforts and resourcefulness. In terms of the women's role in the family, women often have the responsibility to care and provide for their family members, which puts a lot of pressure on their capability to earn money, provide for food, and raise their own and other family members children. Several studies emphasize that women experience problems that are tied to their gendered position in their society, with specific expectations directed at a woman (e.g. Awumbila, 2006; Theroux, Klar & Messenger, 2013; Walters & Avotri, 1999; Avotri & Walters, 1999).

In a qualitative study of women's accounts of their health, Walters and Avotri (1999) suggest "that there is something about the structure of women's lives that creates distress" (p. 16). They note that women often have a higher workload than men, as they are expected to both engage in domestic activities in the home as well as to provide financial means. Women often talked about how this responsibility stressed and worried them, and how they understood these hardship as something that defines the experience of being a woman (Walters & Avotri, 1999).

Studies on women living in developing countries tend to focus on the struggles and difficulties in ways that disempower women, however as far as we know, few studies focus

on how women are able to cope with, and stay strong through challenges. We aim to explore the strategies the women use when trying to deal with their problems on a day-to-day basis. The study is based on interviews with eight women in Okurase in Ghana about their everyday lives. The women we spoke with were faced with considerable challenges such as unemployment, economical difficulties, health issues, and having been exposed to domestic violence and trauma. In this thesis we explore the following: How do women living under constraining life conditions deal with their challenges through their everyday life?

In the first part of this thesis we detail the women's social and cultural background relevant to understanding the context of the women who participated in this study. Next we will present perspectives from cultural psychology that make up the theoretical framework we have drawn on when analyzing the interviews. In the methods section we describe the process of conducting the study. In the analysis, the contextual knowledge in combination with the theoretical framework will be applied throughout the analysis to create an understanding of the complex ways the women deal with their problems. The analysis will be presented in three main sections that divide the analysis into three themes that are important to how the women are dealing with challenges. Finally we will sum up the outcome of the analysis in the conclusion.

2 Background

Worldwide there is an unequal distribution of both resources and opportunities between men and women. These gendered inequalities in life conditions are largely determined by social and economic structures within the society, and have a great impact on how women worldwide go through their everyday life (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). In most societies women have less access to resources such as education, wealth and land. They often carry a heavier workload by being responsible for family and

household, in addition to paid work. The occupation women engage in is often characterized by low wages, informal employment and less secure conditions (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). Globally, women have fewer possibilities of making decisions concerning their everyday life and less opportunity of improving their lives (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). These global tendencies of gender inequality are also evident in Ghana.

2.1 Economical and health inequality among women and men in Ghana

Ghana has experienced a growth in the economy the last few decades (Cooke, Hague, & McKay, 2016). Despite this, inequality has been increasing, and although poverty has been reduced, it is still a great concern nationally. Numbers from The Ghana Poverty and Inequality Report (Cooke et al., 2016), show Ghana's national level of poverty to be 24%, with households in rural areas having a much higher poverty rate than those in urban areas, respectively 37.9% and 10.6%. A total of 45% of the population live in rural areas (The World Bank, 2018). Although the burden of poverty is shared by both men and women in Ghana, it can be argued that it is more so for women because of gender inequalities caused by social structures and norms within the society (e.g. Awumbila, 2006; Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008; Manuh, 1994). There is a considerable gender gap in access to and ownership of "production resources of land, labour, human capital assets including education and health, and social capital assets such as participations at various levels, legal rights and protection" (Awumbila, 2006, p. 153). Women in Ghana are faced with socially imposed constraints, that both affect their access to resources and possibilities for making themselves a better life. Based on these constraints, Awumbila (2006) argues that women are "generally more vulnerable to poverty, and once poor, they have less access to options in terms of escape" (p. 159).

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals set by United Nations globally (United Nations, 2016), there have been efforts on a national level in Ghana to deal with health related challenges within the population. The efforts can be said to have paid off, as there has been an improvement in general health outcomes in Ghana the last 28 years (Ghana Statistical Service, 2016). However, the people of Ghana are still facing great health related concerns. Inequalities in health outcomes are evident both in different areas and between genders. In 2015 Ghana had a maternal mortality rate of 319 per 100,000 live births (The World Bank Group, 2018). There has been a considerable reduction in maternal mortality rate in Ghana over the last few decades. However, the numbers are still higher than both the rates globally and the rates of the African continent, with a rate of respectively 216 and 289 per 100,000 live births (The World Bank Group, 2018). In comparison, the maternal mortality rate in Norway was 5 per 100,000 live births at the same point in time. The World Health Organization (2018) note that the maternal mortality rate is higher for women living in rural areas and poorer communities. The current life expectancy at birth in Ghana, is 63 years (The World Bank Group, 2018).

Despite of the situation for women presented above, the rate of women participating in the labour market is relatively high in Ghana, with the highest participation rates being in rural areas (Abraham, Ohemeng and Ohemeng, 2017). Although women's engagement in formal employment has been on the rise over the last few decades, the vast majority of women work within the informal sector, doing for example farm work, selling good on the street, ect. Of all women engaged in work in Ghana, a total of 91 percent is within the informal sector (Abraham et al., 2017). In contrast to how formal employment offers an assured means of income, at regulated rates, and in this way provides the worker with stability, the conditions within the informal sector are characterized by insecurity (Manuh, 1994). Most workers in the informal sector are not covered by social security systems. The

working conditions within the informal sector, such as high job demand, imbalance in effort-reward and low control, have consistently been identified as risk factors for both physical and mental health problems (Stansfeld, & Candy, 2006). The daily life of women engaged in informal work is in this way characterized by instability, high demand and stress, conditions that are potentially harmful to the women.

Women in Ghana are usually responsible for almost all domestic tasks of the household. Women are also expected to take care of the household members and to provide for their welfare and health, independent of whether they live with their husband or not. It is common in Ghana with female headed households (Landinfo, 2011). These women are living without a husband for different reasons; some are divorced or widows, some have husbands living outside the household, and some have never been married. However, most of the women in Ghana have been married at some point in their lives. Statistically, women living in rural areas bear 3.9 children during a lifetime (World Population Review, 2018). In addition, women often foster children of their relatives as well, such as grandchildren or their sibling's children (Manuh, 1994). Taken together, women in Ghana often carry a heavy workload by providing financially for their families, as well as being responsible for family and household in daily life. Although the women might have husbands who work, there is traditionally "little pooling of resources between spouses" (Manuh, 1994, p. 63).

Taken together, this gives an impression of how women's everyday life in Ghana is shaped by the life conditions within the society in which they live. The conditions presented above are general to Ghana, and are relevant to the women we interviewed in this study. They live in the rural village of Okurase or one of the nearby villages. In addition to being where most of our participants lived, Okurase was also the location for the interviews conducted in the study.

2.2 The village of Okurase

Okurase is a rural village in the Upper West Akyem District of the Eastern Region of Ghana, about one and a half hours drive from the city center of the capital Accra. Okurase is surrounded by rolling forested hills, with clay-streets and small houses made of concrete or mud, palm trees and music coming out through a sound system in the middle of the village. Along the main road lies small food stalls, a tailor, hairdresser, and the villages drum-carving businesses. Although the village bears witness of challenging social and economical conditions, the atmosphere in the village is characterized by the beautiful surroundings, its friendly inhabitants and curious children wanting to say “hi”.

The village has a population of about 3500 people (Swenson et al., 2018) where almost half of the population is children (Project OKURASE, 2018). The town has basic facilities such as electricity, primary school and a good communication network with a road linking to outside areas. The village does not have running water but does have a safe water system brought by Project OKURASE. Water is pumped to tanks in the marketplace, treated, and pumped to 6 community taps for residents to purchase at a minimal price. Health care services are restricted to a small room where a nurse can see patients but most people cannot afford the medicines or services. For health care, it is common for residents to seek out herbalists or traditional healers. Most people are subsistence farmers of “maize, cassava, plantain, cocoyam and yam” (Swenson et al., 2018, p.384). The women in Okurase, as the majority of women in Ghana, mainly work within the informal sector, having jobs such as selling different kinds of goods through street vending or ‘hawking’, processing or preserving fish, doing farming or sewing clothes.

In 2007 a non-governmental organization (NGO), called Project OKURASE, was started in the village because of the “dire situation the people face” (Swenson et al., 2018, p.

384). The NGO was started by Samuel Nkrumah Yeboah from Ghana, and Dr. Cynthia Swenson from Charleston, USA. It was considered essential by the founders for Project OKURASE to provide help based on what the people of Okurase themselves perceived as the village needs. Their needs were explored in a qualitative study conducted in Okurase through individual interviews and focus groups. Key problems prioritized by the people of Okurase included “no safe water, no sanitation, limited education, limited job training, limited health care” (Swenson et al., 2018, p. 383). Project OKURASE addresses problems that are related to health, well-being and prolonging life, as these were pointed out to be the main concerns within the village. A specific focus is on women and orphans and vulnerable children. Over the last 12 years, the organization has implemented a number of programs targeting these needs. Among other programs, and at the behest of the village, Project OKURASE holds a Village Health Outreach (VHO) once a year. The VHO is a free medical clinic, that is open for about a week, that aims to address both physical and psychological health issues. The village is in constant social and economical development to better the circumstances for the people living there.

3 Theoretical framework

In this section we will describe theoretical perspectives we have made use of when reading and analysing the interviews. We draw on cultural psychological perspectives as theorised by Jaan Valsiner (2014) that emphasise the person as an active agent in their own life. According to Valsiner (2014), people should be seen as meaning makers who constantly make sense of, and ascribe meaning to the world in which they live. We also draw on the concept of agency in analyzing how the women obtain an active role in dealing with their challenges.

The theoretical framework section is divided into two parts; in the first part we present the cultural psychological perspective and the second part will present the concept of psychological agency. These theoretical perspectives contribute to a wider understanding of how the women living under constraining life conditions deal with their challenges through their everyday life.

3.1 Cultural psychology - people as meaning makers

Cultural psychology is the study of how culture and psychology make each other up (Shweder & Sullivan, 1993). An important tenet in cultural psychology is that culture and the psych are intertwined, and inseparable units. Further, cultural psychology acknowledges the influence of cultural variation. Shweder and Sullivan states that: “The aim of cultural psychology is to understand the varieties of normal human consciousness across (...) historically and culturally constructed worlds” (p. 498).

Valsiner (2014) proposes a perspective on psychology where human beings are understood as meaning-makers who continuously react to and act upon the world in which they live. The person is both “adjusting to the world - and adjusting the world to one selves” (p. 4). The person is seen as an active agent, acting through culture. Culture is understood as a “process of mediating human lives through signs, both intra- and inter-psychologically. The central issue for cultural psychology is to locate culture in the life activities of agentic persons” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 47-48). Culture is in between people and their social environment, and is evident in life activities and the meaning people give to them. Within this perspective culture is not understood as a “thing” on its own, independent of people or their social environments.

This understanding of the role of culture is in line with social constructionist theory, as Valsiner (2014) states that “people act through culture - inventing tools and signs, and meta-

signs that organize the work done by other cultural tools” (p 48). The social constructs in their society constitutes the arena in which they engage in their everyday life activities. However, there is also an emphasis on the person’s decisive role in actively creating their worlds, by being agentic meaning-making persons. From such a perspective, culture is viewed not as a “thing”, but as jointly created systems of meaning within a society which people share and which influence which activities people take part in, and which meanings they ascribe to them, as they go through their everyday life. This view implicates that culture is not something external to the women that is used to explain their behavior, but rather an essential part of how they construct and experience their world.

3.2 Psychological agency

According to Frie (2008), psychological agency is “the human capacity for reflective action, and is based on the potential to imagine and create new ways of being and acting in the world” (p. 1). He argues that a “philosophically coherent and clinically consistent theory of agency must account for the complex intertwining of personal history, affectivity, embodiment, social and cultural context, and reflective capability” (p. 1). Frie (2008) calls this perspective “situated agency”. This perspective allows a dialectical relationship between people and their surrounding world, and thus opens up for an understanding of agency that includes the women's inner psychological mechanisms in interaction with their contextual possibilities and constraints. Frie (2008) states that agency “can never be divorced from the context in which it exists, yet neither be wholly reduced to these contexts” (p. vii).

Different theoretical perspectives provide various understandings of the concept of agency. The individualist and essentialist assumptions of “mainstream psychology” (Burr, 2015) of the pre-existing structures within the person prior to society, implicates that agency is understood as something within the person, that the person possesses. In this understanding

agency resembles the concepts of free will, or autonomy, something that the person has, that gets restricted by societal influences. A criticism to this perspective is at that it creates a person-society dichotomy, a problem also evident in social constructionist theories of agency. Burr (2015) points out how concepts such as agency constitute a challenge to understand through the basic assumptions of social constructionist theory, which states that all meaning is socially constructed. If all meaning is socially constructed, the person remains a passive receiver of social influences, and their agency is reduced to playing roles in a social game. We find Frie's perspective on agency to be a comprehensive understanding, that levels out the problem of the person-society dichotomy, by combining elements from different perspectives.

Also included in Frie's (2008) understanding of the concept of agency is the capacity to think ahead and imagine and plan new ways of being, and imagine future events. We found this aspect of agency relevant when trying to grasp the complexity of the women's strategies to handle their everyday life challenges. The idea of "the not-yet existing" as a part of the persons psychology as a whole is present in other theories of psychology as well. Valsiner (2014) presents an understanding of psychology as a science in the zone between the existing and the possible. How the person thinks about and gives meaning to the existing situation here and now, also includes thoughts about what does not exist yet, such as predictions and wishes about the future. What does not yet exist is a part of the persons psychology as a whole in the existing moment. In other words, what is here and now is oriented towards possible future occurrences (Valsiner, 2014). This is an understanding we have brought into our view of change in the women's lives. This perspective is used to examine psychological development, and we draw on this idea when trying to understand how the women handle difficult situations and finds new ways of handling problems.

The idea of the importance of the not-yet-existing for the person's psychology, is a central point in Jenkins (2008) work on how enslaved Africans brought to America used their agency to "reconceptualize the negative images and situations presented to them, thereby finding their own sense of worth and personhood" (p. 195). He underlines the dialectical relationship between the inhumane pressures they were put up against, and the way they were able to keep up their humanity, self-worth and optimism. By being able to imagine, creating visions and dreams that were opposite of what their circumstantial conditions were, they were able to create an alternative way of thinking, parallel to experiencing suppression and inhuman conditions. The enslaved Africans brought to America understood the way they were defined by their society in their own terms, and thereby created an understanding of who they were and their potential to be agents in their worlds. Although the circumstances for the women we interviewed are completely different to that of the enslaved Africans brought to America, we take inspiration from Jenkins (2008) perspective on agency under constricting circumstances. As many of the women we interviewed experienced having little possibility to influence their situation, this is a useful perspective in analysing how they deal with their challenges.

In this section we have presented the theoretical contributions that make up the analytical tools we will apply in the analysis. We draw on perspectives on cultural psychology in order to analyse how the women's experiences are constructed in interaction with their world and how the women are active in giving meaning to their experiences. This theoretical understanding of the person in context, is relevant to understand the concept of agency. We draw on the concept of agency in this thesis to gain a complex understanding of how the women deal with their challenges. We have found agency to be a useful analytical tool when trying to understand how the women obtained an active role in influencing and shaping their lives, despite experiencing considerable material and social constraints.

4 Method

In this section we present the research process and reflect on choices we have made throughout the whole process; from planning the project, to from recruiting and interviewing the participants in Ghana, to transcribing and analysing the interviews back home in Norway.

4.1 Epistemological stance

With this study we aim to explore the women's subjective experience of their lives, as well as how they shape and are shaped by their context. We draw on the social constructionist epistemological stance, where knowledge is viewed as constructed in the social world. Social constructionist research examines how events, objects and phenomena are given meaning within a society, and how these social constructs constitute what is perceived as reality (Burr, 2002; Willig, 2007). This epistemological stance implicates that "what we perceive and experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but must be understood as a specific reading of these conditions" (Willig 2007, p. 7). There is no one truth, but rather many subjective knowledges. This distinction is relevant for our study, as we do not aim to explain the women's objective life circumstances per se, but rather we aim to understand how the women understand themselves and their situation, and how this affects how they deal with their challenges.

In the following we will show what we have done to generate a reliable and valid account of knowledge, which is important for valid research outcomes.

4.1.1 Validity, reliability and generalizability. Validity is concerned with whether the conclusions from the study coincide with reality (Willig, 2007). For that reason, what we define as reality is crucial for the evaluation of validity. From a social constructionist stance, reality is not something that we can observe objectively, but knowledge is created in the

social interaction. Reflexivity is important to bring to attention what we as researchers, and human beings contribute to the process of constructing knowledge. Reflexivity contributes to validity through the researchers continuous reflection about different aspects of the research process, as well as the evaluation of her or his own role in the research, as reflexivity “discourages impositions of meaning by the researcher” (Willig, 2007, p. 17).

We seek to know more about how the women construct their understanding of constrictions and possibilities in their context. To obtain an understanding that is in line with what the women themselves wish to communicate, we planned the interviews thoroughly before conducting them. We conducted pilot interviews, made an interview guide and read up on relevant literature. Allowing the participants to shape the researchers focus and thoughts about meaning, as well as relevance, of concepts and categories investigated within a study, is a way of ensuring that our understanding coincides with the women’s. Throughout the process of interviewing the women, and later analysing the material, we have aimed to let the women guide our focus. We argue that the interview form we applied in this study, the Life Mode Interview, contributes to capture the women’s own understanding of herself and her world. The interview form we applied, and choices we made in the process of analyzing the material are relevant to evaluate the validity of this study, and will be presented later in the methods section.

Transparency is important to evaluate the reliability in qualitative research (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). We aim to be transparent throughout this thesis in order to make the premises for our interpretations and conclusions clear, so that the reader can be able to evaluate themselves the credibility of the research outcome. Reducing sources of error has been a priority when conducting the interviews and analysing the empirical material. Throughout this methods section we will reflect on how different aspects of the process might

have affected or contributed to our construction of knowledge, such as using interpreters, supervision and gaining knowledge about the women's context. Through being transparent about, and present reflections about the research process and choices we made, as well as being transparent in the presentation of the analysis, we argue that other researchers will be able to evaluate the research outcome of this study.

Although generalizability is not a primary aim in qualitative research, the findings from a study can still be relevant for others than the informants the study has obtained knowledge about. The issue of generalizability within qualitative research depends on different aspects of the study, including the research question and what the study is designed to answer (Willig, 2007). When exploring how certain people experience and understand a phenomenon that is relevant to more people than those who are participating in the study, researchers may want to move beyond the empirical material and say something more general about the outcome of the study. Although we cannot know how many or who within a population who share a given experience, qualitative research can provide knowledge of that the given experience is available within a certain context (Willig, 2007). Our primary aim is to know how women living under constraining conditions deal with challenges through their everyday life. We argue that although the women of Okurase inform this question, the phenomenon analyzed and presented in this study can be relevant for people in similar circumstances, but also in very different contexts too. In the conclusion we will sum up the outcome of the study and evaluate how our research findings can be relevant beyond this study.

Essential to whether the research outcome is relevant beyond the specific context of this study is that we have been successful in applying the chosen method. In the rest of the

methods section we will go through the whole process in line with the principles of reflexivity and reflect on decisions that have been important for the research process.

4.2 Recruiting the participants

The process of recruiting participants went through Project OKURASE. From conversations with Dr. Swenson we had learned that the women who had been in contact with counsellors at the Village Health Outreach (VHO) often brought up problems concerning lack of resources and/or feelings of distress, for a number of different reasons. The contact the women had with the helpers and counsellors at the VHO varied from one single meeting, to repeated meetings during the week of the VHO. A few had even had contact with the helpers over the course of some years, receiving different kinds of help and support. Dr. Swenson facilitated the contact with potential participants. We agreed that the women we wished to speak to, were women who experienced different kinds of hardships. We did not wish to speak to women who experienced having the most serious health issues or that Dr. Swenson considered to be particularly vulnerable.

Dr. Swenson helped us get in contact with three women she knew from previous years, who consented to participate. The five remaining women were recruited after they had received counselling at the VHO the summer of 2018. When we met with the women we gave them a brief presentation of who we were and our study, and asked if they wanted to participate. The information about us and our study included; our names, that we were students of psychology at a university in Norway, conducting a study about women's lives, and wanted to speak to women in Okurase about their everyday lives and what kind of challenges they experienced. All the 9 women we asked wanted to participate, although one couldn't find the time. Nana Ama Yeboah, being the Project Coordinator in Project OKURASE, often helped us plan time and place for the interviews.

4.3 The interview setting

The locations for the interviews were chosen based on where we could speak undisturbed, in order to secure the women's anonymity, but also with consideration of convenience for the women and for us. Four of the interviews took place at the office of Project OKURASE, and four at the school where the VHO took place. The room in the office was small with simple furnishing and two small windows letting in sparse amounts of sunlight, and a fan that turned itself on and off, depending on the access to electricity. From outside the window we could hear the buzzing life of the village center. Especially prominent was the constant rhythm of the drum carvers beats as they carved logs into drums, right outside our window. The interviews at the school were held in large, high ceiling rooms, usually used as classrooms, but cleared of all furnishing on the occasion of the VHO. The wall and floors were made of stone, with the ambition of keeping the rooms cool despite of the staggering heat of the outside. Although in the same building as the VHO, the room we held the interviews in was a bit secluded from the hustle of the health outreach.

The people present during the interviews were the two of us interviewing, the woman being interviewed and the interpreter. In the first three interviews, the interpreter was a woman, with slow-paced, articulated speech and a wide vocabulary, speaking both with warmth and authority. The interpreter in the last five interviews was a male teacher at one of the local schools. He combined an advanced vocabulary with a local English grammar, spoken with a hoarse voice with a lot of intonation, who never failed to communicate sincerity and empathy. We were met with warmth and friendliness by all of the women.

Before starting the interviews, the women were given verbal and written information about their rights to withdraw and the aim of the study (see appendix 1). We encouraged the interpreters to go through the consent sheets thoroughly with the women, and use whatever

time they needed. It was important for us to make sure the women were properly informed when consenting to participate in the study. The women had a choice to declare their participation either by writing their signature or by giving their thumbprint. As none of them could write, they all chose thumbprint.

We conducted the interviews in pairs, where one led the interview and the other contributed when needed. We chose doing interviews together to be able to fill each other out, if for example one became curious about something the woman said and the other didn't ask or give it further attention. We argue that this contributed to making the empirical material richer as we in this way were able to cover more aspects of the women's experiences. The interviews lasted from one to two hours, and all were audio recorded.

As a compensation for their time and possible loss of working hours, the participants received 30 Ghana Cedi, which equals about 50 Norwegian Kroner, after the interview. We decided on giving the compensation after recommendation from Dr. Swenson, and she guided us on what would be an appropriate amount of money for the compensation. Although we introduced the compensation after the interviews were conducted, we cannot be completely sure that all of the women didn't know about the money beforehand.

4.4 The women participating in the study

Eight women of different backgrounds participated in the study. Although each woman's experiences were unique, the women also had many experiences in common. All lived in the village of Okurase or one of the surrounding villages. All had children, and many of them had grandchildren. Only two of the women had husbands at the time of the interview. Most of the women lived with their children and/or grandchildren, while some of them lived alone. Except for one of the women who had migrated to Ghana from a neighboring country, the women were Ghanaians by birth. All of the women spoke Twi as their first language,

except for the woman who was not born in Ghana. Some of the women understood a little English, and a few could to a limited degree speak English. Their age varied from around 25 to 65 years. The women's age will not be specified in the presentation below, to maintain their anonymity.

All of the women had sought help concerning physical health issues at the VHO. At the VHO, they had all been referred to counseling for different reasons related to experiencing difficult life circumstances and/or great distress. In the interviews, the women told us that they were faced with a whole range of life challenges, such as difficult economic situations, physical illness, pains, having lost a child, being exposed to domestic violence, and being exposed to traumatic events. Many of the women also described feeling sad, hopelessness, fatigue, feeling anxious and afraid, and some brought up thoughts about dying. In the following we give a brief presentation of the women, presented with new names.

Maria has grown up children, and some grandchildren. She lives with her mother and one of her grandchildren, and has the responsibility to take care of and provide for them. Maria was exposed to a traumatic event some years ago, and this changed the way she lives her life. She has suffered from considerable health issues ever since the traumatic event, and expect to live the rest of her life with pains. Maria works long days to provide for her family.

Ann lives alone. Because of health issues she has not been able to work for some period of time. She has grown up children, as well as grandchildren. Her children provide her with money in order for her to be able to provide for herself. Ann has little to do throughout most of her days, and is worried about being idle.

Sarah has children and grandchildren. She lives with some of her grandchildren, and has taken the responsibility to take care of and provide for them. Sarah has been faced with economic issues after a period of not working due to sickness. At the time of the interview she struggles to manage a loan she took to get herself out of the economic crisis she found herself in earlier, even though she has a job and works hard in order to make money.

Miriam lives alone, and depends on her family to provide for her by giving her food. Her children and grandchildren live in another village. Miriam doesn't work, and explains that she neither has the money to start up a business again or the health to work on a daily basis. She has little to do throughout her days, except when she spends time with her family.

Georgina has a husband, and lives with him and some of her children. After her business collapsed, she has been without work for a period of time. She has marital issues and plans to leave her husband and move somewhere else where she can live with and provide for all of her children. Her family problems worry her a lot. Georgina saves money to be able to go through with her plan.

Awa lives by herself and is not working. She receives help from her daughter in terms of some economical support and one meal a day. Only a year ago she lived with one of her grown up sons and was working, but moved closer to her daughter when he suddenly passed away. She spends her days sitting in her home, but goes to church on Sundays.

Afia lives with her husband and her young children. She works some days and others she stays at home. She is worried about economy and about making sure she has enough food for the children. She is worried about threats of her husband beating her, as he has done in the past.

Catherine lives with some of her children and her grandchildren and is responsible for providing for them. However, due to health issues she is not able to work much at the moment. She experiences health issues and this worries her. She wishes to be able to work more to provide for her family.

4.5 The interview

We wanted to explore the women's subjective experiences about their challenges in their everyday life. To access this information, we decided to use qualitative interviews, because this method holds the potential to understand the world from the participants' point of view.

4.5.1 The interview guide. As a way of setting the scene for a certain focus in the interview and to structure the situation, we made an interview guide. The interview guide ended up consisting of three parts (see appendix 2); one about a day in the women's life at the time of the interview, one about a day in the women's life at a selected time in their past, and one short part about their experiences from the VHO. We wanted to use the women's everyday lives as a starting point for exploring their experiences and reflections about the challenges they brought up, as well as how they were dealing with these challenges. The

interview was meant to be exploring, and meant to give the women a chance to bring up and elaborate on aspects and topics of their lives that were relevant for them. At the same time we had the opportunity to guide the interview in the direction of what we were particularly interested in, which was their experiences and reflections upon the challenges they brought up.

The main inspiration for the interview guide was the Life Mode Interview. The Life Mode Interview was developed by Haavind (1987), and is a systematic investigation of the participants' everyday life. In The Life Mode Interview, the participant is asked to go through yesterday as the day proceeded event by event, from the morning to the evening. The interviewer focuses on exploring what the participant is telling, and encourage the participant to reflect upon what is being brought up. By drawing on this method and asking the women in detail about their day, we aimed to get insight into their everyday challenges and how they dealt with them.

The interview format is based on the assumption that in order to understand the phenomena one aims to explore, one has to acquire a certain understanding of how people live and understand their lives (Haavind, 1987). Drawing upon aspects of the Life Mode Interview provided us an invitation into the women's world; including their context and life conditions, as well as their conceptions and reflections about why events occur and proceed as they do. This is in line with our theoretical framework, both drawing on the social constructionist stance by emphasizing the way the women both shape and are shaped by their context, and cultural psychological perspectives on people as having an active role in creating their worlds as agentic meaning-makers.

4.5.2 Conducting the interviews. When we conducted the interviews with the women in Ghana, it was important for us to try to balance between administering the interview, and

allowing the participants the space to talk about topics of their choice. One reason to give the women a role in deciding the direction of the interview was that this could give us insight into aspects of their lives that we wouldn't necessarily have thought of beforehand (Willig, 2017). Another reason, that was important for us, was that we wanted to give the women space to talk about aspects of their lives that were important to them, and at the same time give them the opportunity to not bring up, or go deeper into, aspects of their life that they didn't want to talk about. This was important for us because we didn't want to push the women into a situation that would be uncomfortable for them, or talk about something that they would later regret having brought up. The more serious topics that we talked about during the interviews were introduced by the women themselves. Examples of these topics are domestic violence, wanting to die, and death within the family. Whenever these topics were brought up we tried to be especially sensitive and respond with empathy. We also tried to ask more open questions so that the women could have a choice in how much they wanted to elaborate.

We assumed that the women would be in a particularly challenging period in their life, because they had wanted to go to the counselling offered at the VHO. By going through two different days in the interviews, we aimed to get a varied impression of different aspects of the women's lives; including their experiences of both "good" and "bad" days. Within this part of the interview, we also included a question about how a perfect day would look for the women, similar to the "problem is gone" question, with the aim to get an even richer description of their experiences. The assumption that the women were in a particularly challenging period of their lives proved to be right in some respects. But at the same time many of the women talked about challenges that they continuously struggled with, that were part of the way they lived their lives. Nevertheless, the two days that were chosen from a time in their life that represented "good" and "bad" days gave an insight into the kind of struggles that the women were dealing with, and gave them an opportunity to compare and reflect on

different circumstances in their life and their experience of this. When asked how a perfect day would look, most of the women would respond that a perfect day is one where they work and are healthy. When we imagined the kind of answers we would get from this kind of question, based on courses in our study program and clinical literature, we expected idyllic portraits of joyful days, but only one of the women understood this question that way. Although this question didn't give the sort of answer that we imagined, the information it provided us with was all the more interesting.

We also aimed to obtain knowledge about the women's experiences of visiting the VHO. Therefore we included a shorter section of asking questions about how they perceived and understood the help they had received at the VHO and explored if they believed it had helped them. This ended up being a less important part of the interview, as the women didn't elaborate as much on this experience, as on topics that came up when going through their everyday lives.

Although we constructed an interview guide beforehand that proved to be useful throughout the interviews, aspects of the interview surprised us and the interviews sometimes took another direction than we had imagined. Nevertheless, letting the interview guide us in unexpected directions is part of the semi-structured interview, and the information it provided us with contributed to us getting a richer understanding of certain aspects the women's lives.

4.6 The use of an interpreter in qualitative interviews

In the interviews, the content of the women's stories and how it was told were given to us by the interpreters. The process of interpretation may have been a potential barrier for us to access the women's descriptions and stories the exact way they told them. The interpreters we worked with did not have formal training in interpretation work, and sometimes their use of local English was challenging for us to understand. From time to time, we experienced that

the interpreters acted in ways a bit aside of their role as interpreters. For example they sometimes had their own conversations with the women in Twi. They also interpreted what the women said with formulations like “she said” rather than to directly translate and say “I”, and they did not always interpret what the women said word by word. We dealt with this issue in different ways. Before conducting the interviews, we instructed the interpreters on how we wanted them to conduct the interpretation, in line with guidelines for interpretation in Norway (Tolketjenesten as, n.d.). If we got the impression during the interviews that the interpreters didn’t follow the guidelines, we took them aside and talked to them about this.

Although we see some challenges with conducting the study with interpreters, we also believe they were a resource for us in the interview. At numerous occasions during the interviews they spontaneously explained local expressions or sayings that the women used that were not familiar to us, which helped us to understand what the women said to a greater extent. The interpreters being less formal than what professionally trained interpreters probably would have been, might also have contributed to making the interview setting a social situation that was more natural to the women. Some of the qualities we highly valued with the two interpreters we ended up working with, were their interpersonal skills and warmth. They contributed considerably to us accessing rich descriptions of the women’s lives and understanding of the world, and to make the interview setting a comfortable situation for the women.

4.7 From interviews to transcripts

All of the interviews were transcribed in English. We chose to use the computer software nVivo 11 as a tool in the process, because this enabled us to synchronize the transcription with the sound files. Sometimes it was hard to hear what was said in the sound files, and then it was useful for us to be able to easily navigate in them in order to make sure

the interviews were correctly transcribed. We didn't use nVivo 11 after finishing transcribing the material, because we found a manual approach to engage with the material more intuitive to us. In addition to transcribing all of the spoken English, we tried to note other things such as periods of silence, the women laughing and if we got interrupted. However, we weren't able to match the women's reactions with what they said because we had to wait for the interpretation before we knew the content of their speech. Because of this we may have missed out on some non-verbal communication that could have contributed to the understanding of the interview. However, we argue that we were still able to capture important information about their reactions and emotional expressions that were relevant to understand the content of the interview.

To protect participant anonymity, the women's real names were not used in the study. We chose to give the women names in this thesis so we could speak about them in a way that gives the reader a notion of the participants as real living people, rather than reducing them to simply being participants in the study. The names we have given to the women, are frequently used in Ghana.

The quotations included in the text have been rephrased in order to present the women in a respectful manner. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) notes that verbatim quotations may cause unethical stigmatization of people or groups, as exact transcriptions of spoken language could appear incoherent and strange when presented in text. Changing the formulations from verbal language to more grammatically correct written language, as well as rephrasing the interpreter's use of local English, has also made the text easier to read.

4.8 Analysing the interviews

The analytical process has gone through many stages and our understanding of the material has shifted throughout the analysis. The analytical process may be explained as the

work of bringing the research questions, the empirical material and the theory together in a way that will give an answer (Johannessen, Rafoss, & Rasmussen, 2018). We aimed at doing just that, and by drawing on thematic analysis and our theoretical framework when analyzing the material, we have developed an analytical model. We draw on our theoretical framework as an analytical tool to “open up” the material in order to widen our understanding of the themes and phenomena brought up in the interviews. Using the theoretical perspectives and the concept of agency has enabled us to understand the ways in which the women act out the agentic potential that lies within their contextual conditions.

Through the process of analysing the empirical material, we have attended to and explored different themes and issues. In the initial readings, we explored how the women experienced the counseling they had participated in at the VHO, and how this potentially helped them. However, as we got a better overview of the material we noticed that the women often gave few and short reflections about the help they had gotten at the VHO, but that they rather turned our attention to how they were dealing with their challenges through their everyday lives. We started by asking the material what their daily struggles were, what they found difficult. We also asked what they wanted to be able to obtain through their everyday lives, and what they wanted to avoid. Then we shifted our focus towards the ways in which the women dealt with these difficulties, and started asking, what they did to handle their problems, how they dealt with them, how they related to family and friends, and what they focused on when meeting everyday challenges. The research question we ended up asking our material is; “How do women living under constraining life conditions deal with their challenges through their everyday life?”.

What the thesis presents is where we ended up with the analytical process. In the following we aim to give an outline of the analytical process of the study.

4.8.1 The stages of the analysis. When we first analysed the material, we began by taking inspiration from thematic analysis as described as a distinct approach by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013). Braun and Clarke (2013) describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question” (p. 175). They present thematic analysis as a basic and flexible approach that can be used in combination with different theories and perspectives, and explain it to be especially useful for researchers with little experience with conducting qualitative research, such as students. As inexperienced researchers we found the thematic analysis useful when starting to analyse the material, and sort out the different themes that had been brought up during the interviews.

We started coding the material when we felt like we had an overview of the content. At this point, we had already spent a lot of time with the material, both through conducting and transcribing the interviews. We coded the transcriptions using purely descriptive codes of the content in the women’s statements, as we wished to apply a more inductive or data-driven analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). We found this descriptive style of coding convenient as it helped us to see both common and specific features in the empirical material. At this point we were focusing on what the women brought up as important through their days, and what stood out to us as interesting. When coding, we noticed that some of the codes were common across many of the interviews, while others only appeared in a few or only one interview. All of the women talked about work and family, all though in different ways, and had many interesting reflections concerning these topics.

The aim of the next few steps was then to organize relevant parts of the empirical material into overarching themes. Braun and Clarke (2013) describe a theme as a “central organizing concept” (p. 224) that captures one idea that also includes different aspects relevant for the central organizing concept. Through the process of trying to identify themes,

we used visual mapping as a tool to explore possible relationships between the tentative themes, the codes, and the empirical material. We also explored possible ways of putting different parts of the empirical material together as a whole that would possibly provide an answer to our research question. At this point we started finding themes, such as reflection about their struggles that would include challenges concerning both work and family. We started noticing how the ways the women reflected helped them understand or handle challenges that seemed difficult to deal with. At this point we moved between looking at possible themes in relation to the coded material, as well as in relation to the empirical material as a whole, interview per interview.

As we detailed how the women in different ways coped with their problems, we also started to look into relevant theory, in parallel with exploring the empirical material further. The theoretical perspectives from cultural psychology directed our attention to how the women were both shaped by, but also shaping their worlds. We became aware of how they were all experienced being constricted in different ways by social or material circumstances, but they nevertheless found ways defining their own challenges, and handled their problems. Agency was brought in to understand how the women were able to make an influence on their everyday life, even when the selection of possibilities to handle things differently was scarce. We have used theory as a tool to deepen our understanding of the empirical material and as a way to interpret what the women told us. By drawing on theory as a way of interpreting the empirical material we get to take the material and place it in a slightly different perspective, and with this create new meaning. By extracting meaning from the interviews through the analytical process and understand this content in light of relevant theory we aim at making our analysis richer, and more comprehensive.

Through the analytical process, we have generated three themes important to how the women deal with their difficulties; 1) the importance of work, 2) the importance of others, and 3) the importance of hope. Each theme captures a central aspect of how the women deal with their problems, and within each theme we will present different aspects that are relevant for the different women. The three overarching themes are distinct but yet connected. The themes appear important in the empirical material, and they contributed to unfold central phenomena and processes in the women's lives that relate to how they deal with difficulties through their everyday life.

4.9 Ethical considerations

Throughout the process it has been important for us to conduct the study in line with guidelines for research ethics. As our research project can be argued to be in the intersection between the field of social science and health research, we have looked to guidelines in both fields as given by The Norwegian National Committees for Research Ethics. In the following, some of the ethical considerations in the study will be presented.

4.9.1 Ethical approvals. The formal approval to conduct the study was in Norway given by Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REC), the 21th of March 2018 (REC REF 2018/428; see appendix 3). There is no formal ethics committee for research in Ghana. Although we didn't have to apply formally for permission to conduct research in Ghana, Dr. Swenson helped us get the study approved in Okurase by the local leaders.

The sound files of the interviews were uploaded and stored in Service for Sensitive Data (TSD), that is a platform to store "sensitive data in compliance with the Norwegian regulation regarding individuals privacy" (University of Oslo, 2017). The empirical material

was anonymized before we exported the word-files with the transcriptions of the interviews out of TSD.

4.9.2 Asymmetry in the research setting. We have collaborated with key persons in Project OKURASE when conducting this study, including Drs. Swenson and Yeboah. Although we are independent of Project OKURASE and the work they do, it is reasonable to think that the women associate us with the organization and the VHO. Between the women visiting the VHO and the people working at the VHO there is a natural imbalance in power, as the women in this setting become ‘help-seekers’ and the workers become ‘helpers’. By us collaborating with the organization to conduct the study, there is a possibility we represent the ‘helpers’ for the women. Project OKURASE works to bring resources to the village of Okurase. The success in attaining resources has been demonstrated both through the many projects they have run in the village, and through individual help they have given to people. No matter the positive impact Project OKURASE might have had on the village and that the success is due to an active partnership between primarily volunteer Project leadership and residents, the NGO may be viewed as representing power and money because they have the power and means to allocate resources. Thus, us being associated with Project OKURASE might have impacted the power imbalance between us and the women we interviewed. Although we tried to emphasise that participating in the study is voluntarily when inviting women to participate in the study, we recognize that there is a possibility that some of the women may have felt like it was “best” for them to participate. Some might have felt like they needed to participate in the study in order to receive further help and support from the organization and the VHO. Further, our association with Project OKURASE might have inclined the women to give more socially favorable replies to our questions.

There was also a potential for us to be perceived as a source of resources that could be of advantage for the women. It is possible that some of the women hoped to establish a relation to us where we could be of help or support for them. This could have inclined them to feel like they needed to portray themselves as “good participants”, or as someone we would want to help, and this might have affected their answers in the interview.

In evaluating whether or not the interviews were of harm to the women, we argue this was not the case. A main reason is because of the form of the interview we conducted. By drawing on aspects of the The Life Mode Interview, this allowed the women to a great extent to influence what was given attention and to be elaborated on or not (Haavind, 1987). In this way, we gave the women a chance to talk about what is important for them, and choose to not talk about issues or aspects of their life that they don't want to share. In this way the interview aims to be both a sensitive and flexible way of talking about potentially difficult topics.

Finally, we would like to note that although our collaboration with the NGO has made this study possible, we do not have economic ties to the NGO.

5 Analysis

Through the following section we aim to present how the women living under constraining life conditions deal with their challenges through their everyday life. We have generated three themes that are important to the women in handling challenges; 1) the importance of work, 2) the importance of others 3) the importance of hope.

5.1 The importance of work

When asked how a perfect day would look, the majority of the women reply that they would be able to work and earn money to provide for themselves, and often also their families. One of the greatest challenges the women are faced with is how to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis. For all of the women, economy is an issue that concerns them a lot, and

the consequences of not having enough money could be severe as this would mean that they cannot cover basic necessities for themselves and their families.

We have identified the importance of working, and thus having means to meet the demands of everyday life, as a strategy the women use to deal with their challenges. This is a strategy where the women take matters into their own hands and use their capabilities to help themselves, often despite considerable challenges in being able to go through with doing their work. Through working the women take an active position where they are able to influence their lives, and often their families lives as well, on a day-to-day basis as well as potentially in the future.

5.1.1 Being able to provide for their family. Because the social welfare system is limited in the society the women live in, they mostly have to count on themselves for earning money to make ends meet. In the ultimate consequence working to earn money means survival for themselves and their family. When Maria talks about her work, she expresses herself like this:

I woke up feeling ok because at least I was blessed by God to see another day. As usual I had to go to my work, so I can get some money to be able to buy food for myself - take care of myself.

For Maria, working and earning money gives her with the means to provide for herself. Catherine talks about how both her children and grandchildren depend on her for daily necessities such as food: “If I don’t go and search for food or do anything, they won’t eat.”. The pressing situation of constantly worrying about how to be able to feed the children on a day-to-day basis, stresses all of the women a lot. At the time of the interview, Catherine talks about how she doesn’t have the opportunity to work as much as she needs to, because of considerable health issues. She also explains that her children don’t have the possibility to work and make money at the time, and that they are fully dependent on her. Ultimately,

Catherine's success in making ends meet concerns also her children's survival from day to day. Catherine communicates that the responsibility she feels towards the children is not something she can question, and can be understood as a part of the internalized societal norms concerning her role as a mother. To Catherine it becomes her trajectory to take on this responsibility, although she struggles to fulfill it.

Being able to make ends meet also holds the potential for the women to be taken care of in the future. When Sarah talks about having taken on the responsibility to foster her grandchildren, she mentions the potential consequences taking care of them might hold for her:

They [the grandchildren] may likely be the ones who take care of me when I'm older, and I'm not able to take care of myself. That's why I've taken up that responsibility to get them a future that will have an effect on me too when I'm older. (...) I need to try and let them go to school, so that they get good places to be in the future - and be able to come and take care of me too.

Sarah emphasizes how providing her grandchildren with a better future, might not only benefit them but also benefit herself in a long term prospect. The women need to plan and prepare for a time where they might need help from others to provide for themselves. There is no welfare system, such as care for elders, that the women can rely on if they were faced with circumstances in their life, such as health issues, where they are no longer able to make money and provide for themselves. This also points to the importance of the family system as a social construct in the women's society. The family system is the source of security for the women, in terms of who they can rely on if they become in need of care. Nevertheless the women also acknowledge the central role they have in contributing to this system, by caring for and raising the children in the family.

5.1.2 Working in spite of barriers. Several women experience considerable health issues or other circumstances that make it very demanding for them to work. However, the

women explain that because they need to work to be able to provide for the children, they pull themselves through. Maria describes working despite of experiencing severe pains:

It still feels like the first day I was [exposed to the traumatic event] (...) It's so painful. (...) Every day. Yeah, every day. It's so hard. It's very, very hard. (...) As for this thing [pain] it's what I go through every day. When I won't feel it, is when I'm dead or maybe when I go to sleep and I'm blacked out completely. But when I wake up - I feel it. Maybe when I die, I won't feel it again. (...) That is how it is. So I don't really think about this so much because I know that that's how it's going to be till I die. So I don't think about it. (...) I come back home [after a day's work] and it's tiring. But because that's how life is I just have to wake up the next thing and move on.

Maria decides to work, despite experiencing constant pain, because earning money makes it possible for her to take care of and provide for her grandchild and herself. Afia also talks about working as a way of providing for her children, despite facing the threat of being exposed to her husband's verbal and physical violence if she does so:

I feel sad when my husband beat me because I'm working, because what I'm thinking is that; when I come to you as a husband to ask for money, and you don't give me - what am I actually going to do to raise money to support myself as well as the children? So when such things are happening - I feel sad. (...) He [her husband] doesn't care. It doesn't matter to him whether there is food in the house or not. But because I'm a mother, I have to see to my children. (...) Through working I get money, little money, to support the family.

Despite this threat Afia still chooses to deal with the situation in terms of working to earn money, because this is an effective way of influencing her's and her children's situation when faced with severe financial challenges.

Afias statements can also be seen as reflecting important social structures that influence how she conceives of herself and her situation. Afia describes how the social construction of marriage and her role as a wife, means that it is expected that she receives money from her husband to take care of the children, and that she can expect him to have the role as a provider. When her husband doesn't fill his role as the provider, and she's left lacking means to care for her children, Afia takes on another line of reasoning which

emphasizes her role as a mother. As a mother she is expected to have the final responsibility for her children, and so it's up to her to do whatever it takes. Her responsibilities give priority to her role as a mother over her role as wife and in this way also gives her direction in her actions to meet these responsibilities.

For some of the women working is also demanding because it doesn't provide them with enough money. Sarah explains how although she works long and demanding days and earns money to provide for herself and her grandchildren, she struggles to make ends meet. She explains what keeps her going like this:

Ok, so the difference [between then and now] is that when I think, and think, and think about it - then I get to a point when I say; no matter how I think, it doesn't really solve the problem, nobody really comes to help. So let me just encourage myself and do what I can do.

Because there is nothing else she can do to make money and be able to make ends meet than to work, Sarah needs to push herself through and keep on working. Sarah has changed the way she deals with her worries about economy, from thinking a lot about it to focus on what she can actually do, which is to keep working. Sarah's change in coping can be seen as a shift away from an experience of having little impact on her situation and worrying about this, to a mode where she is able to focus on coping. She has been able to reduce the sense of stress and worries, despite still finding herself in a very pressing economical situation. This points to how the different ways the women understand their experiences can contribute to how they perceive their role in the situation, and whether or not they can make a difference in it.

5.1.3 Striving for independency. Working and earning one's own money represents an opportunity to be independent. Being independent is something the women brought up several times when talking about their everyday life, and that stood out to be important to the

women. Sarah is currently in debt, paying back a loan, and struggles to both pay down the loan and provide for herself and her family. She took the loan after a period of not working due to illness, to be able to start her business again. Although the loan enabled her to work, the loan has ended up causing her difficulties. Sarah talks about how she worries a lot about this and her experience of not being free:

I used to have my own money, and then I got sick. So I had to use all my money in my treatment, and then I didn't have any money again. I used to be independent until I got sick and I had to use my money - which is why I was compelled to go for the loan. (...) Because of the money, I am afraid. And I'm thinking of how to get the money to go and pay down the loan so that I'll be free.

Sarah experiences not really owning the money she makes, and she is in a situation where her circumstances limit her possibility to choose and influence how she spends her money. The loan controls how she spends her money, and however hard she works to changes this she's still struggling to get to a point where she is in control of the situation. In terms of agency, Sarah is active in trying to influence and change her situation. This can be understood as an effort to use her agentic potential, but still has little impact on her everyday life. How Sarah talks about not being independent because she has a loan, emphasizes the importance for the women not only to make money but also to be able to control how they spend their money.

5.2 The importance of others

When experiencing circumstances that they are not able to deal with on their own, many of the women turn to people in their social network, usually their family, for help and support. For the women who experience not having the possibility to work in order to earn money and be able to provide for themselves, the help their families provides them with is often vital. For these women, receiving help from family can be what makes ends meet for themselves, and maybe also for the children they have responsibility for. Some of the women

also turn to people in their social network in order to get advice on how to deal with difficult situations in their lives, other than financial issues, such as how to handle marriage problems and worries throughout their everyday life. Ann talks about how she asks her family for help with money:

I've been somebody who used to [work], and I've seen money before. So as somebody that's really held money before, now that I don't have money, I get very worried that I don't have money in my pocket. When I run out, I call them, and I say that I don't have money, I've run out of money, and then they will send some.

Ann is currently in a situation where she cannot work, but is fortunate to have family that are able to support her. During the interview she talks about how running out of money is something that causes her great worry, and that she is very grateful for her family. On the other hand she expresses the discomfort of having to turn to them for help: "I feel really bad to be calling them for money, because I know they have children that they are taking care of". How Ann talks about her gratitude for her family helping her economically and at the same time expresses fear of burdening her family by depending on them for money, shows the complexity in how the women feel about having to rely on others to manage.

5.2.1 Being in need of support from family. Some of the women talk about how their family are the ones providing for them, but in different ways. Ann receives money to take care of herself and organize her own economy. This gives Ann the possibility to have an influence in how the money is spent, which we interpret as positioning her with a sense of agency. Ann talks about how she is careful with how she spends the money:

I typically buy all the supplies in large quantities, and put them down. But the problem is that; if I realize that I don't have money in my pocket, or if I've run out, I feel like I'm sick. But, when I enter the room I have everything I need to be able to cook.

The way Ann spends her money can also be understood as a way of building stability and control, despite of being in a situation where she has little control over her income. In this

perspective, Ann has found a way of creating a sense of agency with the limited means she has at hand, and to create a situation where she is able to influence her everyday life.

One of the other women, Miriam, also relies on her family to provide for her, but rather than providing her with money her family gives her food. Miriam describes depending on her family for food:

When my children don't pay me a visit, I don't get any food. Because when they come, they are going to bring some food. And if they don't come, I get no food. (...) I depend on them because of my sickness. I depend on them, for them to support me, to get food to eat in the morning. (...) Sometimes two days, sometimes three days, sometimes a month, sometimes two weeks; I don't get food, because I don't see them or they don't pay me a visit.

In contrast to Ann, the help Miriam receives from her family puts her in a passive position. Rather than providing her with help that creates an opportunity for her to create a situation where she can influence her everyday life, she is put in a situation where the only thing she can do is to wait for the family to bring her food. The help Ann receives in terms of getting money opens up new ways of her dealing with her challenges, but this is not the case for Miriam. Although the help Miriam receives from her family makes a great impact in her life, as the food her family brings her is necessary for her survival it doesn't affect the position she has in her life where she has limited opportunity to make changes in her everyday life.

When depending on family members for food, the women have no influence over their eating on a day-to-day basis. In addition to the uncertainty of not influencing when to eat, the women who are provided with food by family have no control over their meals. The women bring up how not being able to choose what to eat in their everyday lives affects them. Awa depends on one of her children to bring her food:

Here [in the village] there is no work - nothing. So my daughter is feeding me. (...) Sometimes, the kind of food she use to pick; I don't feel happy, I lose appetite. I don't like the food. Because I'm not the one who prepared it, It's usually my daughter, I have to take it as it was given to me. So I might choose to eat little, and put the rest aside.

Not being able to choose to prepare food she likes for herself, is an example of how little influence Awa has in her life at the moment. Afia also talks about how she doesn't have the possibility to decide what to eat, as her husband is the one buying the food for the family:

I normally feel happy when my husband is getting paid - just to buy some food to the house - but the one problem I am facing is that; there is only one food that he use to buy. So sometimes I will lose appetite from that food. Every day we eat fufu [Ghanaian food] - tomorrow we eat fufu, we eat fufu, we eat fufu.

One way of interpreting that Afia presents the food her husband buys for the family as a 'problem', is that she feels frustrated about her not having a position in her life where she can influence the food she eats. Although she cannot make her husband buy the food she likes, Afia however takes an active role in influencing the food she eats when she occasionally has the opportunity:

Sometimes when I change the food to yam [Ghanaian food], or any other foods, I feel good. (...) This happens on days when I [work] and have little money on hand; then I change the food.

By taking matters into her own hands when having the opportunity to work, Afia manages to influence her everyday life to some degree although she cannot make the change she wishes for. To have this influence might give her a sense of not being completely dependent on her husband, as she can make changes for herself through working. Afia explains that this gives her a good feeling.

Being dependent on others in order to be provided for, with necessities such as food, has consequences in the women's everyday lives as it restrains what aspects of their lives they can be in charge of. The different kinds of help the women receive from their families holds different agentic potential for the women to influence their lives.

5.2.2 Asking for advice. The women often talk about how they turn to people in their social network when they are faced with different kinds of obstacles in their lives. Georgina is one of the women who frequently asks people around her for help and support, and who experiences the support she receives as helpful. She explains to have consulted her sister and the pastor about the problems she experiences with her husband, and how their advice has helped her in making the decision on how to deal with it. When in need of money, she explains that she calls her brothers and that they then will try to send her some money. Georgina also talks about how she and her son support each other:

I have taken him [her son] as my friend. Anything that bothers me, I make sure I discuss with him, and anything that bothers him, he discuss with me - so our relationship is quite good.

Georgina turns to people around her for help and support both when in need of emotional and economical support, whether it be through sharing her day-to-day worries, or when faced with particularly difficult situations such as marital or financial issues. In contrast to Georgina who has a number of people around her she can seek help from, Afia talks about how she only has one person to turn to when in need for support, other than her husband. All the same, she express how talking to her friend about her life, such as when her husband is being physical violent towards her, has helped her:

She normally use to say; I should be patient. When she tells me that - in a way it's a good thing. Because there's this saying that; if you patiently dissect an ant you see it's intestines. (...) She's been a good advisor.

The Ghanaian proverb Afia's friend is referring to means "with patience difficulties can be overcome" (Ghana Nation, 2017). Being patient, despite that this means doing nothing, can be understood as a strategy of handling the situation. The women actively seeking advice from others, can be understood as an agentic strategy to be able to handle their difficulties.

5.2.3 Keeping their challenges to themselves. The women also talk about not asking others for help or not sharing their problems with others. Keeping their challenges to themselves can be a way of protecting themselves from the judgement of others. Awa shares her thoughts about telling people about her problems:

Sometimes I keep myself in the room, because I don't want people to see me outside. So, I'm sitting lonely, having nothing in my stomach in my room to the evening. (...) So if I find myself outside, I often sit like this, and people will know that something is worrying me. If someone asks me "what's wrong with you?" I can't tell them "I'm hungry, and I don't have money" - that's why. So I have to keep myself in the room, just to keep away from people asking me about certain things, that I think come close in my business.

By refraining from showing people that she sits lonely through the days, and not telling people what her problems are, Awa gets to control how people relate to her situation. This can be understood as a way to influence how she appears to other people in her society. This can be a way of protecting an image of herself and contributing to maintaining an identity closely resembling how she was before her life changed. Ann talks about how people gossip as a reason to not disclose her problems to others:

But the point is that I don't like to tell my problems to people. I prefer to tell my children, rather than telling other people. Because when you don't have money and you tell people, you don't know - the next thing you hear is that they will be going around telling other people. So even though I don't always feel good about asking my children for money, because they also have children they are taking care of, I would prefer to talk to them, rather than to talk to somebody else - so I don't get my issues out there.

Both Ann and Awa deliberately keep their problems to themselves, or within the family. By controlling the information others have about them, this can be interpreted as a strategy to actively influence how they are perceived by others. This can be especially important to the women when faced with problems that are easily judged or stigmatized by others, like having economical issues, not working, or other problems in living.

5.3 The importance of hope

When being faced with limited possibility to make changes in their lives, the women often deal with their situation by imagining how their lives can change for the better. Some women are hoping for something out of their control to intervene in their lives, and help them make it better. This strategy is evident when some of the women talk about wishing for others to help them, relying on their faith, and hoping for a better future. Others think out plans to make changes in their lives. The strategy helps the women to endure living under demanding circumstances, when there is little they can do to impact their everyday life at the moment. By using this strategy they are able to influence how they experience their difficulties.

5.3.1 Hoping for a better future. Hoping for good things to happen in the future can be a strategy to endure hardships in the present. Being able to imagine that their situation can change for the better can be understood as a way to influence their experience of their present situation. Miriam talks about the possibility of her providing for some of her grandchildren in the future:

Sometimes, when I'm in the rain, lonely at night, I'm afraid because I'm living lonely. But when my grandchildren are with me - I feel great. (...) My children have been thinking and want the grandchildren to be with me to clean the rooms in the house, and do any household chores to support me. (...) Yes, I'll be looking forward to see them coming to me more often.

As noted earlier, Miriam lives under very pressing life conditions and has little possibility to influence her situation at the moment. She describes living a life she doesn't like, not being able to provide for herself because of illness, and she spends most of her days in idleness. Having her grandchildren around her and spending time with family was one of the few things giving her joy. As she lives alone and spends most of her time apart from her family, she describes grieving and feeling sad most of her days. As Miriam explains it, having her grandchildren living with her would be something that would change her life to the better.

One way of understanding how Miriam talks about the idea of her someday having her grandchildren living with her, is by understanding this as something that brings her hope for a better future. Within this perspective, the idea, regardless of what will actually happen, provides her with a motivation to endure the challenges she is faced with today because the future might hold something better for her.

Georgina also finds herself in a situation where she is tied and not able to do what she wishes the; to leave her husband and live with all of her children. Although this is difficult to obtain, she remains hopeful and is actively planning and imagining ways of making this happen:

I'm saving a little bit of money to begin with in my work. I don't want to be with the man that is my husband, so I'm trying to get other money - I'm saving - to rent a room so I can live with all of my children.

Georgina is using that she has to start saving to be able to set her plans in motion. This can be interpreted as a way she shows agency, although the potential to influence her life at the present moment is rather limited. The ability to imagine and plan for new ways of being in the world can be a way of expressing agency, even when there's little room for action.

5.3.2 Faith in religion. Throughout the interviews, religion is frequently brought up, especially when talking about hope and despair. Awa, is in a situation where her life has taken a sudden turn; she has just lost her grown up son under traumatic circumstances. She used to live with him but then moved to another village to be closer to her family after his death. Awa is no longer working, and thus has no income, suffers from health problems, and receives only a limited amount of help from her family. During the interview Awa talks about the life that she used to have with her child, working, in stark contrast to the life she lives now. Awa talks about how she turns to God when she needs help:

Sometimes I will sit inside and be thinking, thinking, thinking that; “Oh God who is my helper, you are my helper, anywhere that you can help me to remove this - you do it.” (...) I was going to church so that God will do it, because I have no mother, no uncles, no father, no nobody - all of them have died, except for me. (...) I've taken a lot of advice from the preaching. They use to talk about things that are relevant to us, and to me as well. They use to say; "If you don't have money, if you are hungry, God doesn't necessarily mean you have to go and kill yourself. You have to depend on God, you have to pray as well, he is the only potent, and the only presence, so wherever you find yourself, his presence is there. He's going to control you gradually, and protect you.”

Awa hopes for God to help her in this very difficult situation, that something will happen in her life that makes it better. A way to understand this is that she experiences having very little opportunity to influence her life, and that she has nobody she can rely on to help her the way she needs. Having faith in a power higher than herself, can be a way of keeping hope for her life to change for the better someday, although she experiences little possibility to make that change herself. For Awa, her religious faith helps the way she feels, regardless of whether or not she receives any concrete help from it:

So the priest give you advice; “if you are not having it, you pray to God - and one day you get some.” These advices help a lot to release some stress, and what you think is bothering you.

For Awa, keeping faith in God doesn't only preserve hope, it also contributes to reduce her worrying. Maybe this says something about her confidence in God, or how much she needs to believe that this strategy will help her make her life better. Awa practices her religion actively by believing in God and through praying and reading the bible, among other things. Her way of relating to her religion can also be interpreted as a way of constructing an understanding of what she is doing in her life as being good enough, as she's being a good Christian. This can be a way for her to relieve her worrying, because in this perspective she's doing something actively that might be rewarded by God. Maria also talks about her experiences of the impact having faith has made in her life:

I was really sad, very sad. But I had this small Bible that I would open and read and see what I find and relate it to my life - and that helps me. (...) Because of my religion, I believe that someday things will be alright. When I met auntie Cindy, I saw that as an answered prayer - this is the solution that I needed. So it's God's making that I met auntie Cindy. It wasn't by chance; it was my belief that someday God will answer my prayers and then he did. (...) Now I feel - despite the pain, even though I still have my physical pain - I'm happy whatever it is God has with me.

Like Awa, Maria talks about how her religion consoles her and makes it easier for her to endure the pain she struggles with every day. As Awa hopes for God to intervene, Maria has experienced this, through getting in contact with Dr. Swenson (auntie Cindy) through Project OKURASE. Maria was in a situation back then where the help she received had a considerable impact in her everyday life and well being. By not interpreting this as a chance meeting, but as an answer to her prayers, Maria takes part in making these changes happen in her life. Although this is understood by Maria as being in God's hands, which is a way of laying the control outside of herself, she still has influence in her life by keeping a strong faith in God. A way of interpreting Maria's experience of this situation is that she has found a way of understanding herself as having an agentic role, in a situation where she had little influence to act upon at the time before she received help. The analysis of how Awa and Maria use their religion illustrate how the women actively use their faith in order to try and help themselves in very difficult situations.

5.3.3 Thoughts about escaping. There is often a sense of despair in the women's descriptions when they are faced with circumstances where they see no way for a better life. Some of them talk about having had thoughts about running away and others having had thoughts about wanting to die. In the interview, right after talking about her husbands violence, Afia says that she has had thoughts about running away: "Sometimes, when I think about the rudeness of my husband, then I think to myself - should I run away with the children?". Further on Afia talks about how running away for different reasons would be

impossible. The option of running away is thought through by Afia, and considering that she's capable of working and earning money, she might hold running away as a viable option, if it weren't for all the reasons to stay. Sarah also talks about her thoughts about running away, and how she puts the thoughts away again:

What came in mind for me was for me to go. Sometimes it occurs to me to just leave here and go and look for something to do somewhere else. (...) When it occurs to me like that, and I think about it like that; I just console myself. And I say: Well, it's nothing.

Catherine talks about how her illness restricts her ability to work, and how this makes it almost impossible for her to provide for herself as well as her children and grandchildren whom are dependent on her contribution. Catherine expresses how she has wished to die:

Sometimes I think, I have a thought; I just want to die so that I can become free. (...) So one day, one day - before they [her children] realize I've committed suicide.

A way to understand this statement is that Catherine, at the time, saw no ways of how her life could change for the better and that death appeared to her as an option to the life she was living at the time. Nevertheless, wanting to become free implies an active wish of something better than what she has now. This wish on behalf of herself, can be interpreted as an agentic way of dealing with a very constricting situation that is difficult to live with. The interpretation of these thoughts as agentic, stand in opposition to an interpretation of the thoughts as resignation. When asked if she has talked about these thoughts of dying with her children, she confirms this and explains how talking with them has helped her:

Some days ago I called my children and explained to them how painful my decision was - and then I have been coming in true. (...) They encouraged me to stop saying these things. (...) I've responded to them that I've heard them. Ever since I called them, they've been buying me a lot of medicines. (...) I feel happy when they've been doing that.

At the time of the interview her children are still saving money in order to be able to buy health care services for her in the future. Catherine explains how she no longer has

thoughts about wanting to die. This shift from her wanting to die to her wanting to live, can be understood as Catherine experiencing being more hopeful after her children offer to help her out with her health issues. In this perspective, experiencing the love and support from family, may have given her a wish to keep on living her life as it is, despite the hardships she is experiencing.

The women who talk about having had thoughts of running away or taking their lives are all experiencing being disempowered in some way. A common way of understanding wanting to run away or taking one's life is as desperate ways of dealing with a terrible situation where there is no obvious solution, and the thoughts are understood as “giving up”. An alternative way of understanding the women’s thoughts about dying or running away is that the women actively think about what their alternatives are. Through thinking about dying or running away the women create a choice for themselves. This gives them the possibility to more actively choose the life they are living now and feel like they have a certain control of their own lives.

5.4 Summary of the analysis

In the analysis we have explored how the three themes “the importance of working”, “the importance of others” and “the importance of hope” help the women deal with their challenges as they go through their everyday lives. The analysis shows the different ways the women are able to create agency through the way they understand and make sense of their situation, and become able to live out their agentic potential. Although their social and material circumstances put restrictions on how they are able to live their lives, the women are nevertheless able to find ways of handling the challenges they are facing, and to keep an active role in influencing their own lives.

The first theme shows the importance of working in the women's lives. Working to earn their own money had a big impact in their lives. Through working and providing for themselves the women get to directly affect how they and their families go through their everyday lives. Many of the women work in spite of barriers, which underlines how highly work is prioritized. Their role as providers entails a lot of hardship, but this responsibility is also something that motivates the women, both to be able to care for the family's children and because their children might have to take care of them some time in the future. The women also gained independence by working and earning their own money.

The importance of other people in their lives was evident with all of the women, but especially so with the women who were dependent on family members to get food or money. The women who were not able to work showed how they could benefit from resources in their family system to get means to cope. However being dependent on others could also be challenging, as it limits the arenas of their lives they can be in charge of. The analysis also shows how asking for advice or support as is one way the women are helping themselves to get through difficulties. However the importance of keeping their troubles to themselves was also important to some of the women, in order to protect themselves against the judgement of others, and keeping control of how others perceived them.

The third strategy presented in the analysis, shows how the women use hope and imagining of a better life in the future as a way of helping themselves cope with the present situation. Through the analysis we became aware that the women dealt with challenges not only through what the women did, in terms of work and support from family, but also through how they thought about their situation. Keeping faith in religion, and being a good christian is a way the women could actively deal with difficulties even if they had very little possibility to deal otherwise. Some of the women also had thoughts of escaping the life they led, either by

running away or by taking their lives. The thought about escaping is analysed as a way of creating options, so that they can actively choose the live they are living, despite of the challenges this life poses. The way the women shape their understanding of what is possible and impossible in their lives opens up to opportunities to think about or to deal with their problems in ways that make them easier to live with, or more manageable considering their circumstances.

6 Conclusion

The most important findings from this study is the relevance of the concept of agency to understand how women living under constraining life conditions deal with challenges. By trying to understand the women in the perspective of being meaning-makers and through the concept of agency, we have constructed a way of perceiving the women as active in dealing with their challenges. This understanding can be argued to nuance the more common emphasis on how context constricts them and provides them with few options in how to live their lives. This analysis has shown that it is possible to understand the women as active and coping, even when their circumstances constrict them. The outcome of the empirical analysis coincides with an understanding of agency as created in the interplay between the women and their context. Their agentic potential does not lie in their context or in the women's initiative, but in the interaction between the women and their context.

That brings us to another central finding from this study; the importance of understanding the women's psychology within the interaction between person and society. The women's role in their family is defined by the family's specific situation but this role is also defined by how the society functions. Because the women can't rely on social support from the government, they have only themselves and their social network as support system. This puts all responsibility for their economical situation in their own hands and has an

impact on how the women understand their role. Their role as providers and meeting basic needs was described by the women as very challenging, both because the children only have their family to depend on, and because the task of earning enough money was very demanding for the women.

The context is thus vital in order to understand their experience of this situation. At the same time the women experienced their hard work and struggles as meaningful because of their role as providers. Being able to take care of their family was something that motivated them through their day, and in dealing with their struggles. More importantly, the role also gave them an arena to be strong agents in their lives. The absence of social support and men's limited contribution to the family, gave the women great responsibility. By taking this responsibility the women can be seen as cornerstones in their society.

The women who did not have the possibility to work and had to stay home doing little, can be understood as having little opportunity to be agentic in influencing the course of their lives. However, by drawing on Frie's (2008) understanding on how an aspect of agency lies in the ability to transcend the barriers of their context and imagine new ways of being in the world, it is possible to create an understanding of how the women maintain an influence in their lives. The way the women understand their situation can help them deal by keeping hopes up and consoling themselves. This understanding is similar to that of Jenkins (2008), as mentioned in the theoretical framework, where he uses the word "psychological survival" about the phenomenon of psychologically surviving under "inhumane" conditions. As in the Jenkins study, the process of reconstructing an understanding of their situation, that is largely defined by their social and material circumstances, the women we interviewed understood the way they were defined by their society in their own terms, and thereby creating an understanding of who they were and their potential to be agents in their worlds.

The women we have interviewed talked about lives that were very different from the ones we live in Norway, in what we do for work, our access to support from welfare programs, and the responsibility we have for family members. Having enough to make ends meet, carrying a lot of responsibilities, and experiencing having constricted possibilities can be challenging for people in many different societies, not only for those living under similar conditions as the women we interviewed. The way the women find ways of being active in handling challenges related to these issues, can be relevant for people outside of Okurase, and Ghana too. Understanding people, both the women we interview and other people, living under constraining conditions, as having an agentic potential can be a means to counteract the notion of women as only restricted and struggling, but also as empowered and agentic.

The women's ability to create agency can be seen as a way to deal with challenges, but not as a solution to their problems. Although agency is presented here as a phenomenon that helps the women deal with their lives, it is important to note that this is only one aspect of the women's psychology and is based on an abstract conceptual theoretical formulation. Many of the women lack basic necessities in their everyday lives, and have underlined the important difference more money would make. Although psychological perspectives on how women handle challenges can teach us something about their lives, it is important to include the role of the context in enabling and disabling women's opportunities to handle and take charge of their lives.

The way the women interact with their context, we also interact with ours. Being master students of clinical psychology in Norway has probably played a role in directing our interest towards the person's subjective experiences, and psychological mechanisms in action when faced with challenges. Because we come from a quite different context than the women we interviewed, our understanding of their context is built from "the outside", and this might

have affected how we interpreted the material. It is reasonable to assume that we have overlooked aspects of the context that Ghanaians themselves would have focused on. On the other hand, our position might have contributed to adding new perspectives on their lives and the way they handle challenges, that can be meaningful to them. This thesis has simply presented one out of many ways of constructing an understanding of the ways women deal with challenges, aiming to make a small contribution to a way of understanding the psychology of the person in context.

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Appendix 1

Information and consent sheet

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY FOR THE WOMEN OF OKURASE

“A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MENTAL HEALTH AMONG WOMEN IN THE VILLAGE OF OKURASE, GHANA”

You are invited to participate in a study. We wish to know more about mental health in the village of Okurase. We are asking you to participate because you have visited the Village Health Outreach, through Project OKURASE.

We are three psychology students from Norway in Europe. The research project is a part of our training in psychology. These interviews will be used when we write our study at the university.

WHAT IS THE STUDY ABOUT?

In this study we want to talk to women who have received help from the Village Health Outreach, as well as helpers working there. We wish to learn more about the women who have received help and the helpers thoughts and experiences with the Village Health Outreach and the problems they wanted help with.

In this study we want to:

- Interview and ask you about your everyday life, including the problems that you have brought up at the Village Health Outreach.
- The interview will last for about one to two hours.
- There will be an interpreter present.
- We will record the interviews with a sound recorder.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND THE POSSIBILITY TO WITHDRAW

It is voluntary to take part in this study. If you regret taking part in this study you can always change your mind and you do not have to give us any reason why. There will not be any consequences for you or for any future treatment.

If you have any questions about the study, you can contact:

- Vanessa Christensen
by telephone +4790019492 or by e-mail: vanessaavc@gmail.com
- Dr. Cynthia Swenson
by e-mail: swensocc@musc.edu

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE INFORMATION FROM THE INTERVIEW?

The information that is recorded will only be used in this study. All information will be used without your name.

APPROVAL

The Project is approved in Norway *21.04.2018*.

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY

I AM WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

City/Town and date

Participant's Signature or Thumbprint

Participant's Name (in BLOCK LETTERS)

Witness Signature or Thumbprint

Appendix 2

Interview guide

Background

The structure presented in the interview guide is meant to facilitate and focus the interview, and be used flexibly rather than rigidly followed. We want to let the informant get the opportunity to present the topics that are important for her or him first, and then ask follow up questions related to these topics.

Introduction

- Introduce the interviewer and the project, including underlining the aim of the study (see information sheet).
- Introduce the interpreter and explain their role. Underline confidentiality of researchers and interpreter.
- Go through and sign the information and consent sheet.
- Introduce a visual timeline on paper, to clarify when we are talking about past, present and future during the interview.
- Short introduction of the Life Mode Interview: we are going to ask in detail about one or more days in their lives, mainly yesterday.

Interview questions

1. We want to ask you about a typical/regular day in your life. Was yesterday a typical day? (If not find a day in *recent* past representative of a typical day).
 - a. How did you wake up in the morning? When?
 - b. How did you sleep this night? How do you usually sleep?

- c. Who was in the house when you woke up?
- d. What was the first thing you did when you woke up? What was the first thing you thought about? What was the second?
- e. Did you know already in the morning what was your plans for the day? Tell me more.
- f. Was there anything particular about this morning?
- g. What was the first plan for the day? Throughout the day?

(The above questions are examples of detailed questions about everyday/trivial events. The following questions are more general, and are meant to be guidelines for introducing new topics. The interviewer will still ask detailed questions as exemplified above).

- h. Who did you meet? Who are they, and how do you know them?
- i. How was your day? Was it better, worse or different from other days?

- 2. What is important in your everyday life?
- 3. What is challenging you in your everyday life?
- 4. How would a perfect day look like for you?

Interview questions for the women who participated in interventions in this years VHO:

- 5. What was your reason for coming to the VHO?
 - a. Do you have any specific challenges?
 - b. What do you worry about?
 - c. What is not working the way you want in your life?
 - d. What do you think are the possible reasons for these challenges?

- e. How did you try to solve your challenges before coming to the VHO?
 - f. How did you feel about contacting the VHO?
 - g. What did you expect that they could help you with at the VHO?
 - h. What are your thoughts about what you need in order to solve your challenges?
6. Earlier, when you did not experience these challenges, how was a typical day in your life?
- a. Go through a typical day at that time (refer to question 1).
 - b. What is different? What is the same?
7. What kind of help have you received at the VHO?
- a. What did you talk about? What did you do? Who was involved?
 - b. How do you want your life to change with this help?
 - c. What do you think will change in your life with this help?
8. Who knows about your challenges?
- a. What did they say or do? E.g. did they offer help, support, give advice. If so, what did you get?
 - b. What do they think about your difficulties?
 - c. Did someone know that you were seeking help? If so, who?
 - i. What did they say or do?
 - d. Were someone involved in the intervention? How?

Interview questions for the women who participated in interventions a year ago, or more:

9. What was the reason you went to the VHO?
- a. Did you have any specific challenges at that time?

- b. What did you worry about?
 - c. What was not working the way you wanted in your life?
 - d. What do you think was the possible reasons for these challenges?
 - e. How did you try to solve your challenges before coming to the VHO?
 - f. How did you feel about contacting the VHO?
 - g. What did you expect that they could help you with at the VHO?
 - h. What were your thoughts about what you needed in order to solve your challenges?
10. At the time you got in contact with the VHO, how was a typical day in your life then compared to now?
- a. Go through a typical day at that time (refer to question 1).
11. What kind of help did you receive at the VHO?
- a. What did you talk about? What did you do? Who was involved?
 - b. What changed in your life, after you received help?
 - c. When you look back, what helped you the most? How?
12. Who knew about your challenges?
- a. What did they say or do? E.g. did they offer help, support, give advice. If so, what?
 - b. What did they think about your difficulties?
 - c. Did someone know that you were seeking help? If so, who?
 - i. What did they say or do?
 - d. Were someone involved in the intervention? How?

Appendix 3

Approval from REC



Region: REK sør-øst	Saksbehandler: Knut W. Ruyter	Telefon: 22845518	Vår dato: 23.04.2018	Vår referanse: 2018/428 REK sør-øst B
			Deres dato: 13.02.2018	Deres referanse:

Vår referanse må oppgis ved alle henvendelser

Nora Sveaass
Universitetet i Oslo

2018/428 En kvalitativ studie av mental helse blant kvinner i landsbyen Okurase, Ghana

Forskningsansvarlig: Universitetet i Oslo
Prosjektleder: Nora Sveaass

Vi viser til søknad om forhåndsgodkjenning av ovennevnte forskningsprosjekt. Søknaden ble behandlet av Regional komité for medisinsk og helsefaglig forskningsetikk (REK sør-øst) i møtet 21.03.2018. Vurderingen er gjort med hjemmel i helseforskningsloven (hfl.) § 10.

Prosjektleders prosjektbeskrivelse

There is a need for more and better mental health care services in Ghana. More research on mental health conducted in Ghana, is necessary to meet these needs. We want to learn more about mental health among women in Okurase. The research question is: "How do the women in the village of Okurase, who have participated in interventions for mental health issues at the VHO, understand and describe their own mental health difficulties?" This study is done in collaboration with Project OKURASE, a NGO in Ghana. In order to answer the research question we will conduct a qualitative study, where we interview some of the women who have been in contact with Project OKURASE, with a semi-structured interview. We will also conduct interviews with helpers at the clinic where they participated in the interventions. Knowledge about rural Ghanaians' conceptions of mental health phenomena, would be of value for the implementation of effective mental health care services.

Vurdering

Prosjektet er en hovedfagsoppgave for 3 studenter i profesjonsstudiet i psykologi under veiledning av førsteamanuensis Nora Sveaass.

Prosjektet er en liten studie som skal gjennomføres i landsbyen Okurase i Ghana. Det skal inkluderes 10-16 kvinner med utfordringer knyttet til mental helse og som har vært gjennom et oppsøkende prosjekt (Village Health Outreach) i år eller som har sluttet i programmet for 1 eller flere år siden, samt fem helsearbeidere som har vært i direkte kontakt med dem tidligere. Man vil intervju deltakerne med semistrukturert intervju.

Strukturen er basert på livsformsintervju (Life Mode Interview). Hvordan data skal analyseres er grundig og godt beskrevet gjennom en såkalt hermeneutisk-fenomenologisk metode, supplert med tematiske analyser.

Komiteen legger til grunn at intervjuet foregår på deltakernes morsmål, eventuelt med hjelp av tolk.

Komiteen er enig i at en person som deltakeren har tillit til kan bevitne at de har blitt informert og har samtykket til å delta. Hvis mulig bør vitnets navn og relasjon til vedkommende være oppgitt.

Komiteen anser det som verdifullt at deltakere som eventuelt opplever intervjuet som vanskelig, belastende eller utleverende (med en eller flere fremmede og en tolk) kan bli fulgt opp gjennom VHO prosjektet.

Det er oppgitt at intervjuer skal tas opp på bånd. Komiteen forutsetter at lydfilene er sikret/spærret på måter som gjør at uvedkommende ikke kan åpne filen hvis man skulle være så uheldig å miste eller bli frastjålet utstyret.

Det er utarbeidet informasjonsskriv til hver av de tre deltakergruppene. Komiteen ber imidlertid om at skrivene merkes tydeligere med hvilken gruppe de tilhører.

Komiteen vil bemerke at kontaktperson ved forskningsansvarlig institusjon ikke skal være prosjektleder, men institusjonens øverste leder eller den som den øverste lederen har delegert oppgaven til. Komiteen ber derfor om at det oppgis en ny kontaktperson ved forskningsansvarlig institusjon og informasjon om vedkommendes stilling og e-postadresse.

Komiteen setter dermed følgende vilkår for godkjenning:

- Det må stå tydelig i informasjonsskrivene hvilken av deltakergruppene de tilhører. Reviderte informasjonsskriv ettersendes til REK på e-post.
- Navn, stilling og e-postadresse til ny kontaktperson ved forskningsansvarlig institusjon må ettersendes

Vedtak

Med hjemmel i helseforskningsloven § 9 jf. 33 godkjenner komiteen at prosjektet gjennomføres under forutsetning av at ovennevnte vilkår oppfylles.

I tillegg til vilkår som fremgår av dette vedtaket, er godkjenningen gitt under forutsetning av at prosjektet gjennomføres slik det er beskrevet i søknad og protokoll, og de bestemmelser som følger av helseforskningsloven med forskrifter.

Tillatelsen gjelder til 15.06.2020. Av dokumentasjonshensyn skal opplysningene likevel bevares inntil 15.06.2025. Forskningsfilen skal oppbevares atskilt i en nøkkel- og en opplysningsfil. Opplysningene skal deretter slettes eller anonymiseres, senest innen et halvt år fra denne dato.

Forskningsprosjektets data skal oppbevares forsvarlig, se personopplysningsforskriften kapittel 2, og Helsedirektoratets veileder for «Personvern og informasjonssikkerhet i forskningsprosjekter innenfor helse og omsorgssektoren».

Sluttmelding og søknad om prosjektendring

Dersom det skal gjøres vesentlige endringer i prosjektet i forhold til de opplysninger som er gitt i søknaden, må prosjektleder sende endringsmelding til REK.

Prosjektet skal sende sluttmelding på eget skjema, senest et halvt år etter prosjektsslutt.

Klageadgang

REKs vedtak kan påklages, jf. forvaltningslovens § 28 flg. Eventuell klage sendes til REK sør-øst B. Klagefristen er tre uker fra du mottar dette brevet.

Dersom vedtaket opprettholdes av REK sør-øst B, sendes klagen videre til Den nasjonale forskningsetiske komité for medisin og helsefag for endelig vurdering.

Komiteens avgjørelse var enstemmig.

Med vennlig hilsen

Ragnhild Emblem
professor, dr. med.
leder REK sør-øst B

Knut W. Ruyter
Avdelingsdirektør

Kopi til:

- Universitetet i Oslo ved øverste administrative ledelse