

# Liminality and Emotional Labor among war widows in Israel

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## Abstract

This article focuses on Israeli army widows from the religious-Zionist sector and the Bedouin sector. We show how these women are compelled by their cultural context to either suffer liminal identity or to invest in exhausting Emotional Labor and fake their authentic selves. The surrounding society expects much more Emotional Labor of religious-Zionist widows than of their Bedouin counterparts; in contrast, the societal status of Bedouin widows remains liminal, as compared to that of the religious-Zionist widows, who anchor their identity relatively quickly. The findings highlight the need to sensitively assist army widows with the Liminality and Emotional Labor that hinder their personal and familial rehabilitation. The findings are analyzed critically within the framework of the Žižekian approach, which investigates the elusive power of ideology over the agency of the individual's self in society.

## Keywords

Bedouin war widows, religious-Zionist war widows, bereavement, Emotional Labor, Liminality

## Introduction

The current study examines the interaction between cultural and internal social identities through the prism of two central concepts: Liminality and Emotional

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Labor. Liminality is an intermediate stage, when widows find themselves “betwixt and between” after their husband’s death: they are no longer a soldier’s wife, but they have not yet acquired a new identity and are in a transitional period. “Emotional Labor” is the effort made to present to society feelings that are considered appropriate even though they are not authentic feelings experienced at that moment (Bokek & Ben, 2018; Morris & Feldman, 1996).

Observations made through the theoretical prism of these two concepts will be examined in the context of war widows from two national cultural groups in Israel whose husbands served in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF): the religious-Zionist sector and the Bedouin sector.

## **Background**

In the present article, we focus on two groups with unique social characteristics: IDF widows from the religious-Zionist sector and Bedouin IDF widows. An important difference between the two groups is that the first is part of the Jewish majority while the second is an Arab-Palestinian minority group. Nevertheless, the two groups share a central component of identity, namely they both observe a religious lifestyle faithful to tradition.

Three hundred thousand Bedouin live in Israel, most of them in the southern desert region called the Negev. They are Israeli citizens who are Arab and Moslem, identifying themselves nationally with the Palestinians. This is a complex set of identities which represents contrasts and disharmony (Yiftachel, 2012). The Bedouin serve in the Israeli military, mostly in the trackers’ unit and the desert tracking battalion (Bokek & Ben, 2018). Beginning in the 1990s, attitudes within the Bedouin community toward the State of Israel and the IDF started changing. Today the IDF is seen by the Bedouin as representing the Israeli occupation and the conflicts with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the Hebron area, both populated by relatives of Israeli Bedouin. Additionally, a decades-long land dispute between the Bedouin and the State causes further tensions. Consequently, in recent years Bedouin soldiers have suffered negative social treatment, even contempt, within their own society, often accompanied by the explicit demand to avoid military service (Yahav, 2011). Nationalistic Arabic organizations claim that Bedouin soldiers disrespect their identity and heritage, assisting the military in oppressing Arab communities both within and outside Israeli borders (UPI, 2004). Examining the status of Bedouin military widows and working toward their rehabilitation is best accomplished when this complex social and psychological background is taken into account.

Religious-Zionism is a social group that is committed both to Jewish religion and to Israeli nationality. Religious-Zionists believe in achieving and maintaining Jewish sovereignty through organized self-defense. Thus, military service is an important value within this group. Serving in the military, especially in combat units, has become a fundamental component in the spiritual and social image of

the young religious-Zionist man. Religious soldiers are now considered the new military elite (Lebel, Luwisch-Omer, & Possick, 2018; Lebel, 2016).

The following section explains the two concepts that underlie the empirical investigation of IDF widows in this study.

## **Emotional Labor**

The term “Emotional Labor” was first defined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983), who described it in an organizational context. It is a situation whereby workers express emotions that are in line with the rules of the organization or the job, while losing a sense of authentic identity and internal coherence with their own true values and feelings. Morris and Feldman (1996) define Emotional Labor as the effort, planning, and control required to express desired organizational emotion in interpersonal interactions. “The rules of the show,” as described by Goffman (1959), show that in social interactions, people play roles that they understand to be expected of them by the audience. When society’s rules and expectations are contradictory to a person’s own perceptions and feelings, forcing him to give a false representation of feelings to fit in with what is expected of him, he may experience a sense of inauthenticity, alienation, and consequently, dissatisfaction, self-deception, and worthlessness. These may affect the individual’s authentic sense of identity. In the context of Emotional Labor, Hochschild (1983) distinguishes between “superficial acting” and “deep acting.” Superficial Acting is a presentation of emotions that are considered appropriate even though they are not genuinely felt at that moment. Deep Acting is a reverse situation, whereby the individual changes his emotions so that they are in line with the emotions expected of him by society.

## **Liminality**

“Liminality” is a concept first developed by Arnold Van Gennep (1960) in relation to rites of passage in tribal societies. Later, the concept was extended to include the situation of pilgrims after leaving their homes and before reaching their destination, and to the wandering travelers of the world (Belhassen, Caton, & Stewart, 2008). Further, the term “Liminality” has been used to refer to a variety of social situations unrelated to physical conditions, in which a person or group of people are “betwixt and between” after changing or erasing previous hierarchies. This is the view that is adopted in this paper. According to this view, Liminality is an intermediate stage in which the person does not yet occupy the new status but has already left the old one, and it is characterized by disorientation and lack of clarity. Turner (1969) asserts that liminal people live in the realm of the possibility of new configurations of emerging ideas and the transition from one social role to another. A liminal state can last years, even a lifetime, as a static, unclassified state, as in the case of illegal immigrant families (Cossman, 2008; Traphagan, 2000).

### *The research questions*

Previous studies examining attitudes toward military widows in Israeli society have shown that society places them in a position of honor and prestige in the national bereavement hierarchy (Author & Colleague, 2010; Lebel et al., 2018). How do the widows cope with the cultural demand to be national symbols representing the national narrative and ethos? What are the differences in the societal expectations directed at these two groups to demonstrate emotions that accord with the national and military ethos? What are the cultural and social differences in the widowhood experiences of the two groups in relation to their liminal status? The study seeks to examine these questions in the first attempt of its kind to give voice to these silenced women.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on the phenomenological qualitative paradigm, according to which the phenomenon studied is best understood in its natural everyday environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The data were collected by means of in-depth interviews conducted with 14 IDF widows from the religious-Zionist sector and seven Bedouin IDF widows. The age range of the interviewees was between 30 and 72. Each interviewee had lost her husband more than seven years before the interview. All the interviews were narrative interviews that opened with the question: "Tell me about your life." The investigators told the interviewees at the start of each interview that they were interested in the military aspect of their widowhood, and the women described the circumstances of the husband's death, the period of mourning, the process of reorganizing and adapting to widowhood, and the decision of whether and how to establish a new intimate relationship. The sampling method was based on the "snowball" method.

In both groups, consent for the interview was not given easily. Among the religious-Zionist widows, most have remarried, and the theme of this study was not in accord with their current psycho-social needs. Among the Bedouin widows, most interviewees were hesitant in consenting. Eventually the interviews with the Bedouin widows took place with the assistance and encouragement of a mediator, who was known both to the researchers and the interviewees. Early in the interviews we realized that the women belonged to a peripheral social group, known in the literature as a "Hidden Population" or hard-to-reach population (Heckathorn, 2002). Such populations consciously try to shield themselves from exposure (Watters & Biernacki, 1989). The interviews were conducted in Hebrew. Five out of the seven widows were fluent in Hebrew and expressed themselves without difficulty. Two older women preferred having a younger relative present in case they needed language assistance; however, such assistance was barely needed. All interviewees gave conscious consent to participate in this study. We have eliminated any identifying details and stories of the women so as to keep their identity concealed.

The interviews were analyzed by examining the main themes that emerged from them, generalizing beyond the individual cases. We have been careful to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees and to respect their need for protection against possible exposure.

## Findings

### *Emotional Labor*

The research literature (e.g. Bowlby, 1980; Witztum, Malkinson, & Rubin, 2016) recognizes several distinct stages of adjustment between receiving a death notification and returning to ordinary functioning: (1) the moment the news is received, the funeral, and the initial days of mourning; (2) the period of mourning and internalization of the loss, lasting several months and sometimes over a year; (3) rebuilding one's life after the loss, including family and financial reorganization and a decision regarding a second marital relationship. The differences between the groups in the demand for Emotional Labor, as they emerged from the widows' stories, will be presented below, examined over the timeline from the moment of receiving the death notification. As regards receiving a notification of death and the response of the widows, it appears that the religious-Zionist widow is given social standing from the moment she receives notification of the husband's death, when the place of burial is determined, and the first days of mourning are conducted. The expressions of sorrow are dictated by familiar, recognized rituals, and the widow is expected to follow them. Military bereavement, as practiced by State hegemonic institutions, gives honor and prestige to the widow and her family by means of extensive media reporting the death of the soldier and information about his family (Ben-Ari, 2005). Close-up photographs of the widow and her children at the funeral or in the family's home accompany the media coverage of the tragic event. The deceased and his family are accepted into the national "pantheon," or "family of bereavement," and the relevant organizations contact them immediately. Already during the initial days, the mourning is appropriated by the entire country, with the family becoming the media's focus. The widow's house is frequented not only by army commanders and the husband's friends, but also by politicians and senior government officials, such as the president and the mayor. Some of the widows note the national significance of their loss. One of the widows relates: "The disaster touched every home in Israel." None of the interviewees related to the initial period in terms of Emotional Labor, and it can be understood that beyond the trauma of the first phase, the emotional experience of the widows does not accord with the public expression of feelings.

The Muslim religion allocates a period of three days for mourning (*haddad*), at the end of which the widow is required to begin organizing herself for her new life. According to Bedouin culture, expressions of intense anger or grief over the death of a loved one demonstrate disharmony with God's will (Rubin & Yasien-Esmael, 2004); therefore, expressions of grief are not acceptable except

for the wearing of black. Bedouin society does not attribute importance to the widow's feelings.

*Private mourning and public mourning.* All the Bedouin women interviewed handled their mourning as a private experience. They describe themselves as belonging to but not representing their society outwardly. They all see themselves as part of their extended family, the tribe, and the Palestinian Bedouin society, but not as part of the identity cohort of IDF widows. The fact that their husband died during military service was not presented as entitling them to social rights, rather the reverse: they were required to downplay the circumstances of the death in order not to arouse hostility. The Memorial Day for Fallen IDF Soldiers and the ceremonies that take place in military cemeteries on this day are not relevant to them from a national, religious, or social point of view. Thus, commemoration processes, by which the significance of the husband's death is mediated to the public sphere, do not occur, and consequently, the widows are denied the compensations of social esteem and appreciation given to bereaved families.

Widows from the religious-Zionist community are well aware, even before they become widowed, of the social role expected of military widows. Efrat describes this by saying:

Being an IDF widow is a status in our country. Even before I became an IDF widow, I knew that it was something heroic, someone who gave her husband for the people of Israel, and you became a symbol, you have a national role on Memorial Days because you are the representative of the bereaved families now. I wanted to escape it, but I knew it would be no help even if I were to go abroad. Everyone wants to touch your private bereavement. You have no control over it.

Dorit describes the public exposure and loss of privacy as disregard for the widow's personal feelings:

You leave your anonymity, become more exposed in the eyes of society around you. Everyone wants to help sometimes but they have no tact. The loss of one's husband is not something private, for good or for ill, he is also a fallen soldier of the entire Jewish people.

The appearance of widows in various media shows around Memorial Day is part of giving public presence to the husband's heroism. The purpose of such interviews is to expose emotions in order to create empathy and arouse an emotional thrill in the audience. The interviewer tends to ask intimate questions, but after the interview, the widow is left with the pain and the open wound, feeling that she has been used as an object: "I was invited to a lot of interviews, I felt that my heart was somewhere else and that I was being used" (Hodaya).

The description of the public eye following the Jewish widow during memorial ceremonies repeats itself in many interviews. The camera documents the public

ceremonies and sometimes the media goes as far as broadcasting the funeral live, zooming in on the widow's tears. Even when years have elapsed since the husband's death, the widow is still required to express great grief. If she does not succeed in doing so, she feels that she has failed: "I feel that everyone expects me to cry" (Miriam). Miriam feels that the attention she receives on Memorial Day is not commensurate with her terrible pain the rest of the year when she is left alone: "Only later do you begin to take this in, that you live this terrible pain, alone." Miriam notes that she does not reveal anger in public, probably out of her concern not to further alienate her immediate surrounding. Orit describes herself and the other widows as "eating her heart out, inside" in order to avoid expressing real feelings that do not fit the social context.

Some widows find the dissonance between their true feelings and the false ones they exhibit to society is so unbearable that they avoid participating in activities organized by the Ministry of Defense for the benefit of IDF widows. However, by doing so, they lose the opportunity to share feelings, difficulties, and the experience of bereavement. The conflict between expressing authentic feelings and meeting societal expectations which engenders "Commemoration Labor" (Bokek & Ben, 2018) is demonstrated by Talia's pragmatic decision: "It is harder not to go to the cemetery than to be there." Hila sums up: "I became a celeb without wanting to..."

*Rebuilding life after the loss.* The first cracks in the harmony between the feelings of religious-Zionist widows and society's expectations of them are described by widows in the context of hints or open statements regarding the possibility of remarriage. Such hints are sometimes made as early as the end of the first week of mourning. Naomi was 38 when she was widowed. At the end of the *shiva* (seven-day mourning period), her husband's mother approached her and said she hoped she would remarry. "My mother-in-law is a wonderful woman, but emotionally, I was in such a different place." Nechama relates that in the first week after her husband was killed, her husband's father went to her father and told him that they had to make sure she remarried.

A month later, he spoke to me directly and told me I had to get married ... I was angry with him because this was not the time. They wanted to show me the possibility [of a new relationship] and their consent to it.

The widow's anger at the public demand, which did not match her feelings, was not expressed outwardly, due to her empathy toward and understanding of her father-in-law's good intentions, but she points to the discrepancy between this attitude and her own feelings. As time passes, religious-Zionist widows are required to do more Emotional Labor. Moriah's brother-in-law, her husband's brother, was married shortly after her husband's death. Moriah was aware that everyone was looking at her at the wedding, curious to see if, despite her heavy mourning, she could follow the traditional directive of making a bride and groom happy Moriah tells

how she accepted the cultural expectation and danced and sang at the wedding even though her heart was weeping. We see, therefore, that religious-Zionist widows cope with a demand for Commemoration Labor that involves the appropriate Emotional Labor. Some of these women accept the new social role, and only few challenge it.

### *Liminality*

The study's findings confirm the tremendous change a Bedouin widow undergoes. On the one hand, she becomes financially independent because of a State stipend given to IDF widows, whereas previously she was entirely dependent, in all aspects of life, on her husband. On the other hand, she becomes completely reliant on the men of the family, who assume custody of her to protect the code of honor and family modesty. In contrast, religious-Zionist widows, who previously lived in conditions of gender equality, are independent in employment, mobility, and in family decision-making.

The first question that arises for the Bedouin widows after the death of their husband, especially those without children, is the question of where they will live: they no longer belong to the husband's family, but since their wedding day, they have not belonged to their family of origin either:

Our custom is to leave the parents' home if there are no children. We wait four months and ten days after the husband's death [the time it takes to make sure the woman is not pregnant] and then she has to leave his parents' home. (Amaani)

The problem is further exacerbated by the woman's lowly status regarding property accumulated during the years of marriage:

We had a plot that he bought before we got married and I paid the mortgage every month out of his salary, but my name was not written on the papers. I told his family that I wanted to live there. They said to me: 'Forget it,' and after a year and a few months I moved to my parents' home with nothing, I even left the television set there. My parents did not want me to come and live with them, but in the end, they agreed.

Before her husband died, Munira was her husband's second wife. The two wives lived in the same house:

When Suleiman was killed, we had three children. The youngest was one and a half years old, and the oldest was five. My parents asked me if I wanted to come to them, and I said that I wanted to stay in my house. Two wives, we were like sisters, like friends. Her home was on the first floor, and when I came home from work, she would call me and give me food so that I could rest afterward. She is a quiet woman, not problematic.

It seems that for both women, the experience of Liminality was somewhat softened precisely because of the physical proximity and partnership that they had woven together in their previous lives before their widowhood. Among religious-Zionist widows, the question of moving to a new home did not arise after the husband's death because the widows owned the communal property independently of the husband's family.

On the face of it, a second marriage re-positions the widow in society and ends the liminal status that characterizes her social position after her husband's death. In religious-Zionism, a second marriage is the norm for a young widow. Anat explains that in the religious-Zionist community, a woman is admired if she is successful in rebuilding her life and marrying after being widowed:

Society wants to see life repaired, that everything is all right, they check it off. She is set up and returns to the normal cycle of life. They are uncomfortable when you are alone. Society admires widows who take their mourning to a place of strength.

The expectation that the widow remarry is communicated to her not only by family or relatives, but also by the leaders of the community: "At the annual memorial service, a rabbi approached me and asked me, 'So, what's happening? Are you open to a new relationship?'"(Orit). Most of the religious-Zionist widows remarry, but fulfilling this social demand brings about a conflict between two social dictates: to preserve the heroic memory of the deceased, on the one hand, and to maintain loyalty to the new husband, on the other, which society perceives as an obstacle to the former. This contradiction is an added challenge to the Commemoration Labor and Emotional Labor of these women.

The Bedouin women are also pressured to remarry. In the case of Bedouin IDF widows, remarriage is not in order to gain a husband's financial support, because the widows are entitled to a monthly stipend from the State. Marriage is more about social status than pragmatic economic necessity. In any event, the widow who remarries will be a second wife:

I met a married man who was ten years older than me. I did not even have a regular wedding. At first he helped me, but he has his wife and children and I do not want anything from him. (Amaani)

Amaani is in a transitional position: she is ostensibly married, but her husband is not an active partner in carrying the family burden. Additional evidence of this is provided in an interview with Serai.

In summary, we can see that the religious-Zionist widows score higher in the dimension of Emotional Labor expected of them and lower in the dimension of Liminality. In contrast, the Bedouin widows score lower in the Emotional Labor required of them but higher in the dimension of Liminality, as the husband's death leaves them in a temporary, transitional state that prevails for many years until it becomes part of their lives.

### Discussion

The current study examined bereavement in the context of the widows' new social standing and the cultural demands made of them resulting from the circumstances of the tragedy and the State's attitude to private loss as public, national loss.

Grief is seen as a social expression of loss, shaped by social and cultural practices (Levy, 2018). Group members are aware of its unwritten rules and act according to them (Kofod, 2015). A study by Ester Holte Kofod and Svend Brinkmann (2017) clearly shows that grief is to be examined not only in terms of the circumstances of loss and the response to it, but also in terms of *normative* practice. The tension relating to Emotional Labor among the religious-Zionist widows, as shown in our study, often reflects ambiguousness about what constitutes *normative, acceptable* grief, as opposed to *private and individualistic* grieving. Worldwide, there is a trend of an increase in private mourning compared to public mourning, as normative contexts give more room for expression of private grief (Walter, 1999).

The examination of two groups of war widows, differing in social and cultural characteristics but sharing the characteristic of leading a religious lifestyle, highlights the similarities and differences in the perception of Emotional Labor and the Liminality within each group as can be seen in Figure 1:

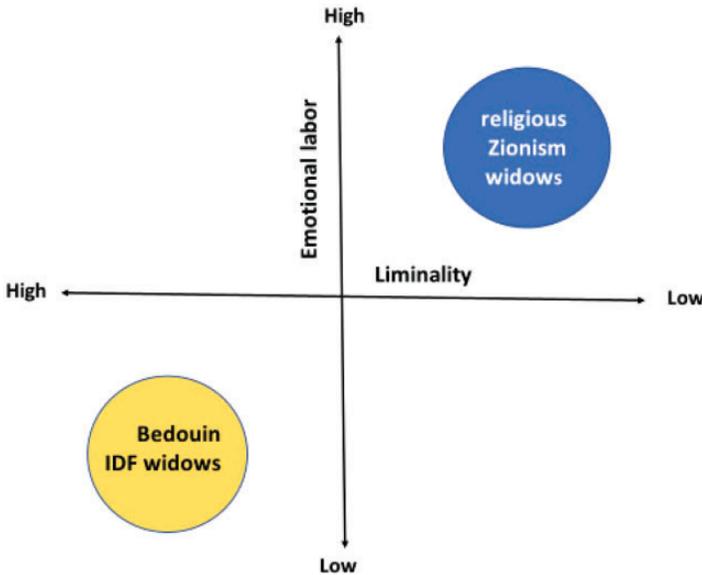


Figure 1. Liminality and Emotional Labor. IDF: Israeli Defense Forces.

The findings showed that the Emotional Labor of religious-Zionist IDF widows is greater than that of Bedouin IDF widows. The demands made on the former for Emotional Labor continued over a prolonged period of many years, extending even beyond their remarriage. Among Bedouin widows, Emotional Labor was found at a higher level during the first period of mourning, when religious and social dictates did not allow them to express their grief in public. Later, however, their absence from the public sphere freed them from the need to express feelings that served societal needs.

The present study confirms the findings of previous studies (e.g. Lebel et al., 2018) that Israeli military religious-Zionist widows exist simultaneously in the private sphere as well as in the Israeli public sphere. Society expects them to take measures to glorify and commemorate the fallen husband; at the same time, in the religious communal sphere, they must focus their efforts on remarrying (Shamgar-Handelman, 1982). In fact, all the widows interviewed for this study have remarried, and some have given birth to children from the new marriage. On the face of it, their liminal social status has ended. The high level of Emotional Labor reported in interviews with women from this group indicates the price they continue to pay for the tension between the expectation that they exhibit noble, hegemonic bereavement and their commitment to their present husband and the new family.

Some of the Bedouin widows remarried as a second wife, and they, in effect, remain “married and widowed”; in other words, they continue to experience a liminal state of “neither here nor there.” The termination of their liminal status is not fully achieved because they remain in the social periphery, both from the family’s perspective and the community perspective, due to the absence of social recognition by the Palestinian Bedouin society of the circumstances of their husband’s death.

The limitation of this study is the absence of a parallel picture of the Emotional Labor and Liminality of nonmilitary widows. Such a study would illuminate the unique qualities of the two groups investigated, not only vis-à-vis each other, but would also expand the perspective in relation to other widows, who are similar in social characteristics but different in the circumstances of death (within the group). We believe that further research focusing on the issue of culture-sensitive mourning, with its intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects, could help devise appropriate and effective rehabilitation programs that are consistent with the State’s strong commitment to the families of soldiers in general and military widows in particular.

To conclude, military loss, national widows’ Emotional Labor, and liminal identity are neither “natural” nor “human”; they are also not inevitable; rather, these are ideological artifacts deeply embedded in the community-enforced culture.

The insights that emerge from the psycho-cultural analysis that we have proposed above highlight the need to be aware of the psycho-social difficulties that widows face (Rubin, Malkinson, & Witztum, 2018). These difficulties are directly related to the culture and customs of the widow’s social group, the norms that

characterize it, and the shared values of its members relating to questions of religion, tradition, nationality, and the perception of military service (Yasien-Esmael, Eshel, & Rubin, 2018). Our recommendation is that any support intervention be tailored to the collective social and cultural characteristics of each ethno-religious group. The findings of the present study may reinforce the importance of attentiveness to the voices of widows in every ethno-religious group as a unique group, so that providing them with rehabilitation assistance may be founded on familiarity with the traditions, religion, culture, and mindset in Bedouin society. It is important that their widowhood be respected (whether or not they remarry) as they continue to live according to tradition and religious customs while developing skills for self-care, for example in child rearing and household economy. Further, we recommend raising awareness of the Emotional Labor of religious-Zionist widows and their experience of severe tension between genuine feelings and those they are expected to exhibit. It would be helpful to develop more pluralistic notions about their various ways of mourning and expressions of grief, waiving public demands that harm their emotional rehabilitation. Social conceptions of national military bereavement do not change overnight; such public representations of grief are shaped over years. Yet we see this research as a first step in raising awareness among professionals in the relevant fields to the emotional and social needs of widows in the context of Liminality and Emotional Labor.

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