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“You Can’t Spend Years with Someone and Just Cast Them Aside”: Augmented Identity in Older British Widows

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Widowhood forces women to reconstruct their identities. This article discusses how this reconstruction occurs. Interviews were conducted with 65 older widows exploring their experiences: Of those, 81% spoke about identity. This reconstruction can be understood in terms of continuing bonds with the deceased, loosening bonds, and personal growth. Women discussed these transitions in four ways: personal struggle, resistance to social expectations, empowerment, and using rhetoric. The reconstructed identity is not that of wife but rather that of an augmented identity of wife/widow. The tensions between how the widows see themselves, and how society sees them are explored.

KEYWORDS *later life, widowhood, women, social construction, identity*

INTRODUCTION

For older women the death of a spouse is a high-probability event (Morris, 1997). The majority of older women will at some point be widowed. In the UK over 23.5% of women aged between 65 and 69 will be widowed; the figure rises to 77% of women aged 85 and over (Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2003); and in the U.S. 42% of women aged 65 and over are widowed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). During the course of two British studies of late-life widowhood, it became clear that women experienced changes in their identities as a consequence of spousal loss. As all significant

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life events impact on an individual's personal identity, it is not surprising that spousal loss is no exception. However, relatively little is written about the ways in which it impacts on a woman's identity (see Lopata, 2000; van den Hoonaard, 1997, 2001). The focus of this article, therefore, is on the changes in identity experienced by British women as a consequence of the loss of their spouses. While the focus is on British women, it is likely that those experiences will resonate with North American widows.

Why should widowhood impact on identity in later life? Widowhood affects almost all areas of a woman's life, from psychological well-being, physical health, social participation, to finance and family relationships (Bennett, K. M., 2006; Bennett, K. M., Hughes, & Smith, 2005a; Keith & Lorenz, 1989; Utz, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2002; Utz, Reidy, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2004). Each of these aspects of a widow's life can influence the way in which she sees herself, her personal (or private) identity, and the way her community sees her—her public identity. In addition, for women born before the Second World War in the UK (94% of the current study), being married was the norm, and life was centred on the home. Brock and O'Sullivan (1985) argue that U.S. society's customs and values do not support the widow's role, and this is also true for the UK; as van den Hoonaard said, it is a "couples' world" (2001, p. 70). Studies from both sides of the Atlantic suggest that the experiences of older widowed women are largely similar (with the exception of health and welfare provision, but they are not central to the themes of this paper). Although it is likely that the centrality of *wife* in a woman's life may change in the 21st century, for today's older widowed women it remains central.

Why should this article focus only on widows and not widowers? The two studies, from which these data are taken, consist of interviews with both men and women. In the analysis, it was clear that while identity issues were important for both, the themes were different. Widowers were attempting to renegotiate and reconstruct their identities within the framework of hegemonic masculinity (Bennett, K. M., 2007). On the other hand, as I will demonstrate, women are trying primarily to renegotiate their identities as *wife/widow*.

What do I mean when I discuss identity? I agree with Allport (1961)'s formulation that identity is the answer to the question "who are you?" As Buss (1980) suggests, most theoretical approaches have a dual definition that reflects both the private and public aspects of identity. He describes the private identity as "that which is me, mine and personally, uniquely mine" (p. 121), while the public identity is "roles, relationships, and membership in groups" (p. 121). This approach has the potential to explain the experiences of widowed women: Widows are faced with challenges to both public and private identities. In terms of public identities, they may no longer be seen as wives, and in terms of private identities, they may feel as if they are still wives and should still be seen as part of a couple—"even the birds are in

twos" (Bennett, K. M. & Bennett, G., 2000–2001, p. 243). Thus, there may be a tension between these two identities, and that may have implications for the degree of comfort, or indeed discomfort, that widows feel living in their communities.

In 1997, van den Hoonaard examined 10 published accounts of widowhood written by North American widows. She argued that women were forced to build new identities after bereavement. At the death of their spouse they experienced "identity foreclosure" in which they were stripped of their identities at every level. However, more recently, she also highlighted the ways in which widows' identity develops through taking on new tasks and reorganizing relationships with people (2001). Although widowed women see the world around them as a "couples' world" (p. 70), they are able to negotiate their place in that world using the characteristics of self-reliance and independence. Lopata (1996), also working with North American widows, has suggested that the change in identity is a long-term process that she termed the "career of widowhood" and the pervasive identity of widowhood (p. 15). She suggested that identity does not disintegrate on the death of a husband but is reorganized through painful effort so that, enabled by social relationships, a sense of continuity is maintained between the old and the new person. Fry (1998) also found positive changes in identity following spousal bereavement, such as an impetus for personal growth and autonomy. DeGarmo and Kitson (1996), in an 18-month longitudinal study of younger American widowed and divorced women, examined two aspects of identity in relationship to psychological distress—identity relevance and identity disruption, that is, the degree to which a woman's identity as a married woman was important to her; and the degree to which the end of the marriage caused identity confusion. They summarized their findings as the higher the identity relevance, the greater the identity disruption. Consequently, though both groups of women had to withdraw from an identity as part of a couple and reorganize the disrupted identity as a person alone, widowhood was more distressing and disruptive to identity than divorce.

Much of the work on bereavement, and indeed on widowhood, focuses on the short-term experiences (DeGarmo & Kitson, 1996; Fry, 1998; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). However, reconstructing an identity following bereavement is an ongoing long-term process, as Lopata suggested when she spoke of the "career of widowhood" (1996, p. 15). Although Lopata's career of widowhood may be less relevant for women born in the latter half of the 20th century, it is likely to be relevant for the widows in this study, who were born earlier. Previous studies do not specifically focus on the processes by which identity is reconstructed or the ways in which widows discuss this reconstruction. The current study aims to fill this gap.

METHOD

The Studies

The data come from two independent studies conducted in England of older widowed men and women. The first study, entirely qualitative, was designed to explore the experiences of older widowed women with a focus on the emotional and participatory changes that occurred following spousal bereavement. The second study focused on gender differences in affect and participation, and used both interview and questionnaire methods (see for example, Bennett, K. M. et al., 2005a; Bennett, K. M., Smith, & Hughes, 2005b). In addition, as one might expect using a grounded theory method, unlooked for themes emerged that permitted new theory development, one of which was that of transitions in identity among the widows.

Participants

In total 65 widows were recruited (and 60 widowers, but their data is discussed elsewhere [see Bennett, K. M., 2007]). The respondents lived in their own homes and were aged between 55 and 93 years old and had been widowed between 3 months and 60 years. For the women in the sample discussed in this article, the age range was 57 to 92 (mean = 72), and they had been widowed between 1 and 32 years (mean = 10). Seven women had been married twice, although only three of those are considered in this paper¹. Table 1 shows demographic information (age, years married, years widowed) for the participants who reported identity-related issues. I contacted a diverse range of formal and informal groups run for or by older people, including organizations run for and by widows, trade unions, organizations supporting older adults, and social service departments (see Bennett, K. M. et al., 2005a for a discussion of selection issues).

The Interview

The research teams tape-recorded the semistructured interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes, and were conducted in the respondents' own homes. Respondents gave informed consent. The interview was not prescriptive; the aim was to learn from the widowed people what was important to them. The approach was "We are the novices and you have the experience." I asked about life before widowhood, around the time of bereavement, 1 year after, and currently. I wanted to know what respondents did and how they felt at these different times, so I asked "what did you do?" and "what did you feel?" (see Bennett, K. M., & Vidal-Hall, 2000).

TABLE 1 Age at Interview, Years Married and Years Bereaved for Participants

Participant	Age at interview	Years married	Years bereaved	Participant	Age at interview	Years married	Years bereaved
W2	75	43	10	W35	74	43	6
W3	81	14	9	W36	72	25	23
W4	74	35	20	W37	69	43	2.5
W5	Not given	49	Not given	W38	65	15 (refers to 2nd marriage, widowed twice)	3
W6	65	34	6	W41	67	16	1.25
W9	76	51	4	W42	59	36	1.5
W10	74	44	2.5	W43	68	33	12
W11	57	31	3	W44	67	38	13
W13	80	41	20	W45	65	14	13
W15	70	34	13	W46	58	35	3
W16	73	14	32	Mrs. A	68	40	11
W17	68	40	6	Mrs. B	72	55	6
W18	65	46	11	Mrs. C	66	43	5
W19	81	32	20	Mrs. D	66	38	2
W20	77	40	6	Mrs. E	78	44	10
W21	77	2 husbands died and dates are confusing		Mrs. F	77	38	20
W22	73	34	10	Mrs. G	73	37	21
W23	92	40	22	Mrs. H	75	25	25
W24	83	54	4	Mrs. I	64	30	5
W25	89	63	11	Mrs. J	76	51	2
W26	70	50	13	Mrs. L	65	12 (widowed twice, refers to 2nd marriage)	2
W27	75	37	16	Mrs. M	75	38	19
W30	79	39	20	Mrs. P	65	31	13
W31	85	49	8	Mrs. Q	65	44	3
W32	74	40	10	Mrs. R	71	26	20
W33	75	48	2	Mrs. S	76	39	15
W34	71	40 (refers to 2nd marriage, 1st ended in divorce)	1				

Analysis

The analysis for the current article proceeded solely using the qualitative data and a grounded theory methodology (see for example, Bennett, K. M., & Vidal-Hall, 2000; Charmaz, 1995; Smith, 1995). Not only are interviews valuable for theory development, but they also give voice to the widowed

women's emotions, which are often underrepresented in quantitative studies. More than 200 codes emerged from analysis of the 65 interviews. A subsample of transcripts was coded for reliability, and it was established as 80% between coders. These codes were analyzed for broader themes that included: narratives of death, gender differences, and attributions. Fifty-three of the 65 interviewees discussed identity issues (81%). The theme of identity refers to discussions about changes in widows' relationship to their dead husbands, changes in how they viewed themselves, and changes in relationship to their role as wife. I discuss the main aspects of this theme below.

RESULTS

Eighty-one percent of the widowed women interviewed for this study reported behavioral and/or psychological experiences relating to identity crises following the deaths of their husbands. The remaining 19% did not discuss issues related to identity, but that is not to say that they too did not experience identity issues, only that they did not report them. An analysis of identity revealed three themes of transition: a continuation of bonds with the deceased, a loosening of those bonds, and personal growth and development. I argue that these transitions are discussed in four ways—as a personal struggle focusing on finding a balance between being a wife and an independent woman; as resistance, particularly to society's stereotypes of widows; as empowerment; and as rhetoric. Their personal stories show them engaging in an enforced, but necessary, reconstruction of their sense of self. The evidence shows that the processes following bereavement do not simply reconstruct the woman's identity as *widow*, but creates an augmented identity as *wife/widow*: that is, partly a new creation and partly a reconstruction of the old.

Process

The enforced nature of widowhood requires women to reconstruct their identities. This is a process, not a sequence of stages. Although these aspects may have some loose sequence, they may also occur simultaneously and are dependent on the issues the widows must confront at a particular time, resembling what Stroebe and Schut describe as "oscillation" (1999). In the paragraphs below, I will use quotations from the women's narratives as illustrations.

CONTINUING BOND

When I analyzed those aspects of the interview relating to the events closely following the husband's death, women had a strong sense of a continuing

bond with their husbands. Like Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) before me, I found that the maintenance of the bond with the lost spouse was an important aspect of the life of a widowed person and not necessarily a detrimental one.

Women maintained the bond in a variety of ways—by recognizing the loss, by continuing to seek their husbands' approval by doing things "for his sake," or continuing to ask his advice (this occurred in 13% of interviews).

Eleven percent of the widows compared the loss of their husband to the loss of limbs or wounds to the body. "It's like losing half yourself," said Woman (W) 11. This seems clear evidence that they had conceptualized their identity (at least in part) as a wife, or half of a couple, or part of a family that now had been split apart, almost literally "Just cut in two" (W2).

Even after his death, widows often continue to seek their husband's approval. W34 explains that "I feel I'm doing what he would want me to do," while W4 comments that "He'd have loved it here [following a move of house]." Indeed there is one example of a woman making a speech that under other circumstances her husband would have done: "I did it for his sake really. 'Cause it was him that should have been speaking" (W23). W36 describes how she maintained the bond in times of difficulty, "I used to appeal to him when things went wrong" (see also Bennett, G., 1987, 1999). In all these cases the continuing bond is recognized and is a source of strength to the bereaved person. Widows commonly believed it was the dead husband that gave them the strength to carry on alone (Klass et al., 1996). In their eyes, at least, they are still wives, not widows.

LOOSENING THE BOND: "Only a wallet. I don't know why I kept it."

At the same time, the women also begin to reconstruct their identities. They report thinking of their husbands less often. As time goes by, they speak to their dead spouses less frequently, and the sense of physical dislocation or amputation lessens.

One of the most important activities associated with this transition is the disposal of belongings (47%). Though most women permanently retain some item of clothing or special possession belonging to their husbands, as W13 says, "Only a wallet. I don't know why I kept it 'cause I bought it for him before the war," for most of them, sooner or later, there comes a time when they dispose of their husbands' belongings. There is ambivalence about this process. Mrs. D's husband's piano symbolizes her married state; on the other, it causes her distress by emphasizing her widowhood.

And also I've sold the piano which cost me a lot of heartache. But I couldn't play. . . . And every time I went, actually I couldn't go in that room, properly really. I used to go in and look away from it because I couldn't bear to see it, sort of. You know, the piano itself. It just made me cry all the time.

It seems that possessions play an important part in the process of identity reconstruction. On the one hand, the retention of at least one of the husband's belongings symbolically maintains the bond; and on the other, changes to the home help loosen those bonds and establish a new identity—as Mrs. Q says, she wanted to “make the bedroom mine.” While seeing the husband's things and possessions is a reminder of the marriage, it may also be that a widow finds them an intrusion into, or an impediment to the establishment of, the new life.

PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT: “I depend on me.”

As the bonds loosen, there are opportunities for personal growth and development. Fifty-eight percent of women describe change and personal growth, and 47% discuss their increasing confidence and self-sufficiency. There are four underlying themes that describe these developments: adaptation to the new situation, independence and self-reliance, meeting new challenges, and the freedom to choose.

Adaptation. The widows' adaptation to their widowhood is presented in terms of movement—change, letting go, moving on. For example, W2 says, “My whole life has changed.” For some women the change is dramatic, but for others it is almost imperceptible; but whether rapid or gradual, the change is often difficult.

Independence and self-sufficiency. This new sense of self-identity is expressed both in terms of psychological change and in changes in lifestyle and the adoption of new activities. Women commented on the changes in their personality, on new-found confidence, and on their increasing independence and self-sufficiency. W10, for example, says, “I can sort it out myself.” Several speak of finding themselves moving from “us” to “me”: “That was when I started to become me instead of us” (W32).

Often this new-found confidence and self-sufficiency is described in terms of practical challenges that have been met. Mrs. P is proud of her self-reliance and compares it to the role of a good husband: “[I] clear drains and [laughs] do all the things that a good husband did.” It is striking that in many of the interviews, the women adopt the language of counseling and the feminist movement, though they have not been involved in either.

Meeting new challenges. As I have shown, the newfound independence is demonstrated in the way the widows respond to new challenges, not only in the home but also in the social sphere (62%). W22, for example, has been all over the world since her husband had died, but previously had never traveled on her own. Others have joined clubs, taken up new hobbies, or done volunteer work, as Mrs. I says, “Now I do line dancing and you don't need a partner for that.”

Freedom of choice. The freedom to choose is most clearly shown when the women discuss the freedom that widowhood has given them *not* to do

things. As W18 says, “Now, life’s completely changed now because I just do things when I want to do them.” Often this freedom is a liberation from domestic labor, but it is also a release from the compromises of marriage, such as what music was played in the house or what was watched on the television (15%).

Taking the subthemes altogether (adaptation, independence and self-sufficiency, meeting new challenges, and the freedom to choose), it is clear that the widows’ lives have changed either because they have made deliberate choices or because they have unconsciously adapted to their altered lives. Though, when reflecting on these changes, they acknowledge that these developments have almost certainly occurred as a consequence of their bereavement, they still view themselves as married to their husbands, even when the marriages have not been made in heaven. Thus, they have identities both as a wife and as a woman alone.

How the Women Discuss Their Identities

Throughout the preceding discussion there has been evidence of the ways in which women talk about and negotiate their identities. Four types of discussion can be seen: personal struggle, resistance to social expectation, empowerment, and the use of rhetoric.

PERSONAL STRUGGLE: “You’ve got to be brave.”

At its most raw, the challenge to identity that bereavement forces on a woman feels like an amputation, as I have shown earlier. Consequently they wish to maintain the continuing bond with their husband—they wish to remain a wife, part of the single unit of married couple. Yet at the same time they also realize that by necessity they have to forge an identity as an independent, single person. Their attempt to resolve this dilemma involves a personal struggle. Mrs. C identifies key aspects of this negotiation—it is a struggle, and it takes courage to face up to having widowhood imposed on one: “You know, you’ve got to be brave, you’re on your own, because after a while you realize that you’ve got to make a new life. You’ve lost your partner.”

The personal struggle appears to be central to the loosening of the continuing bond and the initiation of identity reconstruction.

RESISTANCE: “Why should I be cleaning?”

Alongside the personal struggle motivating identity reconstruction is another struggle, this time with society’s expectations of widowhood. The dominant expectation in Western society is that widowed women will wish either to

remarry or to withdraw from society. But this is not what most widows want. Instead, they find strength in new interests and new friends; they want to be independent and to be freed from traditional domestic chores. Some women express the resistance to societal expectations explicitly: "I go for a walk and I think why should I be cleaning?" (W11)

These women are reconstructing their identities in a way that allows them to live their lives as they wish and without conforming to society's view of what the identity of a widow should be.

EMPOWERMENT: "I'm more confident"

In parallel with resistance to social expectation is the empowerment that that resistance brings. The women in the study are clearly empowered to live their lives as they wish rather than conform to society's expectations. As W27 put it, "Well, it's the freedom really" (W27). Empowerment is also illustrated by Mrs. I, who deliberately asserts her independence by redecorating her bedroom, and making it *her's* rather than *their's*: "I just threw all that out and I had a fresh start with my fresh bedroom." However, many women assess their achievements by reference to the lost husband, and thus maintain their widowhood even as they demonstrate their success as single people. When Mrs. R achieves financial independence, she sees this as something of which her husband would have approved: "A fortnight ago I paid my mortgage off and I went and got the deeds. And my friend . . . said to me, "He's looking down on you, you know, and he's very proud."

So Mrs. R demonstrates that she has been empowered by her widowhood but at the same time asserts and maintains her identity as wife.

RHETORIC: "Me instead of us"

Finally, widowed women use rhetoric when discussing the reconstruction of their identity. Just as they use the language of amputation to describe the experience of widowhood, widows often use the language of feminism to emphasize their new independence or personify the former and the present identities as the contrast between *me* and *us*, as W42 says, "I feel like another person."

From Wife to Wife/Widow

The preceding discussion has illustrated the process and factors that influence the way identity is reconstructed following the deaths of older women's husbands. However, it is clear that these women wish that they were still married, and their identities still remain strongly associated with their husbands and with their identity as wife. W46 expresses this explicitly, she says,

“It’s, you see, although I still see, still feel I’m married to Fred, I am single really.” Intrapersonally she sees identity wrapped up with being a wife but is also aware that the outside world see her as widowed, and no longer part of a couple. Other women also explain that their identities still remain strongly associated with their husbands and with their identity as wife. Mrs. C, from whom the title of this paper is taken, makes explicit the idea that widows do not wish their relationship with their husbands to be discarded or ignored after their husbands’ deaths: “I still talk around the house. It’s something you can’t spend years with someone and just cast them aside.”

Mrs. C implies that not only is her own identity tied up with being a wife but that it would be hurtful to her husband to dismiss the life they had shared. Finally, Mrs. A describes how the identity of a couple is central to a widow’s life and that when the husband dies it leaves a hole at a widow’s very core.

We all put on this wonderful brave face, err, that’s hiding this big hole inside that’s umm, forever there, forever there. And er, you just build, . . . this whole stage there. . . . You can never sort of complete the link.

Although, when she says, “You can never sort of complete the link,” she is referring to the gap left by the husband, she is also implying that she can never be wholly *widow*, that she is instead *wife/widow*.

DISCUSSION

The data show that women reconstruct their identities gradually following the loss of their spouses. They continue to maintain a bond with the deceased, which gradually loosens, and allows them to experience personal growth. These processes are not necessarily sequential and certainly not stages in adaptation in the traditional bereavement sense. The women use language in particular ways to express these changes. They use the language of struggle, resistance, empowerment, and rhetoric. At the heart of their experiences is a sense that they do not become only a *widow*; rather they reconstruct an augmented identity, that of *wife/widow*.

Buss’s distinction between the public and the private aspects is also useful in understanding the challenges faced by older widows (1980). Society sees women who have deceased spouses as *widows* and no longer as *wives*. The widows recognize this fact, but they see themselves still as *wives*. They cannot discard their identity as wife easily, in the same way as they cannot discard their husbands. This tension between the public and private has implications for the ways in which older widowed women adapt to their loss and the ways in which communities treat older widowed women, and

given that the majority of the oldest old are widowed women, the way that the community treats the oldest old.

CONCLUSION: AUGMENTED SELF-IDENTITY

If one accepts the eloquent analogy of Mrs. A, "a big hole . . . forever there," it is not possible to argue that a widow adopts a completely new identity. Her words suggest that a widow has to change her self-identity to accommodate the hole, and so become a *wife/widow*. The widows illustrate Buss's distinction between private and public identities (1980). In public they are seen as, and recognize themselves as, widows; in private, they see themselves as wives, still part of a couple. Thus, the women in this study see themselves as more than widows, even if society does not. To conclude, widows do not lose their identity, but it does force them to reconstruct it. By maintaining strong links with the past while asserting their newly found independent self, they become the augmented *wife/widow*.

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NOTE

1. There were seven women who had been married twice. However, only four of them discussed issues of identity. This is 57%, whereas for those who have had only one husband, it is 84%. This raises an interesting question for which there is insufficient data to answer: Is identity reconstruction different for those who remarry?

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