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Widowhood in old age: Viewed in a family context★

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Abstract

Researchers and clinicians have traditionally explored widowhood as an intrapersonal process. We expand the paradigm of bereavement research to explore the widow's perceptions of her experience within a family context. In a study of family bereavement, 24 widows each participated in 2 separate qualitative interviews, followed by standard qualitative analyses of the transcribed narratives. Three inter-related central topics emerged. (1) Widows stress the importance of their independence vis a vis their family as central to their sense of identity. (2) Widows perceive that they and their adult children avoid expressing their feelings of sadness and loss with each other. (3) Widows believe that their children are unable to understand the meaning of the widows' loss because of differences in generations and life situations. Two inter-woven underlying themes emerged: protection of self and of other, and boundaries between widow and children. Just as protection is rooted in a dynamic of separation between widow and child, boundaries are rooted in their deep bond. When researchers and clinicians recognize the dynamics of these two themes they can potentially increase understanding of widowhood within the context of the family.

Keywords

Widowhood; Family; Bereavement; Protection; Boundaries

Introduction

Research and clinical works on bereavement have primarily focused on the individual bereaved person, and have only minimally viewed that person within the context of her or his family (Moss, Moss & Hansson, 2001). The person, however, is only one of the family members to experience the loss. It is important to understand the context of bereavement (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007), and thus research would ideally include multiple family members, across generations (Nadeau, 1998, 2008; Rosenblatt, 2000; Silverman, 2000). Here we explore elderly widows' perceptions of their experience of bereavement within their family. Future research as well as work of mental health and physical health professionals can potentially be enriched by placing widowhood in a family context.

In this paper, we do not attempt to examine the intra-personal aspects of widowhood such as depression, anxiety, despair, and positive wellbeing (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Carr, 2008;

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Lund et al., 1993). Rather we highlight the importance of some family contextual factors that potentially affect the widows' bereavement experience.

The overall approach in this research is *social constructionist*, acknowledging that social actors are embedded in society, culture and historical time, and that they are actively involved in creating society and culture. Three bodies of theory, often crossing the boundaries between sociology, social psychology and thanatology, provide the basis for our research: family systems theory, symbolic interactionism, and bereavement theory.

Family systems theory

Family systems theory assumes that family rules and patterns shape loss experiences of individuals (Rosenblatt, 1993). Thus, the behavior or reaction of one person in a family can and does have an impact on other family members and on the family as a whole (Rosenblatt, 2000; Shapiro, 1994; Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991). "Families are bundles of interwoven lives and interconnected lives" (Hagestad, 1996, p 205). Meanings are created and maintained through family interaction (Patterson & Garwick, 1994a). In this paper we are sensitive to the significance of family (Nadeau, 1998), specifically how a bereaved family member perceives and is influenced by other bereaved family members. This theoretical approach influenced how the data were gathered, and our analytical approach.

Symbolic interactionism theory

Symbolic interactionism theory is a frame of reference explicated decades ago, emphasizing the social nature of reality. When people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Mead, 1934; Thomas, 1923). In regard to widowhood, there is a strong connection between social construction of reality and feelings such as grief and loss (Lopata, 1996). Family bereavement is shaped by realities created through mutual interaction (Moss & Moss, 2012-13). Each family member searches for meaning built upon his or her perceptions of the situation (Neimeyer, 2006). How grief is expressed depends upon the subculture and the interactional setting. Here, we explore, how individual widows think about and describe their own bereavement experiences, and those of other family members, in order to interpret them and create their own reality.

Contemporary bereavement theory

Contemporary bereavement theory goes beyond the traditional model that emphasized intrapersonal processes, that the bereaved persons should express and work through their grief, and that the lack of emotional expression leads to unwanted and delayed grief. Contemporary bereavement theory emphasizes (1) the salience of socio-cultural factors (Rosenblatt, 2008), (2) argues that depression or complicated grief is not a modal outcome of bereavement (Bonanno, 2009; Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004; Rando et al., 2012), (3) that the tie with the deceased is maintained (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996), (4) that bereavement is a process not an event (Carr & Utz, 2002), (5) and that bereaved persons and their kin have to deal with emotional distress of loss as well as to solve real problems of living requiring restorative tasks (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010).

Widowhood has long been considered one of the most difficult stressors in the life course (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Initially research on widowhood, primarily involved persons who were not considered old (e.g. Lopata, 1973; Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974). In the past decade, research has made strides in examining the experience of widowhood in old age (Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2006). When the spouse of an older person dies, after decades of living together, there is a loss of couplehood, of interlocking roles, commitments and traditions with the spouse. Themes of loneliness and loss occur, along with shifts in patterns of daily living. Generally for older persons, widowhood is a normal, expectable, on-time experience (Neugarten, 1969), often seen as an appropriate death of an elderly person following a life well lived (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007). In old age, however, the death of a spouse occurs at a time when social, financial, physical health, and other adaptive resources are increasingly limited. Though many widows are resilient and do not exhibit extreme distress, they live with reminders of their loss (Bonanno et al., 2004). Overall, the psychological consequences of widow's loss of a long time husband have been found to include both prolonged distress and resilience (Wolff & Wortman, 2006).

Design and methods

Data is from a multiyear qualitative study, The meaning of the death of the first elderly parent: A family perspective. The broad goal of the study is to increase understanding of multiple family members' experiences and meanings as they are associated with the death of the first elderly parent, specifically of adult children and the widow. We examine the father's death because it is the more common first parental death. After thirty years of marriage, women have more than three times the risk of being widowed than do men (Novak & Campbell, 2001).

Study participants—adult children and widows—were recruited by following-up recent death notices in community newspapers. We reviewed obituaries to locate deaths of elderly men, in families where the widow survived, and one or more adult children lived in or near Philadelphia. About 6 to 10 months after the father's death, we sent letters to one adult child in each family for whom we could locate a listed home telephone number. We explained our interest in increasing understanding of the meaning of the death of an elderly father for a family. Of the 70 letters sent, we were able to contact 52 adult children by telephone, and screen the child for family eligibility: The father died at age 70 or older; each child, age 40 and over, was a biological child of both parents; and the child judged that the widow would be able to be interviewed if she were willing.

Most (44, 85%) of the families who were screened were eligible. Of those eligible, 10 adult children either refused, or did not follow-through with a scheduled interview. Thus, 34 families participated in the overall study. We interviewed 24 widows. Of the 10 widows who did not participate, 8 refused and 2 were later found by the interviewer to be too frail physically or cognitively to participate.

The study was reviewed by the Arcadia University Institutional Review Board, and each participant read and signed a consent letter. We assured each family member that all of his or her responses are confidential, private and not shared with anyone outside of our research

staff. Each participant was paid \$75. Two qualitative ethnographic in-person interviews were held about a week apart with each family member. Participants were interviewed separately, interviews each lasting 1 1/2 to over 2 h.

Widows had a mean age 79 (range 69–88); their husbands mean age 82 (range 70–92). They had been married an average of 56 years (range 44–65). The widows were European Americans (17) and African Americans (7), with Protestant, Catholic and Jewish religious identities, and they were from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. All but one set of widow interviews were carried out in the widow's home. We changed names and identifying characteristics for confidentiality.

The first of the two interviews with each widow asked about her personal reaction to her husband's dying and the death. Although spontaneous descriptions of the experience of other family members did arise in the first interview, the second interview explicitly focused on the widow's perceptions of and relationships with her adult children around her husband's—their father's—death.

Data is based on audio-taped and fully transcribed interviews, as well as detailed field notes and staff memos. We used standard methods of qualitative research (Mischler, 1986; Silverman, 2001). The data emerged from both gross level sorting and detailed analysis. In the analysis, we first used data review, that asks the broad questions, “What is the data?” and “How is this data relevant to the topic under study?” The next step was large level sorting of each transcript, then codes for broad themes and topics intra-individually, then fine-grained analyses that include coding for sub-themes and patterns within respondent's entire transcript. As new data were transcribed and ideas and themes emerged, we back-checked them with data from widows who had already completed the interview.

Results

In their narratives, each widow perceived that her adult children transferred their attention and concern from their now deceased father to her. Recently bereaved adult children have been found to increase their concerns about dependency of their widowed parent (Umberson, 2003). The bereaved widows expressed a strong sense of resilience as they describe their lives and their world (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007). Overall, they tended to emphasize the meaning of their personal loss of their husband, and they spoke little about their perceptions of the meaning of the loss for their children.

We asked a widow, *Have you, since your husband died, talked to your daughter about how she's feeling about your husband's death?*

R: No, I never even thought to ask her how she feels. I think about myself too much. ... No. We don't talk about it.

And in response to the same question, another widow said:

No. I probably have been very selfish.... I just really haven't brought it up.

Although, the widows were diverse in many ways, as they spoke about their adult children in the light of their own bereavement experience, three inter-related central topics emerged:

(1) the significance of their personal independence vis a vis their family, (2) the reluctance of widows and adult children to express their feelings of sadness and loss with each other; and (3) the importance of generational differences in responding to the death. Although we will discuss each topic separately, they are interwoven in multiple, complex ways.

1. Widows stress the importance of their personal independence vis a vis their family

In the past, the married couple had a sense of joint or shared independence. After the husband's death, a major concern for widows is to develop a sense of personal independence within the family, in some part a reflection of the pervasive core of individualism in contemporary American culture.

We examine three interwoven aspects of independence for widows: first, that widows describe their independence as central to their sense of identity; second, that their sense of independence is socially constructed, particularly when widows integrate the views of their adult children into their own views of themselves; and third, that the widows' concern about independence is rooted in their wish not to burden their adult children.

Independence as central to personal identity—Integral to their sense of independence is widows' wish to preserve their identity. Persons who have experienced loss generally engage in a process of rebuilding and affirming a sense of self (Neimeyer, 2001). There tends to be a cumulative, continuously developing sense of identity (Kauffman, 1986). Old persons make efforts to affirm their life story that is recognizable across time when they experience major life transitions such as widowhood (Hansson & Stroebe, 2007; Neimeyer, 2006; Sneed & Whitbourne, 2001).

A major theme in the lives of widows in this study, involves achieving a balance between their wish to affirm themselves as competent and personally responsible vis a vis their sense of vulnerability and precariousness (Portacolone, 2013). There is some research evidence that widowed persons may become more independent and self-confident after the death (Carr, 2008), and that widows' sense of personal competence is associated with their overall adaptation (Lund, Caserta, & Dimond, 1993).

We asked a widow: *What would your son say your feelings are since his dad died? What would he say about you?*

R: He would say I'm holding my own.

I: What does that mean?

R: It means that if I needed him, I'd call. If I don't, I can take care of myself. But I always did that before even when their dad was alive. ...I'm self-reliant. And it's the one thing that gets me to where I am now.

And another widow said: *I don't ask anybody to help me unless I can't do it myself. ...I don't need... I don't have to be dependent on anybody just yet.*

As Erikson's conception of human development suggests, memories of the past, and expectations of the future frame an individual's current sense of identity (Kivnick & Wells,

in press). Widows often spoke about their past strengths, current competence, as well as about their potential future vulnerability.

Widows' independence is socially constructed particularly as it integrates their children's views—Widows' independence in significant part is confirmed and enhanced when they see that their adult children view them as independent. Widows often interweave their own feelings and attitudes with their perceptions of the feelings and attitudes of their children. When we asked a widow about her children, she frequently couched her response in terms of herself. Conversely, when we asked about her self we often heard about her children (Moss & Moss, 2012; Nadeau, 1998, 2008).

Note a widow's response when we asked: *Do you think that your children may have changed some since your husband died?*

R: I think so.

I: In what way?

R: I don't know. That's a question. I think maybe I'm going to have a talk with them after this, just to see if I've changed that much. I think what they would say is, "Well mom, you're just as independent as you were."

A few widows said that they had been very dependent on their husband when he was alive, and were challenged to take on new responsibilities after his death. Carr (2008) found that women who reported high levels of emotional dependence on their husband, had increased self esteem after the loss. Others have reported stress-related growth among recently widowed persons (Caserta, Lund, Utz, & deVries, 2009).

We asked one, *Did you and your husband ever talk about how it would be for your daughter after he died?*

R: Well, I can't say the two of us ever discussed it with Emily... She didn't think I would be able to manage without him because he was, like I said, controlling and I more or less depended on him to make lots of decisions. But I think I've surprised her because I think I have handled things as well as can be expected. And I think my son and daughter-in-law feel that I'm doing good.

Again this is an example of a widow responding to a question about her daughter, with a response describing how her self-esteem is bolstered by her children's positive view of her self. Widows often assert their independence as they respond to the expectations of their adult children.

A widow said: *Helen [daughter] said, "Mom, you cannot decorate. [for Christmas]. Come on. You know." I said, "I'll do it." I don't listen too much.*

Another widow, speaking of her self, said: *I'm a strong person..... I got my strong genes from my mother. We also asked her: Do you feel at all more dependent on your daughter and son now?*

R: Well, (pause) I can hold my own, thank God. 'Cause I'm able to get up. I can clean, I can cook, I can wash, I can shop, but most of that stuff my daughter does it.

...She does the shopping. And she'll come here and... change my bed because I like my mattress flipped. ...[but] I fell on my job and I hurt my back a few years ago.

This widow is similar to others who feel they are independent and able, even within the context of regular help from their children for tasks that they find are difficult to do for themselves.

Widow's independence is often associated with their wish not to burden their adult children—There is a mutually supportive process when adult children are perceived by the widow as affirming the widow's independence: widows feel that their selfhood is enhanced, and the adult children are perceived to be relieved of meeting additional dependency needs of the widow.

We asked a widow: *Often children have told us...in general they will say their mother is very strong. "My mom is really strong!" Do you think your kids would say that?*

R: I think they want you to be strong because it's less on them. That might be a harsh statement, butThey want you to be not having a pity party or hanging on to them.

Widows see their independence in a family context. Many of their statements about independence are associated with their concerns about potential dependency. They do not want their adult children to see them as needy or vulnerable.

Next, we turn to examine how widows control their emotional expression when they are with their children. Widows may believe that if they express their sadness and loss with their adult children, they will feel less strong and more vulnerable.

2. Widows tend to avoid talking about their sadness and loss with their adult children

Generally widows describe everyday conversations and interactions with their children as focusing on restoring continuity and managing their daily lives. Widows rarely told us that they talked with their children about the depth and breadth of their feelings around their husband's death, or about issues of loss connected with their widowhood. This reflects the dual processes of loss and restoration that many recognize as central to bereavement in contemporary theory (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010).

We are also guided by Hochschild (2003) of emotion management that is basically an interactive account of emotion. She suggests that within a specific context, grief should be seen from both a normative perspective (what is judged to be appropriate in the light of socio-cultural feeling rules), and from an expressive perspective (one's feelings and how others understand and respond to those feelings).

When a widow does not directly communicate her feelings, she tends to mask her emotions to reflect personal and social expectations that she appear strong and in control (Goffman, 1959). However, when widows feel sad they tend to look sad, and this may communicate their upset whether or not they verbally express their feelings (Bonanno, 2009). Widows

subtly distinguish between having an emotion, expressing an emotion and talking about their emotions—giving sorrow words.

A widow was describing the recent family holiday dinner:

R: Everybody was together for Thanksgiving.

I:... And would anybody have said, "Gee, dad would like to have been here?"

R: No.

I: Would you ever say something like that?

R: I would think that.

Widows repeatedly referred to the importance of regulation of their expression of grief and loneliness vis a vis their children. However, interacting with the interviewer, a benign stranger, they often expressed deep feelings through tears.

Two closely inter-woven sub-themes emerged from the widows' narratives about expressions of loss and sadness between widows and their children: First, widows tend to believe that their expressions of emotional upset will be upsetting to their children, and will also be upsetting to themselves. Second, widows often say that they express their emotional upset when they are alone.

Widows believe that if they express emotional upset to their children, the children will be upset, and it will further upset the widow—In general, widows tend to follow family and cultural feeling rules, thinking that their children do not want to see or hear expressions of emotional upset. They may think that when they do express deep emotions they risk discomfort and withdrawal from members of their support network, such as their adult children (Bonanno & Keltner, 1997).

We asked a widow: *Do you think he [your son] appreciates what you're going through as a widow now?*

R: Oh, I think so. They don't want to, they don't want to see you cry because that makes it harder for them too. So I'm not saying they ignore that, but you hold back so you don't upset them ... you put a front on.

When widows do not express their feelings, widows sense that their children are less able to recognize the widows' emotional upset about the loss. Thus, widows may be thwarting empathy and overt emotional support from their children.

Listen to two widows:

I: What do you think your children would say about how you've been dealing with life since your husband died?

R: Well, they think that I'm doing okay.... But they don't know. I never say I'm depressed or anything, I never tell them... how I feel...

Another said:

R: Oh, the kids don't know exactly how I feel.

I: They don't?

R: No. I don't cry or complain when I'm with them.

When widows say they don't talk with their children about the meaning or the impact of the father's death, this may be in part because the children have communicated in some ways that they really do understand, or in part because the widow would like to think her children are empathic and understand her grief. Perhaps widows think that when much is left unsaid it is easier to believe that there is common understanding.

The next widow describes family feeling rules as they are played out in widow-child interactions:

I: How do they [your children] deal with your emotions—the way you feel about things?

R: Oh, I think good. ...They seem to know me well enough that if I've had it, I've had it. You know? (laughs) And they realize that.

I: They realize that you have quote “had it”?

R: I don't want to discuss anymore or that's it....You know, some things make you sad. The more you talk about them, the sadder you get. You've got to get onto the next thing to make you happier. They're very feeling—they can sense when I've had enough.

Another widow succinctly summarized the attitude of many, when she said:

R: We don't talk about him [father] much They just don't mention him and I don't say anything. ...Well, they don't ask me how I feel and I don't tell them.

This “don't ask, don't tell” pattern is mirrored in the widow's perception of her children who are also seen as managing their expression of emotion, when they are with her.

We asked a widow:

I: Do they share the fact that they really miss him a lot and have something to say about him that's important to you? Do they do that?

R: No, not too much. They think it probably would upset me. I just know they do.

Possibly these narratives are suggesting that rather than sharing feelings between widows and their children, what is most important to them is that their contacts with their children reflect mutual concerns about the other; each potentially has-the-other's-back, both instrumentally and emotionally.

Only two widows described a child, each a daughter, as openly grieving when she was with the widow. Each widow accepted her daughter's tears and upset, and the widow described herself as in control. One said, *I probably did more of mine [crying] when I was by myself. You know, when I'm with other people, you kind of...*

Widows tend to express their upset when they are alone—In human communication, there are two basic interwoven components: the message (what is being said or expressed) and the interpersonal relationship (here between widows and children) (Ruesch & Bateson, 1968). When the widow's feelings of pain and loss are not expressed to the child, it is a way for the widow to spare the child from recognizing threats to the widow's strength and independence.

One widow said:

R: I miss him so much.

I: Do you?

R: Yes. But like I said, I have accepted it. I have no choice. Now see, if I cry and moan it's going to make it hard for them [children]....

I: Do you feel that you held back your feelings?

R: No. I didn't hold back my feelings. If I cried they didn't see me.

Widows often spontaneously spoke about feelings they did *not* communicate with their children. Implicit in their narratives was a strong reflection of social-cultural expectations that bereaved adults should not reveal their grief. Rather they chose to conceal their grief, leaving widows to express their emotional upset when they were alone.

One widow clearly combined her sense of identity with her pattern of monitoring her expression of feelings. We asked:

I: Can you tell me how you were feeling during those days? At the funeral home after he died.

R: Well,... I like to cry when nobody sees me crying. I'm that type of a person. ... But my insides were crying more than the outside. ...I guess I cried so much in my life I don't have no tears no more (laughs).

We asked another widow:

So what do you think your son..., for example, would say about how you've been dealing with life since your husband died? What would he say?

R: They'd all say I was doing pretty well considering. But they don't see me crying because I don't usually cry when they're around....I do it more when I'm by myself.

Widows seem to imply a sense of personal empowerment when they choose to express their grief when they are alone, not when they are with their children.

3. Widows believe that their children are unable to understand the meaning of the widows' loss because of differences in generations and life situations

Rosenblatt (2000), in regard to the death of a child, wrote about the chasm between bereaved parents and others, and here we address a chasm between the widow and her adult children. Widows often indicate that their children are not able to understand the widow's experience. A widow's process of living through the loss of her life-long companion is different from a

child's experience of parental loss. Most children have moved physically into their own home and moved psycho-socially into their own separate family, and thus a distance is subtly felt over decades. The widow's daily life and habitual interactions change dramatically, and generally the child's life changes less.

Referring to both of her children, one widow said, *I don't know that they feel any sense of loss because it's been so many years that they've been married and gone.*

Research suggests that widows sensitively recognize that the children have their own lives (Matthews, 1979). We asked a widow:

I: How did members of your family react to your husband's death?

R: They all took it very hard. It was unexpected really....tears and crying.

I: But since then, you know, since the day that he died.

R: Oh, that's different. That's all past. ... They're all involved with their families and this is not their spouse or their child. Later, this widow said: They (son and daughter) have no idea how I feel. I keep it to myself. They have enough on their plates... I just feel like they have their own problems. They don't have to deal with mine.

There is a sense of hierarchy that is culturally based, such that the primary ownership of grief resides with the widow whose husband has died, and not with the children whose father has died. There is a pecking order of grief (Kastenbaum, 2008).

Another widow said that she is lonely.

I: Do you share the fact that you could be pretty lonely here with your daughter?

....

R: I did tell her. I said, "It's really lonely."..

I: Does she ever share with you that she understands how you feel?

R: Yeah. As far as she can understand (laugh) because she's lost her father, but she hasn't lost her husband. And she hasn't lived with him for 65 years, or known him for 70.

A widow emphasized this theme of generational difference over the life course:

They're young people, you know? These are problems of old people. (laughs).

Another widow said, *I would like to live alone. I don't want to live with my daughters. ...They are good, but you know, ... I figure I'm old. I have my own ways of doing things. Maybe I'd interfere ...they have two teenage daughters.*

When widows tend to see a chasm between themselves and their adult children, they often expressed this in their responses to our question: *Some widows have said they try very hard not to intrude on their children's lives. How is it for you?*

The word “intrude” suggests thrusting into an unwelcome social space. It implies a separation between the widow and her children. Often the widow engages in a complex evaluative process as she considers whether she is entering in an uninvited way in the lives of her children. Research focusing on widows more than two years after the husband's death, found that some widows spontaneously said that they did not want to intrude or interfere with their children's lives (Talbot, 1990). Perceptions of potential intruding have consequences for maintaining harmony and comfortable relationships within bereaved families.

In response to the “intrude” question: one widow said: *Well I've been saying the same thing. I don't want to intrude in their lives because I know they have families.*

Widows perceive that their children's primary responsibility is to their own spouse and their own children. Again the socio-cultural ethos of independence influences the widow and her view of her children's lives.

When several widows spoke about giving advice to a child, each one was careful to indicate that she either did not expect that the child would follow her advice, or that she only gave advice to pass along family rules—e.g. to respond to an unfaithful husband by changing the locks on the door.

Discussion

Next we will examine underlying themes that arose from the analysis, then we describe some of the limitations of our research, and end with some implications of our findings.

Two underlying themes

Two inter-related core themes emerged from the perspectives of elderly widows as they talked about their bereavement within a family context: protection and boundaries. The widow's views of herself and her perception of her children's behaviors, attitudes and expectations are interwoven into these themes. Throughout the widows' complex and sometimes contradictory narratives is their wish to maintain continuity and stability both in their personal lives as well as in their relations with their children.

Protection

Protection is often seen by widows as mutual. How it is played out in the families where an elderly father has died has been rarely examined. A wish to protect one's self and one's children from the pain of loss appears to be integral to the process of widows' bereavement. Emotion regulation has been found to be an important part of grief and grieving (Bonanno, 2009; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Widows want to protect their children from upset, by not sharing their problems, needs, as well as feelings of personal grief and loneliness. Additionally, each widow tends to describe her children as wanting to protect the widow, her independence and her quality of life. A pattern emerges of ‘don't ask and don't tell’.

Nadeau (1998, 2008) observed that protectionism—not talking about the death—may tend to inhibit family meaning-making, and keep family members separate physically and

emotionally. Additionally, we suggest that a web of protection may tend to maintain the family as a caring unit.

Protection emerged early in our study, during the time of recruitment of participants. We noted that a handful of adult children refused to allow us to contact their widowed mother, saying they wished to protect their mother from what could be a stressful and upsetting interview.

Aspects of protection are integral to each of the 3 topics in the findings above: centrality of independence, avoidance of emotional sharing, and recognition of generational differences. Widows' view that asserting their independence may be protecting their autonomy within the family, their sense of personal identity, and protecting themselves and their children from feeling they are a burden. Avoidance of emotional sharing tends to reflect the widows' effort to protect themselves and their children from emotional upset about loneliness and loss. Widows' view that generational differences thwart the children's ability to comprehend the depth of the widows' loss may protect the widow from unfulfilled expectations of her children's empathy. In the widows' attempts to shield their children, and in perceiving their children as protecting them, issues of power may be implied. Perhaps both mother and child perceive the other as more vulnerable and themselves as more strong.

Recent research in the Netherlands indicates that after the death of their child, parents often try to protect each other by hiding their feelings for the sake of the partner, by trying to spare their partner's feelings, and by staying strong for their partner; this is termed “partner-oriented self-regulation” (POSR) (Stroebe et al., 2013). The researchers found that the impact of POSR was the opposite of what partners had wished: each partner had an increase, not a decrease in grief. In our study, widows talked often about their protective stance vis a vis themselves and their children. We do not know whether POSR in widow-child dyads after the father's death would follow the patterns of grief in the parental dyads after the loss of a child. Future research is needed to explore the conditions under which the web of protection tends to maintain or weaken the bereaved family as they adapt to the loss.

Underlying protection is a distinction between self and other. The process of protection is often associated with a sense of boundaries. Next we turn to a discussion of boundaries between the widow and the family.

Boundaries

Family boundaries affect and reflect expectations and interactions between family members. Boundaries are ubiquitous, and particularly notable in generational differences and when widows are concerned that they are intruding in the lives of their children. How individuals view themselves is embedded in their view of the structure of their family (who is in it, who is not), and of its functioning (how family members interact with each other) (Black & Santanello, 2012; Patterson & Garwick, 1994b). When a widow says that her children have their “own families” this implies boundaries.

The concept of boundaries is central to each of the three topics we have examined above. The widow's focus on independence and the wish for continuity of independence, explicitly

and implicitly refer to the boundary between the widow and her child. When widows do not share their feelings with their child, this maintains their separateness. Further, the recognition of an intergenerational chasm between the old widow and her children reflects the significance of the boundaries.

Van den Hoonaard (2001) found that widows “need to be sure not to overstep an invisible boundary that would result in invading privacy, crowding or expecting too much”. When the adult child married and had children, there was often a culturally rooted tendency to emphasize the independence and integrity of the new family unit. The societal mandate of independence was carried beyond the individual child to his or her new family. The boundaries between widows and their child's family have been multiply reinforced due to years of living apart in separate households, as well as the widow's recognition that her children's central concerns (about their work world, their own children) are different from the concerns of the widow (in regard to loneliness, potential decrease in resources—both physical, social and financial).

In summary, each member of the family—the widow and the child—basically wants to maintain a boundary while at the same time wants to feel a strong, meaningful, caring connection with the other (Fingerman, 2001). Research is needed to understand the processes of the formation, permeability and impact of boundaries between widows and their adult children, in response to the death of the father.

Just as protection is rooted in a dynamic of separation between parent and child, boundaries are rooted in the deep bond between parents and children. The central themes of protection and boundaries highlight the significance of a family perspective in understanding the experience of widowhood.

Overall, future research should examine how bereaved family communication patterns shift over time: from the period prior to death, at the time of death, and the weeks, months and years after the death. It would be important to explore the complexities of the processes of understanding or not understanding the feelings of the bereaved other by examining how bereaved family members do or do not share or perceive they share their thoughts, feelings and meanings about the loss.

Limitations

The paper is limited by the data from widows in the United States. We recognize that there can be considerable diversity in the experience of elderly widows living in other cultures (Martin-Matthews, Tong, Rosenthal, & McDonald, 2013). Our interviews focused on a short period of bereavement—from 6 to 12 months after the death. We are aware that without longitudinal data, retrospective biases have colored narratives. In selecting only families where adult children lived proximate to their parents, we may be describing a specific cohort of widows. In the future, widows are expected to have more of their children living at a considerable distance (Spain & Bianchi, 1996.) Also, in our focus on widows, not widowers, we recognize that past research has found gender differences in how persons respond to widowhood. Men and women differ in the ways that spouse death affects them psychologically, socially, financially and in everyday living (Carr, 2008; Lund & Caserta,

2002; Schaan, 2013). We leave it to future researchers to examine the meaning of a mother's death for adult children and the surviving widower.

In focusing on parent–child relationships in widowhood, we have not discussed such potentially salient factors as quality of the marriage, the pattern of terminal illness, the extent and duration of caregiving provided by the widow, the impact of place of residence at the end of life, the suddenness of the death, the health of the widow as well as background characteristics of age, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status. Additional areas that are beyond the scope of this paper and of the research study are the interface of the widows with other family members such as sibling, sons and sib-in-laws, grandchildren, as well as with non-kin.

In keeping a widow–child focus, our forthcoming papers will focus on widows' perceptions of similarities and differences in the bereavement experience of their children, as well as the interface between the widows' narratives and those of their children.

Implications

The implications of this paper can affect both future research on widowhood and clinical work with bereaved widows. A family focus potentially broadens research understanding of the experience of widowhood in old age. Allowing the focus on widowhood to incorporate a family perspective can sensitize the bereavement researcher not only to the children of elderly widows, but also to close family members of bereaved persons in general. Hopefully, mental and physical health professionals will become more aware of the family context of their bereaved patients. When health practitioners ask more and learn more about other bereaved family members, and the widow's perceptions of them, the therapist can be enabled to have a deeper insight into family dynamics and thus be increasingly helpful to a widow. Boundaries and protectiveness can add new dimensions to the meaning of loss and the therapeutic process.

Traditional research on widowhood has ignored concern with the widow's interaction with surviving adult children, although the widow's family world involves her children, potentially more centrally than it did when the father was alive. Family systems theory and symbolic interaction theory have joined here to enable us to explore the social nature of reality of bereavement. Jointly they can widen and deepen understanding of widowhood.

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