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Widowers' strategies of self-representation during research interviews: a sociological analysis

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses the strategies that older widowers used to assert their masculinity during in-depth research interviews by the author, a middle-aged woman. Twenty-six widowers living in Atlantic Canada and Florida in the United States and who were aged from 56 to 91 years participated in the study. The author analysed the interviews from a symbolic-interactionist perspective that looks at the world from the perspective of those being studied. The widowers used various strategies of impression management to reinforce their identity as 'real men' during the interviews. These strategies included taking charge of the interview, using personal diminutives and endearments to assert control, lecturing the interviewer about various topics including differences between men and women, and bringing attention to their heterosexuality by referring to themselves as bachelors and commenting on increased attention from women. The paper chronicles the process of discovery of the importance to the study participants of portraying themselves as men. It was found that older widowers' identity as 'real men' is precarious because they lack three essential components of masculinity: being in a heterosexual relationship, being employed, and being young. The article makes extensive use of the participants' quotations to demonstrate their attempts, through impression management, to maintain a masculine identity while discussing the very topics that threatened it.

KEY WORDS – widowers, gender and interviewing, masculinity.

Introduction

Over 30 years ago in her classic book, *The Future of Marriage*, Jessie Bernard (1973) pointed out that men and women have different experiences of marriage even when they seem to encounter the same objective situations. As a result, we know that we need to study the perceptions of both men and women in order to understand the similarities and differences in the ways that they experience marriage. The same can be said of the experience of the end of marriage through widowhood or divorce (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998). Nonetheless, research on widowhood has focused almost

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entirely on the experience of women (Martin-Matthews 1991, 2000). In part, at least, this is because the majority of those widowed are women. In the United Kingdom, about 12 per cent of all women are widowed compared to fewer than five per cent of men, and according to the 2001 Population Census, only 17 per cent of men aged 65 or more years and 43 per cent of those aged in the late eighties were widowers (UK Office for National Statistics 2001). Similarly in the United States among those aged 65 or more years, 42.4 per cent of women are widowed but only 13.1 per cent of men (US Census Bureau 2007).

The terms that we use to refer to people who have lost their spouses reflect the dominant view that widowhood is women's experience. 'Widow' is one of the few English words with a root form that refers to the feminine rather than the masculine case. In fact, widowers are sometimes unfamiliar with the word 'widower' and refer to themselves as 'male widows'. Usage of these two words reflects the different connotations of being a widow and a widower. For example, it is quite common to hear a woman referred to as John's widow, but the converse, Mary's widower, sounds awkward. Although widow and widower may superficially seem to be two sides of the same coin, their social meaning is very different. The difference manifests itself not only in what widows and widowers say about their experiences but also in how they go about saying it. This article analyses the impression-management strategies (Goffman 1959) that a sample of older widowers used during interviews about their experience as widowers to take charge of the situation: asserting their dominance as men, differentiating themselves from older women, and associating with bachelorhood rather than widowhood. Others have noted that when men tell the stories of their lives, they 'typically devote little narrative space to their marriages and wives. In general, men's life stories feature themselves as the central character and topic for discussion' (Minster 1991: 37, cited in Russell 2007: 184). The men in this study were no different even when asked directly about how their lives had changed since their wives had died, and several stated unequivocally that their lives had not changed very much. Research has demonstrated that men talk more about both their families and their careers when interviewed by a woman than by a man (Stephenson *et al.* 1999).

Literature review

Searches were undertaken for published studies on masculinity and older men, masculinity as an accomplishment, and women's experiences when interviewing men. Very little literature was found that examined

masculinity among older men (but see Calasanti 2004; Calasanti and King 2005). Only two books are known that directly address issues of older men as men, rather than as people whose gender is not an issue (Arber, Davidson and Ginn 2003; Thompson 1994). Most research on older men *as men* concentrates on understanding their bodies and health problems (*e.g.* Drummond and Smith 2006). As Thompson (2006: 633) commented, the study of ageing and masculinity is in its infancy and in this field 'aging overshadows gender'. As the present article demonstrates, however, older widowers do want to be seen by others as 'real men'. The most relevant literature is that which deals with masculinity, which in general conceptualises it as something that men accomplish rather than as an essential part of their makeup (for a seminal paper see West and Zimmerman 1987). As Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001: 90–1) noted, 'the [masculine] self is not a psychic entity … but rather a dramatic effect created by performance and interpretation. … The dramaturgical task is to signify possession of an essentially masculine self … [which] is always the product of a performance tailored to the situation and the audience at hand'.

An interview provides an opportunity for a man to signify his masculinity, but is also an occasion when it is threatened because he inevitably gives up some control by agreeing to participate. When a man, particularly an older man, agrees to talk about a significant life event in which he was powerless and about which he might become emotional, such as becoming a widower, the situation may be unusually threatening. Although several articles have analysed the issue of women interviewing men, very few have been studies of older men. Some women have written about their experiences interviewing or doing fieldwork with men when the subject was non-traditional male activities. Lareau (2000: 428), for example, reported the problems that arose when studying fathers who knew little of the day-to-day details of their children's lives but 'excelled' when talking about 'their own work experiences, their leisure activities, and masculinity'. Bennett, Hughes and Smith (2003: 413) addressed the issue of women interviewing older widowers and acknowledged that the gender and age of the interviewer might have influenced the 'content and direction' of the exchanges, while Williams and Heikes (1993) pointed out that many assume that men are more comfortable discussing personal issues with women. This article builds on these observations and examines in detail how older widowers negotiated their identity as men during my interviews.

Arendell's (1997) writing about the power dynamics she faced when interviewing divorced fathers is particularly relevant. The men she interviewed presented themselves as masculine and worked in several ways to prove their manhood during the interviews. Some used her as a target for

their anger but others treated her as an honorary male. They employed extensive denigration of women and some touched her during the interview. Although the widowers I interviewed used different strategies to assert their masculinity, the prominence of their strategies to assert their status as men over the course of the interviews was strikingly similar to the situations that Arendell described.

Pini (2005) wrote about her experiences interviewing male leaders of an Australian agricultural organisation. The men she interviewed, like the Canadian widowers I spoke to, exhibited rural and more traditional gender attitudes than one usually finds in urban contexts. Pini framed the problematic as, 'who is asking whom about what and where?' (2005: 204). She reported that the interviewees reinforced their superior position as men in several ways: by referring to her using the first name of an actress with whom she shared a surname; by 'positioning themselves as busy, powerful, important men' (2005: 208); and by calling attention to their own knowledge by giving her 'mini-lectures' which were difficult to interrupt. Because most of the men that I interviewed were retired, the tactic of presenting themselves as busy was not available, although several provided detailed descriptions of their volunteer work or participation in organisations – many as officers.

Alongside the sparse literature on older men as men (*i.e.* in terms of gender and masculinity), little has been written about older widowers that goes beyond their physical and psychological problems. Notable exceptions are Davidson's (1999) interview study of older widows and widowers, and Moore and Stratton's (2002) *Resilient Widowers: Older Men Speak for Themselves*. Neither of these important works has however addressed the ways in which the gender of the researcher interacted with the age and marital status of the men and the topic to affect the participants' self-presentation strategies. Davidson noted that the widowers to whom she spoke talked at length about their past occupations and war experiences (1999: 72).

Context of the research

To contextualise the study, a summary of my previous research on widows will be helpful. It began with a study of women's published autobiographical accounts, which found that most were written in an emotionally evocative style (van den Hoonaard 1997). The authors focused on their loss of identity at the self-, inter-personal and impersonal levels. They described the process of building new identities and described themselves as transformed into 'new women'. All the autobiographies took account of the centrality of the role of wife in the authors' lives and described an

'identifying moment' through which they became acutely aware of their new identity as widows (Charmaz 1991). Other elements of the ways in which the women constructed their accounts stood out: the stories gave much space to accounts of their husbands and marriages; described considerable social dislocations, including being deserted by most of their friends (Lopata 1996);[1] and gave extended accounts of the many things that they needed to learn how to do, *e.g.* handle money and change light bulbs.

Because the emotional and evocative style of the accounts was quite different from the matter-of-fact way that widowhood is usually discussed in academic writing, I sought to overcome this difference through an in-depth interview project with older widows.[2] The interviews encouraged the participants to speak at length and with much emotion about their experiences; for example, they told detailed stories of their husbands' deaths which served to provide meaning to their sense of themselves and their lives as widows. The women described their husbands and marriages in great depth to communicate what they had lost when their husbands died. The participants still identified strongly as their husbands' wives, and this identity served to ameliorate the stigma of being a widow (van den Hoonaard 1999). Nonetheless, the identity of being a widow was very salient for these women and they, like the autobiographers, reported that their confidence had grown through learning how to take on some of their husbands' tasks and that they had lost many friends.

The widows also expressed considerable apprehension about their competence as interview participants, with frequent disclaimers such as 'I hope this is what you wanted' and 'I don't know if this will help you'. Some transformed the alien situation into a more familiar one by offering tea or coffee.[3] Many recognised that most people do not want to hear about their experiences. Their approach to the interview situation, their efforts to transform the research encounter into one with which they were more familiar, and their desire not to talk negatively or off the point all communicated aspects of the women's experiences as widows – and of the precariousness of the women's identity. They were fearful, it seemed, that at any moment they might discredit themselves by talking too much or by misinterpreting the questions even though they were reassured that no particular answer was expected. The women reflected the low status of older women and their general belief that older women, widows in particular, are uninteresting and have led ordinary lives. In Goffman's terms (1967: 8), they were 'out of face' – they did not have a ready line to take in the interview situation – not because they had lost face but rather because their social position led them to believe that they 'cannot competently convey what they think or how they feel' (Holstein and Gubrium

1995: 20). The widows reacted to this situation by refusing to take control of the interview and by finding ways to emphasise our similarities, as by noting that we were both mothers.

The current study

After completing these two studies, and noting that there were few sociological studies of widowers (and none in North America), the next step was to interview widowers about their experiences. The approach was similar to that used for the interviews with widows, with the interviews being driven by the participants' concerns. As so little of relevance had been written, it would have been almost impossible to decide in advance which issues would be important to them. The introduced themes were those that had emerged as significant in the research on widows: the experience of taking care of a dying spouse; the first days of widowhood; identity changes and the social meaning of widowhood; negotiating relationships, particularly with adult children and friends; learning to live alone, including the domestic chores; experiences with helping professionals, *e.g.* doctors, clergy and social workers; connections to the community, including church and secular organisations; relationships with women and ideas about remarriage; but I did not go into detail. This was to avoid leading the responses into the same terms that I had used to convey my understanding of women.

Theoretical perspectives

The study was an application of the symbolic interactionist approach, a way of looking at the world from the perspective of those being studied. As such, it analysed not only how widowers described their relationships but also how they negotiated them (Becker 1996). Symbolic interactionism asserts that 'all terms are relational' and that a trait, such as being a widower or an old man, is not simply a 'fact but rather an interpretation of that fact' (Becker 1998: 132, 134). The focus was on social meanings and processes, *i.e.* widowers' interpretations of their identity and status as widowers. There are three central components of the epistemology of qualitative, symbolic interactionist research (Becker 1996). The first two – ascertaining the viewpoints of those studied, and emphasising everyday life and lived experience – focus on the participants' 'definition of the situation' and its consequences for how they live their lives and interpret their place in the social world. The third component is in-depth or rich description; for example, conceptualising widowers as

multi-dimensional individuals who interact with others, bureaucracies and themselves in the process of understanding their everyday lives.

Methods

A convenience sample of 26 widowers aged from 56 to 91 years whose wives had died within the previous 10 years was interviewed. Most participants lived in an Atlantic Province of Canada, but six widowers were resident in Florida in the United States. Because widowers are so difficult to find (Moore and Stratton 2002), recruitment was particularly challenging. A very wide net was therefore cast to recruit informants, using a combination of media publicity, connections with organisations, *e.g.* the Third Age Centre at St Thomas University, and personal contacts. The Canadian sample included men from various backgrounds including professional occupations such as scientist and doctor, various blue-collar occupations, and salesmen. About one-half lived in rural areas of the Atlantic Province although it can be argued that the cities of the province are more rural hubs than true metropolitan areas. The Florida sample was, on average, older, with their age range from 75 to 87 years. These men had relocated from large, urban centres in the north eastern United States, were Jewish, and also had diverse occupational backgrounds, including accountant, small business owner, airplane mechanic, and salesman.

All except one interview took place in the men's homes (one man insisted his home was too messy). We sat where the men chose, usually in the living room but for a few at a kitchen table or, in one Florida case, a patio. Most of the men maintained a businesslike demeanour and did not offer coffee or tea; in sharp contrast to the widows I had interviewed who took a more personal approach, most adopting the role of hostess. The duration of the interviews with the men ranged from 45 minutes to three hours (average one hour), about half the duration of the widows' interviews. The length of the interviews depended on each participant's expansiveness following the prompt questions. In both studies, I sought to understate my professional position to minimise the inequality in the researcher-participant relationship. Nonetheless, some men said that they had volunteered to participate (at least partly) because they knew that I had written a book (van den Hoonaard 2001) on women's experiences of widowhood, which apparently told them that I was not a neophyte and had credentials as a researcher. Nonetheless, a few of the widowers treated me more like a daughter than a professional – I did not challenge this approach.

The analysis of the interviews used a thematic approach that involved reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify the major themes that

the participants had raised. Text related to each major theme was entered into separate files and then carefully coded to discover the similarities and differences both within and between each interview. It was through this painstaking process that I noticed that the widowers had worked very hard to make sure that I understood that they were still men. This effort was most obvious in their discussions of housework and cooking, two customary feminine tasks, and in their attitudes towards remarriage. As the analysis progressed, I recognised that the men's style of interaction established and reinforced their masculinity. I had not intended to approach the study of widowers in terms of masculinity, but the theme of being a 'real man' was ubiquitous and strong. Rather than look at the men's style of interaction simply as a problem of the research, I recognised it as 'an act of gender signification that crie[d] out for analysis' (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001: 211). I therefore listened again to the interview tapes to seek confirmation that the participants were indeed 'doing gender' throughout the interviews (West and Zimmerman 1987). There was ample confirmation. The men's tones of voice – whether didactic or aggressive – were those of a dominant man talking to a subordinate, younger woman.

Findings

The following sections present what the participants did and said during the interviews under four headings: (1) taking charge in their reaction to the first question and by interrupting; (2) referring to me as 'girl' or 'dear' or by a diminutive of my first name, both to reinforce their dominance as men and to change the subject; (3) lecturing me about various topics, including the essential differences between women and men and remarks on older women's unattractiveness; and (4) emphasising their heterosexuality by referring to themselves as bachelors.

Being in charge

The same opening question that began the earlier widows' interviews was used: 'What I would like for you to do now is tell me your experience with being a widower. You can start where you want and end where you want. I'm just interested in finding out about your experience.' The intent of the design was to encourage the participants to decide which aspects of being widowed were most important to them and then to elaborate. The question had been very effective in the widows' study but was ineffectual with the widowers. In the former study, it elicited responses about many topics that I had not anticipated, such as how the participant had met her husband and what their marriage had been like. After a few interviews

with the widowers, it was obvious that the men were not allowing me to complete the question. They started talking over the question, and I soon shortened it to: 'What's it like being a widower?' or 'Tell me about being a widower'. For some, the interruption may have been an indication of their discomfort and a desire to get on with the interview. In response to the opening, many men began to talk about their experiences with women or their willingness or unwillingness to remarry.

The women in the earlier study expressed their uncertainty by asking, in essence, 'Am I doing this right?' (van den Hoonaard 2005). In contrast, the men communicated their uncertainty through interruptions, by expressing their sexuality, and by associating being a widower with re-partnering or being pursued by women. It was not only following the first question that the men interrupted me. As I later read the interview transcripts, I noticed that there were many places where the typist had inserted 'both talking at once'. Further reference to the tapes confirmed that the men had interrupted me throughout the interviews. It may have been their habitual way of conversing with a woman or they may have been asserting their dominance as men, or maybe some of both.

Using personal diminutives to assert control

Another conversational strategem that a few participants used to assert their dominant position was to refer to me as 'girl', 'dear' or to use the diminutive form of my name, 'Deb'. One informant particularly, Leroy, used this kind of terminology effectively to move the interview on when he wanted to change the subject, it seemed particularly when his emotionality might have moved him from the line he was taking.[4] Goffman noted the same behaviour (1967: 16), and Charmaz (1994: 283) wrote about men with chronic illnesses 'controlling time, pace, space, information, and people in order to give them more control over ensuing interaction, impression management, and identity'. Leroy controlled the pace of the interview to deflect attention from the unmanly act of becoming visibly emotional. When he appeared to be verging on tears, he used the following phrases to change the subject or the pace of the interview: 'Let's get going here, *Debbie dear*', 'Okay, *dear*', 'So, anyway, what other questions have you got there, *dear*?' 'So, what else have you got up your sleeve there, *girl*?' and 'No, that's it. Next question, *Debbie*' [author's emphases].

Another widower, Ralph, also controlled the tempo of the interview by addressing me as 'girl' or 'Deb'. He used diminutive phrases to refer to me to speed up the pace of the interview or to close off a subject when he was ready to move on. These phrases also indicate that Ralph was relaxing into the general way he interacts with younger women, for these phrases often had an affectionate tone to them: 'Well, carry on here, *Debbie girl*', 'Well,

Deb [and] Anyway, *Deb*', 'You're getting an education, *girl*', 'So I don't know, *girl*, what else I can tell you?' 'So that, *Debbie dear*, just about covers that aspect of it' [author's emphases]. Another participant, Jacob, a widower whose demeanour was most aggressive, when explaining his dilemma in relating to women said, 'So, you're caught between two things, *kid*'.

Educating the woman interviewer

In addition, the men also demonstrated that they were knowledgeable in various areas not related to the topic at hand by delivering 'mini-lectures' (Pini 2005). The topics included: Winston Churchill, how to ripen pears if they are still hard when you bring them home from the store, the military, how to get extra frequent-flyer points or low-price airline tickets, the 'Vial for Life' programme,[5] the Great Depression, politics and social justice, genealogy, men's 'slavery to testosterone', and the mistake that Debbie Reynolds made when she married Eddie Fisher. It is likely that some of the men were emphasising knowledge associated with their age cohort (*e.g.* Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt), and that some were displaying the generativity drive (*e.g.* when referring to conversations with school children about the importance of the environment), but in several other interviews the didactic tone was striking.[6] The following excerpt from the interview with George came after I inquired if there was anything more that I should have asked. In response, he talked at length about the distinctive challenges faced by men and women that had raised his curiosity:

G: I see women, obviously some men too, who do the most, the most crazy things. Maybe you're one of these people who do this – do you like pears? … Do you get pears from the store and take them home and eat them, or do you have them mature? Do you put them in the fridge?
I: Oh, it depends … if they are soft, I put them in the fridge; if they're not soft, I leave them on the table.
G: Okay, to mature before you eat them … you'd be amazed how few women know that. I've had women actually serve a fruit for dessert that was hard as that [raps on table] … and they will say such things [as]: 'Well, you know, those fruit, those pears aren't very soft. I've had trouble getting soft pears'. To me that is a stupidity, but it's amazing … intelligent people do that!

Other men also explained their views about the differences between men and women and their belief that women of their own age were old and unattractive. Some of their phrases invited me to agree with them, which at first led me to think that they were at those points treating me as an 'honorary male' (Warren and Hackney 2000: 15). From later close examinations of the interviews, however, it became clear that these comments involved an 'assertion of superiority' as well as superior knowledge and denigration

of older women (Arendell 1997), and that sometimes the men had the tone of instructing me about a fact of life with which I might not be familiar.

Highlighting the difference between women and themselves may have served to emphasise that they were men, but also made the participants' comments didactic. They explained that the differences included: women's ability to make friends (from Samuel), that men are more involved in organisations (Edward), that women care more about taking care of the house (Samuel), and are more proficient at family relations and remembering dates (Bernard, Keith, and Carl), and need a sense of security more (Bernard). Their expressions conveyed a sense of the 'naturalness' of these differences, a view that is not unique to these men or their cohort but rather reflects widespread stereotypes, some of which have been borne out by research; for example that women are generally the family kin-keepers.[7] Similarly, like many people these widowers believed that women were more successful at adjusting to widowhood, and again some research supports this view (Bennett, Hughes and Smith 2003). Winston opened our interview, before I had even turned on the tape recorder, by explaining why he thought women were better at surviving widowhood than men:

> Both [women and men] grieve, have the same problems afterward, but men are more likely to give in. I find that women carry on with their lives … work harder at adjusting to things. … Men are good at surviving in some ways. If, say, they're thrown in a boat in the middle of the ocean, and they're not going to be rescued and they've got to get somewhere. … They might be better at looking after [coping with] something like that … if something happens and they're in the mountains, and they got to get out; but in ordinary life, it seems that women are better.

Winston's comments painted women in a positive light while at the same time distinguishing himself from them and identifying very traditional male traits. At one point in the interview, in fact, Winston said that he thought that women were the best thing that had 'ever been invented'. In contrast, several participants' remarks about older women and the language they used to describe women were strikingly negative and demeaning. This is not a reference to the use of 'girl', because the usage was as likely to be the unconscious common practice of their cohort rather than an attempt to demonstrate masculinity. The most frequent context for speaking of women in a derogatory manner was the topic of the men's thoughts about remarriage. The participants commented that they would only be interested in women younger than themselves, and they described women of their own age as unattractive and asexual. Jacob's comments were particularly explicit:

> But one strange thing: I took out a girl one time … she dressed up very nice, and [her] children were worried about her getting raped. I said, 'she should be so

lucky'. … Her children said, 'don't get raped'. They must have been kidding …*they're not that physically attractive any longer, you realise that.* … When I knocked on the door [I said], 'If you're not dressed, I'll wait, I'd rather see you with your clothes on than in the buff'. You know, I'm not kidding about that [author's emphasis].

Jacob used 'they' to refer to old women as if I were not of that category now or in the future. Matthew's comments about rural women had a similar flavour: '*I don't know if you're aware*, but farm women in general are pretty big because they like to cook, and I don't like big women, never have' [author's emphasis]. Both the tone and the words make it clear that these men were talking about a category, old women, to which neither of us belonged. Similar to the divorced fathers who took part in Terry Arendell's study, and unlike the men that Williams and Heikes (1993) interviewed, these men 'seemed impervious to the possibility that I might be offended by sexist [and ageist] remarks or inclined to include myself among those – women–being demeaned' (Arendell 1997: 359). Another participant, Charles, was quite explicit about the double standard that applies to ageing (Sontag 1972) and that results in older men's lack of interest in women their own age:

I'm 75 years old, and, you know, what the hell. It's over. I know I shouldn't feel that way. I look pretty good. And, in my mind, I can't associate with a 70-year-old woman. To me, a 70-year-old woman is an old lady, and I don't feel like going out with an old lady. [My wife (who was 70)] looked young; she acted young; she moved young … that's the way I feel about it.

These men, if they were interested in re-partnering, were only interested in younger women. Ralph observed that the women who appealed to him were considerably younger than himself: 'Some of the women that I've see, hell, I'm old enough to be their father … that I feel perhaps I'd like to go out with. Ideally, what I'd like to find [is] someone that looks "not too bad", shall we say? I'm still a bit on the fussy side. Not that I'm any living, breathing doll, but I refuse to think old'. Ralph and Charles both identified women their own age as 'old' while they were interested in women who would be or think, act and look 'young' as they did. Their comments reflect a combination of ageism and sexism that denied the possibility that women of their age might actually think, look and act young. This contrast desexualised old women at the same time as the men claimed that their own sexuality endured.

Some participants used denigrating or belittling terms to refer to women in general. In some cases, these words targeted older women and were desexualising, while words that described younger women tended to be diminutives. Ralph's narration of a recent illness incorporated both: '[The nurse who took care of me in the hospital was] an *old sergeant-major*

type. … When I was younger, I used to get all these *sweet young things*, but now I seem to be getting these *old crows*. … They've lost their sense of humour' [author's emphasis]. Similarly, Leroy talked about his 'little housekeeper' and said that his adult daughter was 'a very supportive little girl'. Herbert, when describing widowers who had taken up with unattractive or difficult women, referred to those women as 'battle-axes'. Bernard, referring to his disabled girlfriend, commented, 'she's limited, poor kid'. He noted that he called her 'kid' because she was five years younger than he was. Several widowers repeatedly addressed me using the diminutive nickname 'Deb'.

Exhibiting (hetero)sexuality

Another aspect of the men's impression management was that they brought attention to their own heterosexuality by referring to themselves as 'bachelors' and recounting women's interest in them. A few remarked either that they were surprised by their interest in finding a new woman, or concerned about their non-interest in sex. Several men referred to themselves as 'bachelors' rather than 'widowers', a puzzling label. I do not imagine that widows refer to themselves as 'spinsters', 'old maids' or even 'single', and not one of the women I interviewed did so. What makes this difference even more striking is that women almost universally reported a dislike for the term 'widow' (van den Hoonaard 2001), while the men in this study claimed no strong feelings one way or the other about the word 'widower'. In fact, several men were not even certain about the terminology and referred to themselves as 'male widows'. In Goffman's terms, the use of the word 'bachelor' served as a tool of impression management (1959) and preserved the men's identities as (hetero)sexual and thereby allowed them to retain their status as men (Calasanti 2004). George articulated the most developed argument for regarding himself more as a bachelor than a widower:

> Well, I say I consider myself a widower … functionally I can't consider myself a widower … maybe bachelorhood would be better. I simply see myself as a free agent and do what I please when I want to do it. Now I like cooking; I've always liked cooking. I'm a miserable housekeeper. My house is always a shambles … so how does that make me function as a widower? It doesn't … maybe as a bachelor rather than a widower. … I am not functioning any differently than if I were a bachelor, so I don't know where being a widower is relevant.

George explained that: 'I felt almost an obsession to get involved [with women]. I'm free now; I can do anything I damn please. Incidentally, I did get involved with a number of women, a sequence of them. I don't know why except that I felt this freedom to do what I chose'. Marc,

although he did not use the term bachelor, suggested that others saw him as a 'lone wolf' who might be a threat to married couples, because 'suddenly I'm free, I'm loose. So, therefore, here I am, and I constitute a threat or danger.' These remarks equated being a bachelor with being 'free' or 'loose'. One could build a picture of the free, virile bachelor based on these remarks. In addition, a number of participants stated either explicitly or implicitly that being married or paired with a woman leads either to being managed in several ways (like being encouraged to go out and do things) or to being constrained (*e.g.* one man said that he could now 'eat a sandwich at 3 am' or 'get drunk' if he chose). We can see the stereotype of the wife as the ball-and-chain who inhibits a man's 'natural' inclinations. The point is not that these widowers would actually get drunk or have a middle-of-the-night snack; it is that they *can*.

Matthew, who was living with a woman, compared the experience of being in a small town in his province in which he had lived during and right after his marriage and was 'very lonely, kind of like a lost sheep', and where some widowers go to the Seniors' Club and 'sit around and play bridge or some silly, little board game' with life in the small Canadian city where he now lives. Russell (2007: 182) noted that men often shy away from participating in organisations geared toward older people because they do not include activities 'associated with traditional male interests such as sport'. For Matthew, the small town with its feminine activities was an emasculating setting for older widowers while, in an urban centre, 'it's almost like being an elder bachelor all over again'. Matthew, notably, did not suggest that he might have gone hunting, fishing and skiing as some other widowers who lived in rural areas did. His focus was on organised activities for 'seniors', activities which many older men eschew because of the preponderance of women who participate. Matthew's story suggests that he had to leave the small town to once again be a man. The contrast between being a bachelor and being less than a 'real man' that was implicit in Matthew's comments also appeared in other interviews. Keith, for example, described himself as 'an old maid, maybe around the house'. Jacob juxtaposed his attraction to the thought of being a bachelor with other widowers' giving up on life and essentially becoming women:

J: And I'd do my job as a bachelor, I think, if it were 10, 15 years prior to this. … The fact that I'm 82 years old. I'd want an involvement … so you're caught in between two things, kid. You don't have solid contact with a person, and it ain't quite kosher. They can shit on the fan. … The average male becomes a female when their wife kicks the bucket.
I: What does that mean?
J: You understand English?

I: Yes, but …
J: American males that lose their wives at my age are all fucked up. They don't do anything. They sit and die … and that's it, you understand it? I can't say it any other way, they die.

Matthew agreed that 'the male who fails to live up to his culture's masculine ideal is [like] a woman' (Edley and Wetherell 1995: 183). This propensity to use a feminine label as an insult to boys and men is pervasive and begins during childhood (see Thorne 1993 and endnote 7).

Jacob was the most aggressive participant in the study. The above quotation demonstrates his use of strong language, his impatient way of responding to my request for clarification in the demeaning question, 'You understand English?' and his identification with bachelors who are sexually alive. This demeanour was displayed consistently throughout the interview although it was moderated after the tape recorder was turned off, when he offered me a can of soda and chatted about his preference for books by male authors. Other men also used strong language or profanities (*e.g.* ass, damn and hell) that are not normally approved by women of the participants' generation, certainly for use in the presence of women. It may be that the precariousness of the men's identity led to an 'exaggerated display of dominant male culture' similar to that experienced by token women (Kanter 1977) and by female field-workers in a male-dominated setting (Gurney 1985: 48).

Although only two men, perhaps reflecting norms associated with their cohort, explicitly mentioned that they missed sexual intimacy, from the beginning of the interview many talked about the experience of being surrounded by interested women. One man described going out with one woman after another after his wife had died, and remarrying within six months. He married a woman who had never been married before, and the marriage was short lived, partly because she had a domineering nature and insisted on taking a trip abroad during which, he felt, she wanted to show off that she now had a man. Others suggested that the realisation that they were indeed widowers was prompted by the different ways in which women reacted to them. In response to the final question, 'Is there anything that I haven't asked that you think is important?' Patrick said, 'No, I guess the only other thing I would say is be wary of … some women who might be interested in you. I know there's quite a few who've hinted, but again we've kept it on a friendly basis'. Patrick suggested that he was in control in this situation, but others described predatory women who, for example, brought them innumerable casseroles and phoned them incessantly. Regardless of their experiences with women or their desire or not to remarry, most of the widowers raised the issue of finding a new

partner early in the interview without a prompt. The ubiquity of this topic kept the spotlight of the interview on the participants' heterosexuality and their identity as men.

Discussion

The interview situation presented the widowers with what Morgan (1992: 100) referred to as 'a paradigmatic example of masculinity under challenge' because they were widowed, retired, might become emotional, were being interviewed by a woman, and were older. As Calasanti and King (2005: 7) pointed out, 'our constructions of old age contain no positive content'. The situation elicited a particularly forceful effort by the participants to establish themselves as men, but they had a difficult task, for there is no available, familiar image of being an old man and a widower that men can adopt in their presentation of self and still portray themselves as masculine. They were forced to use the symbols and practices from a repertoire learned in youth. This perhaps explains why some of the things the men did and said seemed throw backs to an earlier era and were reminiscent of pre-feminist, cross-gender interaction. Rather than criticise the widowers' strategies as out-of-date, we should recognise their untenable position as old men subjected to ageism and with no viable model of old masculinity on which to draw. Every topic the men brought up was saturated with their efforts to portray themselves as real men.

Had the interviewer been a man, the strategies of claiming masculinity might have looked different. The men could have found areas of similarity, *e.g.* sports, rather than focusing on differences between us. For example, reporting their study of husband care-givers, Ribeiro, Paúl and Nogueira (2007: 307) pointed out that several participants conveniently incorporated references to previous life experiences that had embodied their masculinity as young men into the description of their caring tasks. They had been emigrants or in the army for long and hard periods of time, and in both situations they were on their own and had to be self-sufficient. The manner of asserting their manhood is different, but the claim is the same. In this study, because the interviewer was a woman, many of the widowers monopolised and dominated the conversation by interrupting, agreeing to less self-disclosure, and being 'less supportive of the conversational topics' that were raised (Edley and Wetherell 1995: 20). The men's approach may also have reflected age or cohort socialisation. There is no way of knowing whether or not their strategies would have been different had our relative social positions changed in terms of age, gender or cohort. Nonetheless, drawing from other studies conducted by women of men's experiences that are 'unmanly,' we can infer that the strategies

might have been different, but surely the concerted effort to present a masculine self would have been present.

This phenomenon raises the question of why the men's identity as men was so precarious. Being retired (Morgan 1992), unmarried (Connell 1987; Nock 1998), and most importantly old (Thompson 2006), threatened every aspect of their masculine selves. The interview situation clearly exacerbated these challenges because the men had little control of the situation and some were aware that they might become visibly emotional. In response to this situation, the men 'exert[ed] a sort of compensatory control' (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001: 207) through interruption and by using diminutives or endearments when addressing the interviewer. In attempting to find a positive image, older widowers might look to contemporary novels and movies. For the most part, books and other media do not provide older men with a model or script of older widowers, masculine or otherwise. These media often portray widowers as *young*, attractive men whose wives have died violently. For example, in Pat Conroy's novel, *Beach Music* (1995), the main character is a 37-year-old, six-foot-six man whose wife had committed suicide. Another factor is contemporary western society's definition of the situation and treatment of old men as being devoid of gender. In addition, we might argue that widowers come to occupy a 'feminine space'. Widowhood is primarily a woman's experience, and stereotypes of widowers portray them as lost and ineffectual, characteristics that contrast with the manly attributes of stoicism and control. As Meadows and Davidson (2006: 297) noted, old men who 'occupy feminine space … invoke strategies in an attempt to remain approximated to hegemonic forms [of masculinity]'.

The older widowers used the image of the youthful bachelor to talk about themselves because nothing else was both acceptable and available. Through this 'self-categorisation' they 'classif[ied themselves] as particular types of people'. By comparing themselves favourably with other older men who become like women when they became widowers, they made distinctions that reinforced the 'being manly' category they claimed for themselves (Hollander and Gordon 2006: 190). Through this process, the men were able to resist an androgynous or feminised identity. Spector-Mersel (2006: 68) noted that there is at present 'an absence of cultural guidelines for being both a "true" man and an aging person [and that this results in a] context in which contemporary older men struggle to build acceptable identities'. This struggle is exacerbated for widowers who not only lack the physical prowess and participation in paid work that are necessary to maintain a masculine identity but also are not in a relationship with a woman. They experience widowhood, which is usually associated with women, with a lack of control and displays of emotion

that are decidedly unmanly in western culture. In the social context of an interview about their experience of being widowers conducted by a woman, the men had to grasp at the only representations of masculinity that were available to them. The widowers used impression management to establish themselves as true men and 'construct legitimate personal identities' (Spector-Mersel 2006: 78), using symbols of youth and middle age because there are no usable images of masculinity for older men.

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NOTES

1 Helena Lopata (1973), who carried out the first studies of widowhood in English, when asked how she felt about the literature on widowhood after the loss of her own husband, commented that it did not communicate the overwhelming emotional experience (personal communication).
2 That study was funded by a Community Researcher Award from Health Canada. For that project, I interviewed 28 women over the age of 50 years who had been widows between one and 10 years.
3 For a full analysis of the widows' approach to the interview situation see van den Hoonaard (2005).
4 All names are pseudonyms and, unless otherwise stated, all quotations are taken verbatim from interview transcripts. I have used first names because the widowers and I called each other by first names during the research encounter.
5 This programme encourages 'seniors' to put a vial in their refrigerator door that lists all their prescriptions. The widower who mentioned it insisted on a long explanation even though I told him I already knew about it. He also insisted that I bring a vial home with me.
6 Although the words may look as if they are accomplishing the same on the printed page, when one listens to the audiotape, the instructive and on occasion condescending tone in some interviews is obvious.
7 The term 'girl' may also be used as an insulting comment on the performance of male athletes and soldiers.

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