

# Remembering the past, looking to the future: Christmas as a symbol of change in later life widowhood

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## **ABSTRACT**

Many older women experience the loss of a spouse or partner in later life. This paper explores older women's experiences of Christmas in order to locate process and meaning in relation to the transition of later life widowhood. Drawing on longitudinal data, derived from three in-depth interviews conducted over 18 months with 26 older widows, this paper presents a number of themes from the women's accounts of their Christmas celebrations and their Christmas cards. The importance of continuity, social relations and autonomy is situated in three emergent themes: 'Family, intergenerational ties and tradition', 'Friendships, organisational ties and reciprocity' and 'Personal continuity and activation'. The significance of discontinuity, change and mediation is illustrated through three emergent themes: 'Christmas as a catalyst for change', 'We are all widows' and 'Negotiating change with others'. The findings, including the positive aspects of continuity and discontinuity, demonstrate that Christmas is a potent symbol of both personal and social transformation during later life widowhood, and that the management of transition incorporates not only social relations, but also personal agency and flexibility. This paper further challenges the predominantly negative stereotype of older widows and illustrates their resilience and growth in the later stages of life.

**KEY WORDS** – older widows, transition, Christmas, social relationships, continuity, discontinuity.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to explore the transition of later life widowhood as experienced by a group of older women. This group is of interest as there are larger numbers of older widows than older widowers (Hirst and Corden 2010), they are largely 'invisible' and are often perceived

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as vulnerable members of society (Chambers 2005). Traditionally much of the literature concerning widowhood and social relationships depicts older widows as the passive recipients of support (Lopata 1996; O'Bryant and Hansson 1996). However, many older women go on to experience a period of independence and personal growth following bereavement (Chambers 2005; Davidson 2001*a*, 2001*b*; Lieberman 1996). Importantly, previous studies have generally approached the transition of widowhood retrospectively rather than being alongside older widows as they experience the process of change (Collins 2011).

Drawing on longitudinal data obtained through prolonged engagement with older widows, this study explores change as it is happening and as events unfold. Due to the unfolding nature of the research and the iterative process involved, it became apparent during the initial fieldwork that Christmas is both an emotional and a telling time in the change process. The participants in this study comprise White British women who all celebrate the Christian tradition. Christmas in this instance has the potential to reveal the qualitative dimensions of older widows' social ties and practices during transition (Allan 1996; Chambers *et al.* 2009; Morgan 1996).

It has been suggested that the 'traditional family Christmas' contributes to psychological wellbeing (Mind 2003). Family relationships and identities may be reinforced through the routine occupation of sharing meals (Ludwig 1998; Wright-St Clair *et al.* 2005) and through traditions, values and belongings passed from generation to generation (Hunter 2008; Shordike and Pierce 2005). The continuation of such routine activities and rituals has been found to assist in adaptation, helping to ease the flux of change (Atchley 1999; Ludwig 1997; McIntyre and Howie 2002).

This paper discusses Christmas as a symbol of change, and illustrates how the ritual represents both the past and a new present during later life widowhood. First, the literature review provides an overview of the theoretical understandings of the transition of later life widowhood, and a discussion of the meaning of social ritual, including Christmas and Christmas cards. Second, the methodology and methods section outlines and justifies the methodological approach taken and the methods adopted, including the ethical considerations, the analysis of the data, and the validity and reliability of the research. Third, the findings from the women's discussion of their Christmas celebrations and their Christmas cards, including aspects of continuity and discontinuity, are presented. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusions section appraises the findings in relation to the existing literature and considers their contribution to the existing knowledge base, including social gerontology. The limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are also considered.

## Literature review

### *The transition of later life widowhood*

Widowhood in later life is more common for women than for men. In England and Wales, between 1971 and 2001, twice as many women as men experienced the death of a spouse (Hirst and Corden 2010). In Great Britain in 2007, 23 per cent of women aged 65–74 were widowed, rising to 61 per cent of women aged 75 and over (General Household Survey 2007). Older widows are more prevalent than older widowers, partly because women tend to marry older men, live longer, and because older widowers tend to remarry (Bennett 1998; Binstock and George 2001; Hirst and Corden 2010). Indeed older widows will on average live another 14 years after the loss of their spouse (Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson 1994), and they will usually live alone (Hirst and Corden 2010).

Many studies suggest that widowhood is detrimental to health and well-being (Bennett 1997; Laditka and Laditka 2003; Thuen and Reime 1997; Van Baarsen *et al.* 1999). Widowhood can also lead to a loss of social roles and challenge personal identity (Davidson 2001*b*). The negative aspects of widowhood may be exacerbated by the prevalence of physical and psychological dysfunction in later life (Bernard *et al.* 2004), indeed some older widows experience multiple and parallel transitions in addition to widowhood due to their lifecourse position (Collins 2011). However, research conducted in the United States of America (USA) suggests that most older widows and widowers demonstrate resilience following their loss despite the negative aspects of the transition (Bonanno, Wortman and Nesse 2004). Much of the earlier widowhood literature has been criticised for focusing on the problematic aspects of the transition (Chambers 2005), reinforcing ageist and sexist stereotypes of older widows (Owen 1996), and portraying older widows as passive recipients of support (Lopata 1996; O'Bryant and Hansson 1996).

Social support is traditionally viewed as assisting the transition of later life widowhood and positive experiences of social relations can be seen to facilitate adaptation (Antonucci *et al.* 2002). Studies have found that the renegotiation of social relationships (Barnes and Parry 2004), including family roles and practices, takes place (Ray 2000) as families evolve (Finch 2007; James and Curtis 2010), although this seems to depend on the history and quality of relationships with kin (Allan 1996). In addition, emotional support from friends has been found to assist in the role transition from being married to being single (Morgan, Carder and Neal 1997), and often such friends are described as 'like family' (Blieszner 2006). However, the widowed may find it easier to form friendships with other single people rather than continue friendships with couples (Allan 1996).

The individual consequences of widowhood are complex and may depend on factors such as gender and culture (Carr and Utz 2002), as well as skills and approaches developed over the lifecourse (Chambers 2005; Stevens 1995). Previous experience of a transition and the inclination to be self-sufficient are also thought to assist in adaptation (Rhee 2006; Sugarman 2001). Studies suggest that taking an active, positive approach rather than a passive, negative approach during the change process is beneficial, and that adaptation, change and growth are possible throughout the lifecourse (Barnes and Parry 2004; Blair 2000). Continuity theory suggests that general patterns and habits contribute to a constant sense of self (Atchley 1999; Craib 1998; Ha 2008; Hannam 1997; Jamieson and Victor 2002; Nutman-Shwartz 2008) and transitions are easier if individuals take a part of the past with them into the here and now (Bridges 2003). However, the theory has been criticised for not taking into account discontinuity and change in addition to continuity and stability (Becker 1993). Moreover, engagement in familiar occupations and routines has been found to facilitate adaptation during widowhood and other transitions related to later life (Donnelly and Hinterlong 2009; Howie 2002; Ludwig 1997; Lysack and Seipke 2002).

The personal change associated with later life widowhood can have positive as well as negative consequences (Matthews 1991). Following a period of bereavement, most widows start to rebuild their social lives and establish a new identity (Lieberman 1996). Widowhood then can be a period of growth, development and liberation, resulting in new friends and social activities in the remaining years of life (Carr 2004; Chambers 2005; Davidson 2002; Hurd 1999) in contrast to the responsibility of providing care to an ageing spouse experienced by many older women (Davidson 2001a).

### *Exploring transition through Christmas and Christmas cards*

Christmas celebrations and the exchange of Christmas cards may offer a further means of exploring the qualitative aspects of transition and personal communities: 'people's significant personal relationships' (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 45). Celebrations such as Christmas are not only 'ritual performances' but also social resources as family and friends are brought together 'routinely' once a year, giving people the opportunity to reinforce kinship ties (Allan 1996; Allan, Hawker and Crow 2008; Bytheway 2005). Women have traditionally been at the centre of family celebrations such as Christmas (Kuper 2001), including sending the cards, buying the gifts and meal preparation (Searle-Chatterjee 2001). In addition, women can be seen as 'kin keepers', particularly when changes in family rituals such as

Christmas have to be re-negotiated (Pett, Lang and Gander 1992). For example, Shordike and Pierce (2005) found that it was important to older women and their families to continue holding the Christmas meal in the 'matriarchal' home even if they did not cook the Christmas meal themselves.

Christmas celebrations may also reveal changes in social relationships (Searle-Chatterjee 2001), for example, research conducted in the USA has found the transition of late life divorce to have an impact on family practices (Pett, Lang and Gander 1992). According to Cartledgehayes (2003), the grief of widowhood may be exacerbated over the Christmas period by the pressure to participate in and maintain former family rituals. Indeed flexibility and personal choice has been found to be more useful to adaptation and discontinuity (Ludwig 1997; Shordike and Pierce 2005). This may be difficult during the Christmas period when pressure to conform to a celebration with family, as in the past, is high (Kuper 2001; Searle-Chatterjee 2001). Moreover, family relationships and practices may be further complicated in contemporary society by practical considerations such as the increase in geographical dispersal of family members (Allan 2008; Chambers *et al.* 2009; Hareven 2000). For example, as families evolve it becomes more difficult to decide whose family to spend Christmas day with which can lead to tension, although this is often resolved through alternating (Kuper 2001).

Christmas cards can be seen as emblems of Christmas, they are also a means of maintaining social relations, particularly with geographically dispersed network members (Allan 1996). In addition, North American research suggests that receiving Christmas cards, particularly from long-distance friends, has a positive effect on self-esteem and happiness (*Medical News Today* 2003). Across the world many people send Christmas cards to their family and friends, and in the United Kingdom (UK) the post office handles over seven hundred million cards in the weeks leading up to Christmas (Royal Mail 2010). In addition, the exchange of Christmas cards may be relevant to the discussion of social convoys (Allan 2006; Allan and Jones 2003) as 'the custom ensures that people retain scattered links as potential resources for the future and as links with the past' (Searle-Chatterjee 2001: 177). Social bonds with friends in particular are often reinforced through the annual exchange of Christmas cards (Allan 1996; Allan and Jones 2003; Finchum 2005), often including a letter (Hill and Dunbar 2003). Although studies have found older friendships to provide continuity during later life, according to Allan and Adams (2007), there remains a lack of longitudinal research exploring friendships over the lifecourse and examining the role of friendship networks in affirming identity and managing life events such as later life widowhood.

In contrast to Christmas cards, which may be sent to many, including geographically dispersed ties, the exchange of Christmas gifts is confined to a smaller circle of actively supportive ties (Waits 1994). These generally include close family and friends, indicating the special value of these relationships and reinforcing these bonds (Searle-Chatterjee 2001). It has been suggested that children symbolise generational links and ease family tensions during celebrations such as Christmas; and are also the focus of gift giving (Searle-Chatterjee 2001). Although industrialisation coupled with urbanisation has all but extinguished the custom of exchanging handmade gifts, it has been suggested that gifts for loved ones are 'decommoditized' through meticulous wrapping and embellishment to make them appear more unique and special (Searle-Chatterjee 2001: 184).

It seems, in the West at least, that Christmas remains a very symbolic time, entrenched in ritual and tradition. However, the few studies that have examined the ritual of Christmas and the exchange of Christmas cards in the context of transition have been conducted in the USA (Pett, Lang and Gander 1992). This study uses Christmas and Christmas cards as discursive tools over a period of time in order to capture change during later life widowhood in the British context.

## **Methodology and methods**

### *Study design*

This research adopts a multi-method approach and a longitudinal design within a qualitative framework of subtle realism (Mays and Pope 2000). The knowledge claims associated with subtle realism recognise the existence of an underlying solitary reality, in this case later life widowhood. However, the approach also acknowledges that individuals have different experiences and perceptions of that reality (Finlay and Ballinger 2006; Walliman 2006). Alternative qualitative perspectives were considered when designing this research, including the narrative approach, however this approach was not deemed to be as appropriate as subtle realism for a number of reasons. A narrative approach is concerned with revealing perspectives through individuals telling stories of their lives. It is often adopted in life history research (Bryman 2001). For example, Chambers (2005) adopted a feminist, biographical approach which revealed 'multiple narratives' of later life widowhood. However, the narrative approach has been criticised for its focus on 'form' rather than on 'real' events (Silverman 2000). Furthermore, this research is interested in understanding the process of transition as it is happening rather than gaining a retrospective view of later life widowhood.

The approach of subtle realism advocates prolonged engagement with participants (Angen 2000); this can be seen to increase the validity of qualitative research (Creswell 2003). Recent qualitative studies of later life widowhood conducted in Britain, such as Chambers (2005) and Davidson (2002), have largely employed a retrospective rather than a longitudinal approach (Carr and Utz 2002). This study employs a longitudinal design as it is concerned with the transition of widowhood and what happens after a period of bereavement. The longitudinal approach adopted in this study captures unfolding events over time (Bryman 2001; Vaus 2001) and provides an insight into the process of transition as it is happening (Charania and Ickes 2006; Ray 2000).

The older widows' lived experiences and subjective meanings of their transition are explored through a series of three in-depth interviews conducted over 18 months (Chambers 2005; Hockey and James 2003; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). In addition, the second (six months later) and third (after a further 12 months) interviews employed Christmas and Christmas cards as discursive tools in order to reveal individual experiences and social relations in a more fluid sense (Plummer 2001). Moreover, the discussion of Christmas and Christmas cards allows for the further exploration of the older widows' family practices (Chambers *et al.* 2009; Morgan 1996) and social convoys (Allan 2006) during transition.

The interviews conducted in this study follow a semi-structured format (Patton 2002), in that interview schedules were designed and worded in order to establish rapport and address the research questions of concern in an open and flexible manner (Silverman 2006). For example, questions asked during the first part of the initial interview included: Can you tell me a little about yourself? How has your life changed since being widowed? The rationale for including these questions was to generate background information and context for the women's experiences of transition. Questions asked later on in the initial interview included: Can you tell me about the people that are important to you, such as family, friends and neighbours? Are you closer to some more than others? The rationale for including these questions was to explore the qualitative aspects of the women's social relationships.

Informed consent was gained with all of the women and the project, how the data would be used, the right to withdraw at any time and the assurance of anonymity were explained in full (Vaus 2001). Pilot interviews were conducted with four older widowed women, who did not take part in the main study, to ensure that the initial interview schedule acted as an appropriate data collection tool, this can be seen to increase reliability (Silverman 2006; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

### *Sample*

Interviews were conducted with an opportunistic purposive sample of 26 older widows in the area of North Staffordshire, UK. This area comprises both urban and rural communities. A purposive sample consists of 'information-rich cases' selected for in-depth study (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009: 173): in this case older women who had been widowed between one and three years experiencing the transitional phase of widowhood (Bankoff 1983). At the time of the first interview the women were aged between 62 and 90, this age range incorporated both the 'young-old' and 'old-old' (Litwin and Landau 2000).

The type of purposive sampling used in this study was opportunistic as the older widows were eventually accessed on a voluntary basis via a newspaper article, organisations for older people, and through family and friends. One of the strengths of this sample is that the women came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Employing a combination of strategies, including the use of gatekeepers, snowballing and advertising, led ultimately to a more diverse sample (Sixsmith, Boneham and Goldring 2003). In addition to the strengths of the sample, the limitations include that the women had been widowed for different periods of time and were at various ages when widowed. It is recognised that such factors may have had an impact on the management of transition in addition to the women's social relations. However, as this study is concerned with the transition *of* rather than *to* widowhood, this is less of an issue, as the focus of the study was not on the women being at the same stage of transition. Indeed as the sampling in this study was opportunistic, it was dependent on the older widows who responded.

### *Analysis*

The researcher chose to undertake transcription as this can be seen as the beginning of interpretive analysis (Bird 2005; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). In addition, field notes and a reflective diary were kept throughout the course of the study in order to record the context of the interviews, the non-verbal communication of the participants, as well as the researcher's own thoughts and feelings (Chambers 2005; Finlay and Ballinger 2006; Rose and Webb 1998). The diary and field notes were drawn upon and contributed to the ethical considerations of this study as well as the analysis of the women's interview transcripts. It was decided not to return the transcripts to the women due to the sensitive nature of the material, involving bereavement and family relationships, which may have caused emotional distress to the women, and also to their families in the event of their death.



Although 'member checking' is thought to increase the internal validity and credibility of research (Finlay 2006), this was outweighed by the need to adhere to the ethical principle of non-maleficence, to do no harm (Gilhooly 2002).

Data analysis of the interview transcripts in this study involved the use of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis identifies patterns and themes as well as contrasts (Braun and Clarke 2006; Coffey and Atkinson 1996). As a method thematic analysis can be realist, reflecting the experience and reality of interviewees, and constructionist, identifying the effects of societal discourse on interviewees' experience and meaning making. In addition, it can operate between the two as a contextualist method, underpinned by theories such as critical realism (Braun and Clarke 2006). The method used in this study is contextualist as it is consistent with the subtle or critical realist approach. In addition, the thematic analysis adopted in this study takes an inductive approach, in that the themes identified were soundly linked to the data. Data analysis of the interview transcripts drew on a grounded theory perspective (Bowen 2008), the transcripts were read and re-read, 'open coded', 'categories generated' and 'key issues' conceptualised (Burnard 1996: 279).

The NVIVO qualitative data analysis software was also used to assist in the analysis of the interview data (Bazeley 2007; Lewins and Silver 2007), as the three stages of interviews generated a vast amount of detailed material. On completion of the second interviews, using a recursive and iterative approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009), the researcher conducted a preliminary analysis of a subset of the first and second interviews and referred back to the research questions as well as the existing literature prior to further data collection. Originally, the plan had been to conduct a series of three interviews at six-monthly intervals. However, after conducting the second interviews it became apparent that Christmas was a particularly significant and telling time in the change process. Therefore rather than returning to interview the women after six months, the decision was made to wait and re-interview them after 12 months. This allowed for a further exploration of the impact of change on the women's family practices and social convoys.

Following completion of the third stage of interviews a subset of the women's transcriptions were coded, an example of an initial node included 'active participant'. Codes were then clustered and categorised into tree nodes, an example of a tree node included 'personal identity'. Following this, major thematic categories were developed with sub-codes, an example of a major thematic category included 'process of change'. This process was then repeated with the remaining women's transcriptions with codes being added as necessary, until no new codes were generated and the conceptual

themes began to be repeated (Bowen 2008). Following this, a refined list of conceptual themes was developed, which included 'remembering the past, looking to the future'.

## Findings

The findings from the women's discussion of their Christmas celebrations and their Christmas cards include aspects of continuity and discontinuity. The importance of continuity, social relations and autonomy is situated in three emergent themes: 'Family, intergenerational ties and tradition', 'Friendships, organisational ties and reciprocity' and 'Personal continuity and activation'. The significance of discontinuity, change and mediation is illustrated through three emergent themes: 'Christmas as a catalyst for change', 'We are all widows' and 'Negotiating change with others'.

### *Continuity, social relations and autonomy*

The women's experiences illustrate that Christmas is a potent marker in the change process as it evokes thoughts of the past, present and future. In addition, some of the women had lost their family members over the Christmas period itself and this was a particularly poignant time for them. Visiting the resting place of loved ones appears to be a crucial part of remembering, especially at this time of year. For some of the women this also provides a sense of personal satisfaction and the fulfilment of a normative obligation, particularly over the Christmas period. As Veronica explained during the third interview:

There are some days, and I felt this very recently more than ever, er even though it's four years. But some days I cannot rest until I've been down to the crem, to the grave ... but I feel like I've done my duty.

The home environment can also reflect an engagement with the past through other significant symbols. Molly, who lost her husband at Christmas, demonstrated her remembrance by framing and hanging a portrait of her and her husband on their wedding day. She described this during the second interview:

I put it up just before, two days before Christmas I think, in fact if I'm not mistaken it was the day he died as I had that, that I got that done and I put it up at Christmas.

A year had passed before Molly felt able to display this cherished photograph without becoming too distressed. This honouring of the past and taking a part of it forward into the future demonstrates a form of continuity and seems to be integral to the process of transition.

## **Family, intergenerational ties and tradition**

The older widows' experiences of Christmas are largely affirming. Many of the women gave accounts of a very special time of year, where close family ties and their kinship roles were positively reinforced, helping to ease their transition. As well as reinforcing relationships with existing family members, Christmas gatherings also provide an opportunity to meet new additions to growing families, such as grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The tradition of a 'family' Christmas itself can provide a sense of comfort and place in the world during the uncertainty of transition. For many of the women, reinforcing kinship ties around the Christmas period is customary in their immediate and extended families. Gloria, for example, talked about the special qualities of family, including her immediate kin and the adult children of her deceased partner, as she discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview:

Your families do mean a lot to you don't they? But we've had a big family haven't we? There's been ten children you see in my family, but it makes a difference, and at Christmas time, you all keep in touch with each other, even if you don't see each other for a year.

In addition to spending Christmas Day with family, being involved in the preparations leading up to the event is apparent. Continuing to contribute in some way to the Christmas meal preparation itself is important to many of the women, even if the celebrations no longer take place in their own home. Providing a sense of continuity for family members can also be seen as an important influence. During the second interview, Molly talked purposefully about her commitment to her central kinship roles of mother and grandmother even as she was grieving:

I put all me decorations up, but I wasn't even going to do that, but I thought 'No I'll put them up for the children', I decorated everywhere because of the baby ... when he came in he couldn't believe his eyes, because I have this one that hangs from the ceiling. Well my daughter's 42 and I've had them since she was born.

The special qualities of intergenerational ties were apparent for many of the older widows. For example, many of the women were thrilled to receive handmade cards from the small children in their families. In several of the women's accounts children appear to embody family continuity and lineage and this seems particularly pertinent over the Christmas period, as it is often viewed as a special time for younger family members. Moreover, Christmas also appears to be a significant time for passing on cherished family items to the next generation. Megan, for example, during the second

interview talked about mementos she had recently come across and given to her adult son:

I've just taken a box of cards round to Andrew this morning . . . they are cards of happy birthday one year old, two years old, three years old, up to six I think, and I had them in this old broken-down box, er which was a Christmas card box . . . well he's 51 now. So I took them round and he said 'Oh mum, you wouldn't throw those', so I said 'Well, I thought that I would bring them round, I couldn't throw them away'.

This organising or 'putting things in order' appears to be an essential part of the moving on process for many of the older women, with valued possessions from the past being handed down the line and entrusted to future generations.

### **Friendships, organisational ties and reciprocity**

The continuity of friendships is also apparent over the Christmas period, with friends featuring in the celebrations of some of the older widows, and in the exchange of cards of many of the older widows. Many of the women's Christmas cards reveal the cyclical reinforcement of friendships made over the years. These ties are considered important and seem to maintain a link to past enjoyable times. In contrast to the loss experienced in widowhood, the discussion of Christmas cards also revealed a renewing of friendships during this time.

Spending Christmas with family was not an option for some of the women for a variety of reasons. Often on these occasions friendships came to the fore. Close friends were on hand the first Christmas of Molly's bereavement, providing emotional support when her family were unable to. She described her experience during the second interview:

The phone went and Alan came upstairs, he said 'It's May mum, she wants you to go over there', and the doctor said 'That's the best thing you can do, just get out of the house because nothing's going to happen'. Me son had registered him, we'd got the undertaker, there was nothing else we could do because it was Christmas and New Year, and the doctor said 'You go to Scotland, to your friends', because me family couldn't get on with their grieving because of me.

Similarly for Moira, the close friendships she and her husband enjoyed during their married life continue into widowhood and are apparent over the Christmas period, as she explained during the second interview:

Well Christmas Eve I went out with the six friends who I normally go out with and we had a lovely night . . . I went out New Years Eve, we went to the pub again (laughs), we all got together and we had a great night . . . I think New Years Eve was the best night, I didn't think I was going to enjoy it, I wasn't sure if I wanted to go out or not . . . and I did enjoy it.

Long-standing neighbourhood friends can also provide a source of continuity. Beverly's cards and visits from her neighbours have not only continued into widowhood but have also prevailed during the more recent transition of moving house. As well as family and friends, the importance of continuous ties with organisations, such as voluntary agencies and the Church, was also apparent for many of the older widows as they discussed Christmas and their cards. These associations ranged from the relatively superficial to being more 'friend-like' in nature. For Veronica, who is childless, attending various churches and associating with different people has led to the formation of some supportive friendships in widowhood, providing local support in the absence of family.

Reciprocity, particularly in the form of card exchange, is customary over the Christmas period. In addition, mutual support and the exchange of gifts, especially with close members of personal communities, are apparent in the accounts of many of the older widows. For example, Patricia, during the early days of widowhood, talked about the mutually supportive relationship she has with her close friends who live nearby:

Well Enid and Arnold are good to me. I went to the mini-fair, and there was food left over and that so I brought, paid for them. And then they grow tomatoes and kidney beans and things and they give them to me. We help one another . . . I went there Boxing Day last year, and they came here the year before to tea.

In addition to receiving support, actively giving support and making a valued contribution to personal communities also appears to be important to successful adaptation during later life widowhood.

### **Personal continuity and activation**

Personal involvement then, alongside social relations, appears to be an essential facet of positive adjustment in widowhood. As the women discussed Christmas and their cards, many of them talked about the importance of having a sense of autonomy alongside the supportive ties of family, friends and others. This personal activation or 'getting on with things' often reflects the women's development and experiences over the lifecourse. Gloria, for example, after losing her second long-term life partner, drew on her prior experience of being widowed as a younger woman.

The family practices and earlier careers of the older widows can also have a bearing on their approach to widowhood in later life. Doreen, for example, reflected on her attitude during the early days of widowhood:

Actually, I think being a nurse I am used to being involved with death and in my family we are always involved with relatives' deaths, so you mourn and you grieve but at the

end of the day he wouldn't want us to be sad and holding ourselves back because we just aren't that kind of family anyway.

Rather than be on her own, Veronica, who was not invited to her family's Christmas celebrations, explained during the second interview how she took the initiative and created her own special day:

I thought to myself 'Well I'm going to have to spend Christmas on my own then', and I thought 'Well you are not Veronica, because you can invite people'. I invited two friends, who live just at the back here and go to church . . . I wasn't moping, thinking 'Oh nobody wants me', I sort of made an effort.

Veronica was able to draw on her own determination as well as her personal community in order to avoid isolation over the festive period. Reciprocal relationships with friends coupled with an independent outlook enable her to manage her transition effectively despite having limited family.

### *Discontinuity, change and mediation*

Christmas is a time to remember the past, however, it also signifies looking to the future and moving on. As we saw earlier, visiting the resting place of loved ones is particularly prevalent over the Christmas period. However, for women such as Beverly, who continues to visit the cemetery, especially at significant times of the year, it is not a necessary duty as she explained during the third interview:

I go up Christmas and put a wreath on. But I don't think you need to go to the cemetery because there's always something you do during the day when you think about them, that's how I look at it, that's my philosophy anyway. Yeah I think you should go forward not back . . .

Despite the Christmas period being a difficult time for Molly, as she lost her husband around this time, she also talked positively during the third interview about upcoming excursions with her new associations, including the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS):

Oh I shall definitely be going away, I like to do things on the spur of the moment. Somebody from the WRVS has gone to Torquay this week, to look a place out.

Special days of the year, such as Christmas, appear not only to be a reference point for remembering the past, but also a catalyst for new beginnings and looking ahead to the future, particularly later on in widowhood.

### *Christmas as a catalyst for change*

The Christmas and New Year period seemed to signify personal change for many of the women, motivating an engagement in new activities or a change in approach to long-established practices. Molly, whose husband died just

before Christmas, talked enthusiastically about the development of a new and very different interest for her during the third interview: a craft class making Christmas cards. This marked a significant change for Molly, who had relied on her family to write cards for her the first Christmas following her bereavement, as her husband previously wrote the Christmas cards. In addition to starting a new hobby, Christmas also seemed to motivate Molly into signing up for some voluntary work with a charitable organisation:

Well I just got up one day . . . and did it, just before Christmas I rung Age Concern, they said 'We'll leave it until after Christmas now because of the Christmas holiday'. I went on the 4th of January and filled everything out.

Some of the women, especially those who had been widowed for a longer period of time, demonstrated discontinuity by choosing to spend Christmas away from their families and homes. Marilyn's Christmas during the early days of widowhood appeared to be a novel and separate event in contrast to the mundane routine of the rest of the year. As she described during the second interview:

Well Christmas Day I went my son's for a Christmas meal, you know, all of us, stayed there Christmas Day. Then New Years Eve we went to a friend's, because you've got to see the New Year in haven't you? And er then it's back to normal, boring things.

As Marilyn has two adult children she explained how Christmas Day is celebrated between the two families: 'Like this year we're going to Gill's all day on Christmas Day, so they take it in turns'. However, during the third interview, Marilyn talked about spending a different Christmas, from the usual celebrations with her adult son and daughter, away with her widowed friend:

I went with me friend and her sister and her husband, and two more friends of hers, and we had a great time. The hotel was lovely and the food was excellent . . . Her husband died on the 28th of December . . . you know, so it was Christmas time when he died, so she was glad really to be away from home. . .

In contrast to her restricted social life during the early days of widowhood, which may be due in part to her having been the main carer for her husband for several years, Marilyn has developed her confidence along with her wider ties and activities, relying less on her adult children. Change and discontinuity is apparent then, in many of the older widows' activities, routines and family practices. This indicates not only their adjustment during widowhood, but also a new found freedom and sense of personal fulfilment as older women in the later stages of life.

### *We're all widows*

Later life widowhood can lead to an increased identification and solidarity with female friends and family members. Moreover, as the women talked

about their experiences of Christmas and discussed their cards, many of them made reference to other older widows. Minnie described how she has formed a closer friendship with another older widow, whom she was able to spend time with over the Christmas period. This was particularly helpful for Minnie as she only has one adult son who lives in the south of England:

I've got a friend Irene, she lost her husband. We've sort of struck a friendship up, from when we met in the cemetery, her husband and my husband used to play football together . . . and we did go away together at Christmas, and I say to Irene, 'Irene we mustn't forget we were the same', you know.

Beatrice also demonstrated the strong alliance she has with her friends, who are also older widows, as she discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview:

'Friendship is a precious gift' which it is, and the words in that are really nice, which is a lovely card to get. That's Beryl she's another one, she is the third one, and I'm the fourth, the four widows.

During the third interview, Beatrice also described inviting a recently widowed friend on a short break over the Christmas period, with her and her other widowed friends:

Oh I went to Southport . . . so I asked Bella . . . because she's on her own the same as us, she will never have anybody else the same as us (laughs) so we went to Southport for the weekend and that was brilliant.

Beatrice makes it clear that she and her four close friends, who she calls the 'merry widows', are out to enjoy each other's company rather than to meet male companions. Indeed Bella is included in the group as she shares this sentiment as an older widow. A commonality of later life widowhood is apparent then for many of the older women, indicating a shift in personal identity and demonstrating shared values, mutual support and socialisation with others in a similar position.

### *Negotiating change with others*

The mediation of family practices with loved ones is apparent for the women who decided to spend a different Christmas away from home. Rather than making an autonomous decision regarding a shift in Christmas celebrations, many of the women consulted their adult children beforehand. Molly, for example, during the third interview described the discussion she had with her son and daughter prior to going away for Christmas with the WRVS:

Christmas they'd got a what's it up to Blackpool . . . and er they asked me did I want to go . . . and er I said 'Well I really don't know whether I want to go or not' er . . . I said 'I'll ring me daughter and I'll ring me son and see what they say', they said 'Well go for



it mum', because they've got lives of their own, 'Go for it', so I went to Blackpool for Christmas.

Molly was able to successfully negotiate a change in family practice with her adult children. It may have been especially important for Molly to have this approval due to her previously having hosted the Christmas Day meal in the family home for a number of years.

Negotiation is also evident when Christmas is spent with the same family members but takes place in another home. Although Doreen had been invited by her adult daughter to spend Christmas in her home once she was widowed, this had been resisted in the early days by one of her adult sons. However, Doreen and the rest of her family were able to agree to spend Christmas together at a different location and the New Year's celebrations in the matriarchal home, as she explained during the third interview:

We've thought about it before but we've never actually done it . . . and er, I think it's mainly because of the bachelor son, but he actually came for New Year but he said 'Oh yeah it's a good idea' . . . so that was, but we were still all together which was nice.

Family members then, in addition to the older widows, have to be willing to let go of the 'old ways'. The re-negotiation of family practices involves dialogue between older widows and their families, and also the inclination to be versatile and receptive regarding changes during transition.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

### *Discussion*

This paper has located the process and meaning of transition through themes derived from older widow's experiences of Christmas. Christmas as a reference point demonstrates a remembering of the past but also a looking to the future. Although the findings further illustrate the positive aspects of continuity (Atchley 1999), they also challenge the negative connotations of discontinuity in later life (Becker 1993).

The women's accounts of their Christmas celebrations largely feature their families and the reinforcement of these kinship ties (Allan 1996). Family continuity, including sustained family practices and established roles, appears to ease transition by confirming social belonging (Kuper 2001; Searle-Chatterjee 2001; Shordike and Pierce 2005). Most of the older widows in this study spent Christmas Day with their immediate family, demonstrating the continued importance of the Christmas meal as a family practice (Allan, Hawker and Crow 2008). Remaining central to the Christmas celebrations appeared to positively reaffirm the majority of the women's self as well as family identities during transition (Kuper 2001;

Shordike and Pierce 2005; Wright-St Clair *et al.* 2005). Moreover, many of the older widows provided family continuity through conveying values and passing on belongings from generation to generation (Hunter 2008).

Intergenerational ties with children were particularly important to the older widows, many delighted in the hand-made cards they received and the ritual opening of presents with grandchildren and great-grandchildren (Searle-Chatterjee 2001). The findings also illustrate that the celebration brings together dispersed kin and eases tensions within families (Allan 2008; Chambers *et al.* 2009). These ties and the tradition of a family Christmas appear to 'ground' older widows during a time of uncertainty (Hannam 1997). These established patterns can often be traced back over the lifecourse to the older women's own childhood experiences (Ludwig 1997; McIntyre and Howie 2002).

The continuity of friendships developed over the lifecourse feature strongly in the women's discussion of their Christmas cards (Finchum 2005), and very often these ties were described as 'more like family' (Bliesner 2006). These findings also support the concept of social convoys (Allan 2006; Searle-Chatterjee 2001) and demonstrate the importance of friendship networks in affirming identity and managing life events (Allan and Adams 2007). Indeed friends replace family for some of the women with limited kin. In addition, many of the women's Christmas cards demonstrate a renewal of old friendships as well as the development of new friendships in widowhood (Finchum 2005). Previous partnered friends also endure throughout widowhood. This challenges the proposition that the widowed may find it easier to form friendships with other single people rather than continue friendships with couples (Allan 1996). Neighbourhood friendships also continue, even when a widow has left the original neighbourhood; these findings challenge previous studies, which tend to focus on the negative aspects of moving residence in later life widowhood (Lopata 1996).

Personal continuity is apparent in the findings of this study, alongside family and also out of necessity when family members are absent. Often this independence reflects the women's earlier life experiences (Jamieson and Victor 2002) and illustrates the importance of skills developed over the lifecourse (Chambers 2005). The findings also support the assertion that although social identities may be transient, personal identity is constant and dynamic (Craib 1998). For many of the women, engaging in patterns of behaviour developed over the lifecourse appeared to ease their transition (Atchley 1999; Bridges 2003; Ha 2008; Nutman-Shwartz 2008; Stevens 1995). This supports the suggestion that previous experience of a transition, as well as the inclination to be self-sufficient, assists adaptation (Sugarman 2001).

A commonality of widowhood is, however, apparent in this study's demonstration of a shift in personal identity and also shared values and mutual support with those in a similar position (Allan 2006; Barnes and Parry 2004). The findings also concur with those of Morgan, Carder and Neal (1997) who found that the recently widowed women in their North American sample increased their ties with other widows. However, the findings of this study also indicate the provision of support, particularly later on in widowhood, to other older widows. This reciprocity is lacking in the existing types of social support previously identified in the widowhood literature, which tend to focus on the receipt rather than on the provision of support (Lopata 1996; O'Bryant and Hansson 1996).

The women's re-arrangement of family, and indeed friendship, practices over the Christmas period is a telling indicator of change (Becker 1993). These findings concur with previous studies, which have found transitions to have an influence on family rituals (Pett, Lang and Gander 1992). Changes in family practices over the Christmas period (Kuper 2001; Searle-Chatterjee 2001), such as going away with friends, appear to be facilitated by the women's personal communities, including friendships with other older widows (Morgan, Carder and Neal 1997). Instigating a change in family practices around Christmas demonstrates the older widows' confidence and ability to make independent choices. This further indicates not only their adjustment to widowhood but also their personal fulfilment as older women in later life (Chambers 2005; Davidson 2002; Hurd 1999). These findings further challenge much of the earlier widowhood literature, which focuses on discontinuity as a negative aspect of the transition.

The findings of this study also illustrate that mediation between the older widows and their loved ones is common when discontinuity occurs (Becker 1993). This flexibility appears to be useful during the change process (Ludwig 1997; Shordike and Pierce 2005) and also demonstrates the women's roles as 'kin keepers' during transition (Pett, Lang and Gander 1992). However, family members as well as the older widows have to be able to let go of the old ways of 'doing family' (Finch 2007; James and Curtis 2010) and this seems to depend on the history and quality of relationships with kin (Allan 1996). This supports earlier literature, which suggests that families as well as individuals evolve and develop throughout the lifecourse (Allan and Jones 2003; Spencer and Pahl 2006) and that the family should be seen as a process rather than as a fixed arrangement (Allan 2008; Hareven 2000). These findings point to the increased agency and flexibility within families, which is now more common in contemporary relationships (Allan 2006, 2008; Chambers *et al.* 2009; Ray 2000). These positive experiences of social relations can be seen to facilitate adaptation during later life widowhood (Antonucci *et al.* 2002).

The women's experiences of Christmas expose the deeper meanings of social relationships during transition and confirm that social practices are an important means of studying family relationships and uncovering wider social relations and convoys (Morgan 1996; Searle-Chatterjee 2001). These findings further illustrate the heterogeneity of the women's experiences and add to the existing British literature pertaining to family practices in later life (Chambers *et al.* 2009; Finch 2007).

### *Limitations*

In addition to the strengths of this research, the limitations and restrictions are also acknowledged. First, the findings only represent the sample of *White British women* who took part in this study and therefore generalisations are limited (Spencer and Pahl 2006). However, as the sampling in this study was opportunistic, it was dependent on the older widows who responded. Second, it could be argued that this study's focus on the 'novel' experience of *Christmas* may not be a typical illustration of the older widows' experiences during the rest of the year. However, due to the unfolding nature of this research, Christmas emerged as a particularly significant and telling time for the participants, in this instance Christmas can be viewed as a microcosm of the women's experiences and personal communities.

Future work incorporating different groups in different contexts is recommended in order to expand and develop the findings of this research. This could include a longitudinal study of the personal communities of older widowed men in order to explore gender similarities and differences during transition. Existing widowhood research has examined gender differences in terms of partnership choice (Davidson 2001a) and psychological adjustment (Bennett 1998; Davidson 2001b). However, there remains a lack of qualitative research exploring gender differences in terms of the types and characteristics of social relationships and support during the transition (Collins 2011).

### *Conclusions*

This research makes a significant contribution to social gerontology in terms of understanding the transition of widowhood in later life, including aspects of continuity and discontinuity. Rather than focusing on the problematic aspects of later life widowhood, the findings add to the growing body of research indicating the positive aspects of the transition and managing discontinuity and change (Becker 1993; Chambers 2005; Matthews 1991). Although earlier retrospective studies recognise some diversity in the experience of being an older widow, the findings of this longitudinal study

further illustrate the multiplicity, complexity and fluidity of personal relationships during the process of transition.

Changes in significant personal relationships are more apparent, for example, during the social ritual of Christmas, particularly as families and friendships evolve (Spencer and Pahl 2006), family members become more geographically dispersed (Chambers *et al.* 2009), and roles and practices are re-negotiated (Ray 2000). Although the death of a spouse is ranked as one of the most stressful lifecourse events (Bennett 1997; Sugarman 2001), the findings of this research illustrate that the majority of the older women in this study are practical, active and flexible in managing their social relations and lives as older widows. This paper further challenges the earlier widowhood literature that typically portrays older widows as vulnerable and passive, and as a homogenous group.

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