



Translating research findings into community based theatre: More than a dead man's wife



Susan Feldman ^{a,*}, Alan Hopgood ^b, Marissa Dickins ^c

^a Healthy Ageing Research Unit (HARU), School of Primary Health Care, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

^b Bay Street Productions, Melbourne, Australia

^c Primary Care Research Unit (PCRU), School of Primary Health Care, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 February 2012

Received in revised form 4 February 2013

Accepted 19 March 2013

Keywords:

Aging
Widowhood
Women
Health
Wellbeing
Theatre

ABSTRACT

Increasingly, qualitative scholars in health and social sciences are turning to innovative strategies as a way of translating research findings into informative, accessible and enjoyable forms for the community. The aim of this article is to describe how the research findings of a doctoral thesis – a narrative study about 58 older women's experiences of widowhood – were translated into a unique and professionally developed script to form the basis for a successful theatrical production that has travelled extensively within Australia. This article reports on the process of collaboration between a researcher, a highly regarded Australian actor/script writer and an ensemble of well-known and experienced professional actors. Together the collaborating partners translated the research data and findings about growing older and 'widowhood' into a high quality theatre production. In particular, we argue in this paper that research-based theatre is an appropriate medium for communicating research findings about important life issues of concern to older people in a safe, affirming and entertaining manner. By outlining the process of translating research findings into theatre we hope to show that there is a real value in this translation approach for both researcher and audience alike.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Reflections on Helena Lopata

A visit to Australia by Professor Helena Lopata in 1997 for a symposium on widowhood as part of the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics was a turning point for me as both a researcher and doctoral student. Working in my professional capacity at this time as a qualitative researcher with a long-established interest in older women's health and well-being had already alerted me as to how Australian women from all walks of life could expect to outlive their spouse on average by at least six years, but I had not given serious research attention to this group. Widowhood at this time was mostly conceptualized as a fixed state – 'widow' – often in stark contrast with the realities of older women's lives. Helena had

already undertaken extensive research exploring the lives of widowed women in America and during her Australian tour provided me with the inspiration and encouragement to consider the broad social, emotional and economic challenges confronting many Australian women following the death of a spouse. Helena urged me to initiate my own research, encouraging me to talk to older women, to capture their views about the personal and social significance of widowhood and in particular their experiences of life in the ensuing years.

Introduction

A preliminary scan of the Australian and international literature following discussions with Professor Lopata in 1997 indicated that despite the numbers of older women within the world's population outliving their spouses, widowhood was largely uncharted territory in the research literature. Many studies that had been undertaken at that time were overwhelmingly concerned with ascertaining whether there was a

* Corresponding author at: Building 1, 270 Ferntree Gully Rd, Notting Hill 3168, Australia. Tel.: +61 3 990 24474; fax: +61 3 8575 2233.

E-mail address: Susan.Feldman@monash.edu (S. Feldman).

direct and positive correlation between declining mental and physical health and widowhood. It was also found that much of this existing research about life after the death of a spouse had been quantitative, researchers often using secondary data to investigate the psychological and health circumstances of 'widows'. Indeed, the shift from being married to being widowed had more often than not been assessed by researchers and policy analysts in terms of negative outcomes in relation to health, housing, income and care needs. Thus, the dominant view of widowhood was, at that time, fairly bleak.

The purpose of this paper therefore is two-fold. First, it details a qualitative doctoral research project investigating 58 older Australian women's experiences of widowhood. The aim of this investigation was to move beyond the preoccupation with grief, loss and other problems characteristic of much of the epidemiological literature on widowhood and instead elicit older widowed women's perspectives about their own lives. Secondly it is described how the findings of this study were translated into a unique theatrical production that explicitly set out to highlight the potential for widowhood as a positive growth experience.

This research approach allowed a unique perspective to emerge about widowhood and a better understanding of the experience as an involuntary breach in the established social order that leads to transformation and reconstruction of selfhood. The findings of this investigation highlighted how older women are confronted with a range of challenges in order to re-establish their roles and relationships with community and family as they negotiate the transition from wife to widowhood.

From the reading of the literature, it was clear that there was a statistical correlation between declining mental and physical health and widowhood, but as the research progressed, it was found that there was a lot more to learn about widowhood than a state of prolonged bereavement and loss, or compromised physical health. What was confirmed during the research was that widowhood was a complex process that could not conveniently be reduced to simple health outcomes. There was much more to the research story than had previously been anticipated and this observation provoked an initial revision of the original methodological approach which very simply involved a priority setting process in order to identify salient issues and themes generated by the data.

Instead, additional analytical strategies were formulated – namely 'narrative analysis.' It was ascertained that this technique would assist to temporarily direct research attention away from content alone, towards the more expansive analytic task of examining how older women in groups talked about their lives and by doing so gave meaning to it within the context of the stories they told. It was through this added approach that a dialogic interchange could be initiated between groups of widowed women (and the researcher) so that together they could explore the many dimensions that comprise the women's life world. In the end this approach generated new knowledge about the personal and social significance of widowhood. What follows in this paper is a brief discussion of the results of the research before explaining the process of translating these findings into a successful and ongoing theatrical performance.

Background literature review

At the time of the completion of the research study under discussion in 2005 (see [Feldman, 2005](#)) the most recent census data revealed that women comprised just over half (56%; 2,383,563) of individuals aged 65 and over in Australia, and of these, nearly one-quarter was widowed ([ABS, 2001](#)). By comparison, only one in ten men in the same age group was widowed, indicating that almost two-thirds of all widowed people over the age of 65 were women ([ABS, 2001](#)). More recent data indicates that although the gap between men and women's longevity has closed ([ABS, 2011](#)), widowhood clearly remains, and is expected to remain, a common experience in the life course of older women. In addition, the literature beyond the biomedical sciences indicated that for most women, marriage has been one, if not the most important way of defining who they are, what they do, and their place in the world ([Arber, Price, Davidson, & Perren, 2003](#)). As [Davidson \(1999\)](#) suggests, the death of a spouse can lead to loss of "a sense of biographic continuity" (p. 15). According to other writers, the necessity of coming to terms with the death of a partner of many years is, for many aging women, not only an encounter with a complex array of everyday issues but may also "comprise a new and uncharted journey" that re-defines their identity ([Lieberman, 1996, p. 3](#)). For other researchers, aging and widowhood can also be approached as having potential as a reconstructive process of personal change and growth ([Friedan, 1993](#); [Heinemann, 1997](#); [Jones Porter, 1995](#); [Silverman, 1986, 1988](#)).

[Lopata's \(1973\)](#) ground-breaking study of 300 urban widows over the age of 50 years has provided a reference point for much of her subsequent work. Lopata highlighted the importance of understanding widowhood as a process of role change that varies according to interconnecting factors such as socio-economic circumstances, social mores and expectations about the roles of married women. Similarly, the women in the study also reported that they had experienced a dramatic impact on their lives in relation to the change in role from wife to widow and this was of paramount importance to them, especially in terms of social mores and expectations. Many also agreed that the subject was rarely discussed by widowed women themselves, their family or friends.

In a follow-up study of 1169 widowed women, [Lopata \(1979\)](#) examined the support systems that women develop after the death of a spouse. She concluded that, as widowed women age, they rely on informal support from a range of sources that often does not include immediate family. [Lopata \(1996, p. xiii; 2000\)](#) later reflected that the transition from married to widowed involves a shift from "the temporary role of widow" to "a pervasive identity of widowed woman" and that this shift is accompanied by a renegotiation of relationships with other people. In another early study, [Matthews \(1979\)](#) combined participant observation, intensive interviews and analysis of archival material to investigate the social worlds of seven widowed women over the age of 68 years. She concluded that the reconstructive process of self-identity is of central importance, noting that it is "in encounters with others and encounters with self" that older women seek understanding of their experiences (p. 23). In addition, researcher [Martin-Matthews \(1982, 1987, 1991\)](#) also conducted major studies of

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10513187>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10513187>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)