



“You're not getting married for the moon and the stars”: The uncertainties of older British widowers about the idea of new romantic relationships[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Older widowers are more likely to remarry than older widowed women. However, relatively little is known about the attitudes of older widowers to new romantic relationships and remarriage or repartnering. In this study of 60 widowers, more than half *spontaneously* discussed their attitudes toward, and experiences of, these relationships. However, none of the widowers had remarried and of those who described themselves as repartnered only one was cohabiting. We examine these data in the light of Lopata's concept of 'husband sanctification' (1981). We identify four themes. First, some widowers do sanctify their late wives. Second, we argue that *wife sanctification* contributes to widowers' uncertainties about repartnering. Third, when widowers make decisions to repartner, wife sanctification does not appear to make an important contribution. Finally, there is evidence to suggest that wife sanctification influences how men refer to their new women friends. Thus, we conclude by arguing that wife sanctification influences widowers' decisions surrounding remarriage/repartnering.

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Introduction

Helena Znaniecka Lopata was the first scholar to study in detail the lives of widowed women in America, writing *Widowhood in an American City* in 1973. Lopata made significant contributions to our understanding of the experiences of widows, particularly within the context of the social experiences and positions that widowed women found themselves in. Later scholars have developed much of her work. However, one of her little explored, but important legacies is 'husband sanctification' (1981). Sanctification, in this context, refers to the idealisation of a deceased husband. Lopata also pointed out that widowed women were less likely to remarry than

widowers (1996). One explanation for this is that the hypothetical second husband is not able to compete with the idealised first husband. Although Lopata wrote little herself about widowers, she was interested in what other scholars were saying about men. This special issue gives us the opportunity to apply Lopata's concept of 'husband sanctification' to widowers' views of remarriage/repartnering.¹ We extend Lopata's ideas by analyzing interviews with older British widowers. In these interviews they *spontaneously* discuss their views of remarriage. We pose three questions. Do men sanctify their wives? Does this in turn influence their decision-making in relation to remarriage/repartnering? How similar is wife sanctification, if it occurs, to 'husband sanctification'?

How do British widowers differ from widows in relation to remarriage/repartnering? Widowers are more likely to remarry than widows, and they remarry more quickly (Haskey, 1999). This pattern is consistent with that of other Western countries

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¹ In this paper we discuss remarriage and repartnering together. However, we acknowledge the work of, for example, de Jong Gierveld (2004) who has examined in more detail the choices of repartnering arrangements (remarriage, cohabitation and LAT relationships).

(Burch, 1990; Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Wu, 1994). Nevertheless, it represents only a small proportion of the total number of widowers. 2002 British figures show that 6.1/1000 of widowers aged 55 and over remarry and 1.1/1000 for widowed women (ONS, 2005). In our own study (reported here), we find that 3% of our widowers have repartnered, and none remarried. In the Changing Lives of Older Couples study in the USA, Carr (2004) found that whilst men were significantly more likely to desire remarriage or to be dating at 6 months post-loss, this difference had disappeared at 18 months. Further, the desire to remarry was rare. Why do relatively few widowers remarry or express a desire to remarry, even though scholars find that widowers are more likely to discuss the issue than women? van den Hoonaard found that repartnering was one of the first topics raised by her North American widowers (2010), and we find that men discuss repartnering significantly more often than women (Bennett, Hughes & Smith, 2003). Davidson (2002), too, found that men were more likely to talk about repartnering, but relatively few men actually wanted to do so (see also, Moore & Stratton, 2002). How can we explain this pattern of behaviour?

Lopata's notion of 'husband sanctification' offers a possible explanation for these findings (1981). Although Lopata was not the first to observe the idealisation of the deceased (see, Vernon, 1970), she was the first to explore the concept in detail. According to Lopata (1981, p. 441) 'husband sanctification' is the "social purification or reconstruction in memory" of the husband. She argued that this served a number of functions. First, it removed the husband from being the wife's critic and guide by lifting him above everyday and death-related concerns. Second, he becomes a distant and understanding observer of her life. Third, it removes him from "mortal sentiments" (p. 441): of irritations and resentments over how she conducts her daily life. Thus, it enables the widow to go about her everyday life without his interference, and gradually allows her to reconstruct her life. Finally, it increases self-esteem since if her husband was such an ideal man, she must have been a good woman and wife, because he chose and loved her. Although Lopata did not argue this herself, 'husband sanctification', therefore, might also explain why relatively few widows remarry, since new partners would be unlikely to live up to the sanctified deceased husband.

The idea that women do not remarry because their new partners might not live up to the high expectations set by the deceased husband relates to other theoretical approaches to remarriage. Both Hatch (1995) and Wu (1994) suggest that the desirability of remarriage is important. If deceased spouses are set up as the ideal, remarriage may be less desirable, since the ideal may be unachievable a second time. Hatch and Wu also discuss other factors that influence decisions including: feasibility (Hatch, 1995) or barriers to remarriage (Wu, 1994); availability of potential spouses (Hatch, 1995) or market constraints (Wu, 1994); and eligibility, whether the widowed person is, for example, young enough or attractive enough to be considered marriageable (Wu, 1994). Two of these factors also relate to 'husband sanctification'. First, if potential husbands do not live up to the idealised deceased spouse then this is a barrier to remarriage (Wu, 1994). Second, Wu also identifies eligibility, both in terms of physical and non-physical attractiveness, as a factor in remarriage decisions. Although he suggests that the person considering remarriage may not be eligible, it may also be the case that

the prospective spouse is not eligible. This would support 'husband sanctification': prospective husbands may not be as eligible when compared to the sanctified husband.

So far in this introduction we have focused on widows or on remarriage/repartnering in general, but have not considered in detail the case of widowers. Specifically, can we apply 'husband sanctification' to deceased wives? There seem to be few theoretical reasons why 'husband sanctification' cannot be applied to widowers, and thus, become wife sanctification. It may be beneficial for husbands to raise their wives above everyday concerns to become an understanding observer without moral sentiments because it allows widowers to carry on with their everyday lives without worrying about what their wife would have thought. It may also support a widower's self-esteem, since he was good enough to have married this wonderful woman. We will examine this theoretical position empirically in this paper. At the same time, previous research highlights differences between widows and widowers in the context of remarriage/repartnering. First, widowers are more likely than widows to remarry, even if the proportions doing so are small (Haskey, 1999; ONS, 2005). Second, widowers discuss and consider remarriage/repartnering more frequently than do women (Carr, 2004; Davidson, 2002). Third, widowers both in our study and in that of van den Hoonaard spoke spontaneously of these issues, and in the case of van den Hoonaard's research, as one of the first issues men raised (Bennett et al., 2003; van den Hoonaard, 2010). In this paper we examine: whether a widower sanctifies his wife; whether wife sanctification can explain men's uncertain attitudes to remarriage/repartnering; and whether wife sanctification is relevant even amongst men who express an intention to remarry.

Method

We use data from two studies of older widowed men conducted in England. In 2003 we found that widowers spontaneously discussed issues around remarriage and repartnering and did so significantly more often than women (Bennett et al., 2003). In this paper we return to the same data and examine whether sanctification of the deceased wife provides a useful framework for understanding widowers' attitudes to repartnering, and the gender differences we found. In describing our methods two additional issues need to be discussed. First, we need to consider sampling issues. Second, we need to discuss the advantages of volunteered rather than directed speech (Becker, 1958).

Participants

The respondents were recruited for two studies of older widowed men, the first of 15 men conducted in the X of England (pseudonym + X), and the second of 45 men in Y England (pseudonym + Y) (note that all names in the interviews have been changed). They were recruited through various organisations concerned with older people, including widows' clubs, trade unions, age-related charities and local authority social service departments. All respondents were living independently in their own homes or in sheltered accommodation. The data were collected through tape-recorded interviews with the 60 widowers, who were aged between 55 and 98 years

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