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Memories of suffering: Exploring the life story narratives of twice-widowed elderly women

Kimberly A. DeMichele

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Doctoral Program in Gerontology, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250, USA

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ABSTRACT

Narratives of suffering often reflect remembered accounts of past traumas and other significant events in individuals' lives that they deem worthy of public presentation and feel comfortable enough to share. This paper examines the life stories of three elderly women who were widowed early in life ("off-time"), eventually remarried, and were later re-widowed "on time." Their narratives illustrate the complexities of the transitions from wife to widow and from widowhood to remarriage and back again. Commonalities and differences in the narrative are explored, including how suffering was revealed, with an emphasis on understanding the utility of what the women chose to remember, tried to forget, and opted to reveal about their lives. Also considered is their outright rejection of the identity "widow." Within the broader discussion of remembering and suffering, how individual histories contextualize reactions to subsequent events is also explored.

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Introduction

Narratives of suffering are not randomly selected stories people indiscriminately choose to tell. Rather, the narratives described in these papers reflect remembered and constructed accounts of past traumas, critical events, and other significant personal experiences that informants deemed worthy of public presentation and were able to share in the context of an interview. Loss is a common theme in many of the narratives, whether in reference to physical losses, the loss of hope, health, faith, or control, or the loss of long-held and often treasured social roles (Black, 2006; Canham, 2009-this issue). Suffering, especially in later life, is also frequently associated with the loss of loved ones. In fact, many of the narratives we gathered reflect themes of bereavement, particularly related to spousal death. This article focuses on how suffering is revealed in the narratives of women who experienced spousal death twice in their lives and pays special attention to what aspects of their lives they chose to reveal.

Spousal bereavement is especially common among older women and is viewed by some researchers as one of the most disruptive events of the life course (Chambers, 2005; Lopata, 1996). Much has been written in the popular press and professional literature that links suffering and loss (e.g., Black & Rubinstein, 2004; Mabry, 2006), and arguably, some of the most grievous suffering in life occurs in conjunction with the death of a beloved spouse (Finn, 1986). Fortunately, as Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000) pointed out, spousal death is an event most people experience only once in life. Nevertheless, some people are widowed more than once, such as women who are widowed early in life, remarry, and are later widowed again. Although widowhood is most commonly experienced during "old age," a surprising finding reported by Lopata (1996) is that one-third of all ever widowed women were younger than 40 years of age when their husbands died.

The timing of widowhood is critical to understanding its impact. Neugarten et al. (1965) postulated that individuals live out their lives according to culturally constructed time schedules under which certain transitions and life events are culturally prescribed as best experienced at times considered normative (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965). Conversely, "off-time" transitions are often associated with negative consequences. Death, for example, is 'supposed to' occur late in life

E-mail address: kdemiche@umbc.edu.

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when people are older, so the deaths of younger persons 'before their time' can be more difficult for survivors. Because early widowhood is less expectable than "on time" widowhood, an early or "off-time" spousal death is an out-of-sync life event that is often sudden, almost always traumatic, and for which few individuals are adequately prepared.

The timing of the spousal death also affects the transitions which follow, including the likelihood of remarriage. While remarriage among older widows remains relatively rare, American society actually encourages younger widows to remarry, urging them to "get it together" and "move on" (DiGiulio, 1992; van den Hoonaard, 1997). And research indicates that up to half of all American women widowed before age 55 eventually do remarry (Smith, Zick, & Duncan, 1991). Given this, and the fact that women tend to live longer than men, early widowhood obviously increases the likelihood of experiencing widowhood more than once in life.

Although widowhood, at any age, is life-altering and often associated with a decline in physical, emotional, and economic well-being, much evidence suggests that younger women, particularly those with dependent children, are least prepared and fare worse following bereavement (DiGiulio, 1992; Hyman, 1983; Smith & Zick, 1986). Whether anticipated or not, widowhood can plunge a surviving partner into crisis. The trauma of spousal death usually precipitates an intense emotional reaction, and the psychological impact of early widowhood may be more severe because "off-time" deaths are often sudden and unexpected and younger women have had less time to acquire practical resources and develop coping skills (Lopata, 1996; van den Hoonaard, 1997). Financial stress can further exacerbate the psychological stress of bereavement, and research demonstrates that the risk of poverty is significantly higher for young widows whose short marriages allowed less time to accumulate assets, wealth, and other resources (Hyman, 1983; Smith & Zick, 1986).

Thus, the suffering of younger widows, at least in the short run, may be greater than that of older widowed women. This supposition is supported by the high rates of suicide and alcohol, tobacco, and drug use among women widowed relatively early in life (Kreitman, 1988; Zisook, Schuchter, & Mulvihill, 1990). Yet surprisingly little research has focused on the experience of early widowhood, despite the fact that one-third of all women who were ever widowed were less than 40 years of age when their husbands died (Lopata, 1996). This bias may be related to the fact that younger widows are up to 10 times more likely than older widows to remarry (Lopata, 1996), and an assumption that remarriage is advantageous for widowed women, who are thought to have "fewer concerns" than those who do not remarry (Gentry & Schulman, 1988). Remarriage may mitigate some of the adverse effects of early widowhood by offsetting emotional and economic crises and reducing the likelihood of a decline in well-being. Yet, no matter how many problems remarriage may solve, the act also sets the stage for a subsequent marital disruption, whether by death or divorce. Because women tend to live longer than men, widows who remarry are likely to experience the trauma and suffering associated with the death of a husband more than once in their lives.

The purpose of this paper is to explore elderly women's memories of suffering related to spousal bereavement. To do so, the life story narratives of three elderly widows are explored. The women were widowed relatively early in life ("off-time"), eventually remarried, and were later widowed again ("on time"). Their narratives illustrate the complexities of the transitions from wife to widow and from widowhood to remarriage and back again. This paper explores how suffering is reflected in their narratives, and pays special attention to what the women chose to reveal about their lives and how they do so. Within the broader discussion of the impact of their experiences with suffering, how individual histories shape personal meanings in life and contextualize reactions to subsequent events is also explored.

Background

While narratives are grounded in memories of the past, they are also constructed on the basis of identity needs and issues of the present. Natzmer (2002) noted that "the struggle over what will be remembered and what will be forgotten" takes place everyday, in a variety of contexts (p. 174). What memories are incorporated into one's story is important, but how both — what is remembered and what is "forgotten" — are incorporated into the self, as it continues to develop, is a crucial aspect to consider when examining the lives of older women who have been doubly widowed.

As noted throughout these articles, narrative provides an effective vehicle for reflecting on and synthesizing experiences that are held internally, perhaps in an inchoate emotional form. Constructing a story requires imposing order on these vague thoughts, perceptions, and ideas. As Pillemer (1998) pointed out, "when we say that we 'remember' a specific past event, we usually mean that we can produce a detailed narrative description of the episode as it was personally experienced" (p. 4). And while memories are highly subjective and seem individual, exercising memory (e.g., sharing one's story) generally involves others, as we give voice to our perceptions, articulate our experiences, and share our ideals (Climo & Cattell, 2002).

Although memory grants us access to the past, the narratives that memories produce are not normally viewed as accurate records of what actually happened in one's life, but rather as present-day reinterpretations of the past (Bruner, 2004). Because memory operates in the present and incorporates an awareness of the past that was not known when the remembered events occurred, the act of remembering entails far more than conjuring up the past (Climo & Cattell, 2002). Remembering involves a uniting of past and present selves and emotions, which allows for an ongoing reexamination and reinterpretation of one's self and experiences. Likewise, the telling and retelling of one's story allows it to be edited and reedited to maintain coherence. In other words, memories are interpretations, and like narratives, memories are highly constructed.

Memories of traumatic events, such as losses and other events that disrupt one's life and abruptly alter it, may be an exception. Whereas narrative often focuses on one's recollection of what was thought, seen, heard, and felt at a particular point in time, trauma is thought to disrupt the memory process by severing the connection between past and present and breaking the narrative into a "before" and "after." Brison (1998) referred to this phenomenon as an "undoing of the self" and noted that many individuals eventually reconstruct