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3 The Life Stories of Older Widows - Situating Later Life Widowhood Within the Life Course

PAT CHAMBERS

Widowhood in later life, an expected life course transition for older women, is generally presented in the literature as a homogenous ‘problem’ of old age, a time of unhappiness, loneliness and decline. The bulk of the research has been quantitative and has been carried out within two years of the death of the spouse, during a time in which some women are still coming to terms with loss. Little attention has been paid to the ongoing experience of widowhood, despite the fact that an older woman may spend many years as a widow. Furthermore, widowhood has been treated as an entity in itself rather than an integral part of older women’s lives. This paper suggests that by using a biographical approach, which engages older women in the research process, it is possible to look at widowhood through a different lens: one, which acknowledges both the multiplicity of experiences and relationships that older women bring to this time of their lives and the diversity therein. Drawing on a series of unstructured interviews with older widows from Stockport, the paper suggests that the use of a biographical approach, underpinned by feminist gerontology, provides us with a unique opportunity to gain an understanding of the multi-faceted experience of later life widowhood from the perspective of older widows themselves.

Introduction

My own curiosity about later life widowhood stemmed originally from a growing awareness of the differences I encountered between the older widows I met in my own neighbourhood, or in the course of my work, and what I was reading in the literature, where the problem model of widowhood dominates. Later life widowhood is construed as a homogenous ‘problem’ of old age, a time of unhappiness, loneliness and decline. However many of the women whom I encountered appeared, after a period of bereavement, to be leading fulfilled lives and were certainly engaged in society in a variety of ways. I was so struck by the diversity of their experiences that I wanted to know more

about what it was like to be an older widow and what had affected that experience. Thus I needed to find a method of inquiry which would enable me to gain an insider's view of their world and add their 'voice' to the literature. A narrative, biographical approach, underpinned by feminist gerontology, seemed to offer such possibilities. Such an approach, by focusing on the past as well as the present has the potential to construe widowhood as another passage in the lives of women and to explore the continuities and discontinuities that women bring to this time of their lives. In line with feminist inquiry, my aim was to both to engage with the narratives of older women of different ages, class, race and disability in order to better understand their current experience and to value their knowledge as 'experts' (Harding, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). This paper charts my journey of exploration into the world of older widows by:

- Reviewing the 'problem' of later life widowhood
- Situating the study of later life widowhood within feminist gerontology
- Describing my biographical research with older widows
- Exploring the multiple narratives of later life widowhood which have emerged from my study

The 'Problem' of Later Life Widowhood

A review of the literature on later life tells us that widowhood is a women's issue. Although the age of widowhood varies greatly, it is primarily experienced by older women. This is due to women's greater longevity and the tendency for women to marry men older than themselves. The average age of widowhood varies according to class and race - the middle classes experience widowhood at an older age than the working classes; blacks experience widowhood at a younger age than whites (Markides, 1989 cited in Arber and Jay Ginn, 1991). According to ONS (2000) the likelihood of being widowed increases with age, from 28% of women age 65-69, to 74% of women age 85 and over. Widowhood is thus the **likely** circumstance of women as they age.

Given that widowhood is such a major feature of later life, it is surprising to discover that research on the lives of older widows is so scarce. This is particularly so in Great Britain - the little research there is concentrates on loss and bereavement (Marris, 1958; Torrie, 1975; Bowling and Cartwright, 1982). Davidson's (1999) work on gender differences in widowhood is one exception. North American research is more abundant (Lopata, 1973, 1987; Arling, 1976; Bankoff, 1983; Ferraro, 1984; Morgan, 1989) but until recently (Mathews, 1991; Porter, 1994; Lopata, 1996) there was still a concentration on loss and bereavement which presented a problematic if not pathological model of widowhood as Adlersberg and Thorne (1992: 9) confirm:

The vast quantity of literature on older widows in our society convincingly portrays widowhood as an experience fraught with poverty, ill health, loneliness, grief and readjustment.

Much of the research on later life widowhood in the 1970s and 1980s was quantitative, conducted through the use of extensive questionnaires or structured interviews (Pihlblad and Adams, 1972; Lopata, 1973, 1987; Atchley, 1975; Arling, 1976; Bowling and Cartwright, 1982; Bankoff, 1983; O'Bryant, 1988; Babchuk and Anderson, 1989; Sable, 1989; Rosik, 1989) with a focus on the 'problems' of widowhood and the 'support' systems available for older widows. Furthermore, the vast majority of these studies were conducted within two years of the death of a spouse. I have suggested elsewhere (Chambers, 1994) that this narrow focus limits our knowledge of the way in which older women manage and develop as widows to a rather brief period of time during which they may well still be grieving or adjusting to their newly acquired status. While the findings from all the research vary, the overall picture of the lives of older widows is a fairly uniform and one-dimensional problem model, fixed at a particular point in time, which reflects both homogeneity and pathology.

Adlerserg and Thorne (1992) were initially influenced by this pathological model in a community project which sought to find ways of helping older widows to 'recover'. They found instead their preconceptions challenged by many of the older women who were referred to them who, rather than needing help to 'recover', saw widowhood as a time of opportunity. However, the 'problem model' of widowhood is such a dominant public narrative that these women reported both feeling guilt at having positive feelings and difficulties in expressing their satisfaction to others. More recent research (Davidson, 1999; Martin Matthews, 1992; Pickard, 1994) has started to question this problem model of widowhood. Indeed, Lopata, who has written for 26 years on widowhood, now challenges some of her own earlier assumptions (Lopata, 1996). Recently widowed, in 1994, she now writes from the perspective of a widow. Referring to the numerous myths, stereotypes and assumptions surrounding widowhood, she says:

Even I found myself influenced by these at the start of the research. Many of these myths present a dismal and limiting picture of women. (Lopata, 1996: xiii)

Later life widowhood then is now construed in a number of ways: an expectation (Neugarten, 1968); a major personal crisis (Bowling and Cartwright, 1982; Marris, 1958; Torrie, 1975); a stressful life event (Holmes and Rahe, 1967); role loss (Lopata, 1973, 1979) or adaptation (Ferraro, 1984); a transition (Sheehy, 1996); a stage in the lifecourse (Silverman, 1987); a gendered experience (Davidson, 1999). That it happens within the context of family, friends and community is also now recognised (Martin Matthews,

1991; Pickard, 1994; Van den Hoonaard, 1994). However, what is still missing in the literature, is firstly an understanding of later life widowhood as just one part of women's lives. And secondly, according (Jones Porter, 1994: 33), a perspective that is sensitive to the totality of older women's lives and is *grounded in conversation with older widows*.

Feminist Gerontology and the Lifecourse

I have argued so far, that the literature on later life widowhood tells us very little about the actual experience of 'becoming and being' a widow in Britain at the turn of the century. What we have instead is a 'problematization' of older widows, which is in keeping with the problematization of older women in general.

The acknowledgement of the gendered nature of later life is fairly recent and what might be tentatively termed a 'feminist gerontology' has begun to emerge (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Bernard and Meade, 1993; Bernard et al., 2000; Chambers, 2000; Gibson, 1996; Reinhartz, 1986). Indeed Gibson (1996: 94) tells us that that the study of older women, and by implication older widows, has been defined by a preoccupation with male and mid life perspectives and a tendency to see older women in terms of problems:

It is my contention that the particular lens through which older women have come to be viewed is one that selectively includes only certain aspects of being old and female.

Instead, feminist gerontology situates older women's lives within the lifecourse and thus develops a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages older women bring to later life. Over twenty years ago now, Johnson (1978) reminded us of the uniqueness of the human biography and the stories which emerge from those biographies. Engaging with older widow's life stories therefore is one way of exploring widowhood through a 'different lens' (Gibson, 1996), one which offers the possibility of finding out about older women's lives, as widows, in the context of their 'whole lives' and may as a result challenge prevailing ideas on later life widowhood. As Anderson et al. (1987: 119) argue, it is important to find out about women's **actual** lives which: *Deepens the critique of existing knowledge by documenting the inadequacy of past assumptions*.

Biographical Research with Older Widows

My research seeks to redress the current imbalance in widowhood research via an exploration of the previously 'hidden lives' of older widows. I wanted firstly to consider the impact of both individual and collective biography on the lives of older widows and secondly to understand the subjective experience contained in older widows' narratives. A life history approach acknowledges the importance of older women's experiences throughout their lives and as Bornat (1993) suggests, reveals the differences that older women bring to later life. Earlier experiences may account for ways in which major life changes, such as widowhood, are managed.

I make use of what Miller (2000: 15) calls the 'narrative' approach to life story collection:

The narrative approach bases itself fundamentally upon the ongoing development of the respondent's viewpoint during the telling of a life ... 'story'. Understanding the individual's unique and changing perspective as it is mediated by context takes precedence over questions of fact.

I am thus interested in the way in which older widows **perceive** their life history, and their **perception** of its impact, rather than factual information about their lives. This is in keeping with Ruth, Birren and Polkinghorne (1996) who suggest that life as a story is something other than a true verbatim copy of the life lived. I recognise that this accepts the nature of the narrative interview as one in which the interplay between myself, the interviewer, and individual women, is the core source of information. It is the manner in which the life story develops and is related during the course of the interview, which provides the essential avenue to understanding. This requires an acceptance that, in this narrative approach, there is not one single objective reality that is factual and existing at a level of abstraction beyond the interview. The story that each woman tells me is the story she chooses to tell me at the particular point of time, which is the interview. Miller (2000: 17) suggests that this *situational view of reality as fluid is an essential part of the narrative approach*.

Underpinning my exploration is a conviction that older widows have stories to tell about their lives, both in the past and in the present, and if I am to begin to understand the totality of their experience, I must be prepared to both hear and interact with those stories. I argue, that without understanding the whole of their experience, from their own perspective, on their own terms and in their own words, and the way in which they make sense of that experience, I am unable to really understand their lives in widowhood. To put it another way, a narrative/biographical approach, underpinned by feminist gerontology offers the possibility of understanding the social reality of later life widowhood via the actresses themselves. The starting point in this type of research then is

A number of narratives were decipherable within each of the four parts and taxonomies were developed. Within each of the narratives were a series of 'sub-plots. I took heed of Luborsky's warning (1994: 194):

I acknowledge that there is a need for caution concerning the generalisation of 'life themes' and resulting narratives and thus perpetuating my own enterprise and cultural paradigm.

In order to avoid such perpetuation each taxonomy was discussed and confirmed with some of the participants, as part of the discussion on the overall findings of the research. The women identified with the life themes, the derived narratives and the sub-plots, as well as recognising the narratives of others. There was a consensus that they were useful 'markers' in identifying the differences that the women felt they brought to the experience of later life widowhood. Within the limitations of this paper I now briefly describe these multiple narratives.

Multiple Narratives of Later Life Widowhood

Firstly I discuss the parts, and the narratives which emerged from those parts, and then I go on to make some general observations about the concept of multiple narratives as a way of better understanding the experience of later life widowhood.

Me Myself

In the giving of a personal biography each woman, to a greater or lesser extent told the story of 'an identity' and the way in which she had perceived herself over the lifecourse. She talked, from her own perspective, about the perceptions of others, ways in which she had 'managed' her life, and how this had either helped or hindered her in widowhood. These perceptions were reflected in the story she told, the way in which she told it and through phrases, which 'summed up' a personal view of 'self'. She hinted at an identity which was self ascribed, sometimes confirmed or contradicted by others. These statements were sometimes repeated several times during the course of the interview(s). She provided examples of the way in which she had drawn on aspects of her 'self' to manage events in her life. Luborsky (1994: 193) refers to these statements as "*life themes*". These are themes, which cut across the life course and provide explanations for the way a life has been lived. They provide us with clues about the identity of the individual telling the story, and how this impacts on her view of the world.

At one extreme of the taxonomy was a narrative of self-determination, self-confidence and autonomy, which are embraced by a narrative of high self-esteem. These women expressed self-belief, an awareness of their own sense of autonomy. They told a story, which looked back positively over the life course and in which they felt comfortable with their 'self'. For example:

I knew I was loved, that makes you feel secure (Eunice)

I've always been independent (Elizabeth)

I've had a good life (Farzana)

In many ways this is contrary to a popular stereotype of the current generation of older women who are often portrayed as having lacked autonomy and a strong sense of self throughout their life course.

Some women's life themes embraced a narrative of fluctuation/variation between managing and not managing, sometimes feeling confident sometimes not, feeling good about themselves but at times feeling very unsure of who they were. Self-esteem was variable and the life story was often encapsulated in the phrase 'if only ...'. For example:

I was always ambitious BUT My life seems full of 'might have'; I might have done this or I might have done that, perhaps I wasn't really confident enough (Joan)

I've always been a rebel BUT I did what my husband wanted ... (Doris)

At the other end of the taxonomy was a narrative of low self-esteem. These stories contained life themes of emotional dependence on others, a lack of self-belief, and low confidence. The narrators reflected unhappiness with life and uncertainty about themselves. For example:

I've always taken the world on my shoulders, I'm a worrier. My husband always said I worried too much (Patricia)

I've always felt ... well ... grateful, sort of beholden (Sylvia)

The three narratives, which emerged from 'Me, myself' were what I have chosen to call narratives of esteem: a narrative of high self-esteem; a narrative of fluctuating self-esteem; a narrative of low self-esteem.

Table 1 A Summary of the Narratives and Sub-Plots of ‘Me Myself’

<i>Me Myself</i>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>A narrative of high self-esteem</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feeling secure • a strong value base • self-confidence • learning from experience • independence • feeling at ease with oneself • regrets for others
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>A narrative of fluctuating self-esteem</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ambition versus ‘I might have’ • becoming ‘someone else’ • a bit of a rebel • pride
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>A narrative of low self esteem</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • powerlessness • a lack of self-confidence • lonely • failing to live up to expectations • always being grateful • no individuality

History and Me

There is increasing recognition by gerontologists (Riley, 1972; Giele and Elder, 1998) of the importance of ‘historical location’ for understanding the experience of later life. As a result of an analysis of the wider, historical, issues, which are both explicit and implicit in the women’s stories, and which are yet another part of the jig-saw, which makes up both the individual and the collective experience of later life widowhood, two narratives emerged. The narratives are of events and structures as well as attitudes towards and opportunities for women at different times in their histories.

In the telling of their life stories all the participants identified themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, in terms of generation and gender and talked of the impact on their lives, of belonging to this collective ‘we’. Firstly a narrative of ‘belonging to a generation’ was identified. This is of necessity focused on the period, about which the women talked most, their childhood and early adult years, the historical time, which identified them as a generation. The women who participated in the research encompass an age range from 64 years to 89

years and consequently belong to different cohorts. Nonetheless whether they were a child or an adult during the years 1939-45, they all situated themselves historically as belonging to the pre-Second World War generation; the “Thirties” and the “War years” predominated in most of the women’s stories. For example:

When I got married, of course I was ready for ‘calling up’ then. But they didn’t seem to know what to do with me. I was married and only 19 when my husband left. So I got myself a job at the NAFFI at Ryegate ... and I didn’t leave there until the war was over. It was odd really, I mean there were these sort of socials and parties and you longed to go out and have a little flirt, really or meet somebody new, but you couldn’t because you were married. But there were many stages when I thought, that was a silly thing to do. You really do if you’re honest with yourself. I mean I couldn’t because my parents would have been in a really bad way about it ... in those days, you didn’t think about separating or divorce, even with the war.

(Joan)

It was a generation who experienced massive upheaval and change, but also a generation who had greater hopes and expectations than those who had preceded them.

The second narrative was that of ‘gendered lives’. A number of the storytellers recognized that women’s lives are ‘gendered’ and in so many ways, when they were telling their stories, the women recalled how their lives had been structured by the society in which they were living and the generation to which they belonged. They made it clear in the telling of their stories, the role that both the ‘government’ (or society) and powerful individuals (usually husbands, fathers or brothers) had played in structuring their lives. For example:

We stayed in Birmingham until ..., well I was there with the baby, Joe was still in the forces, I can’t remember exactly when he came home, David was about eleven months when he eventually came home and he wanted to go back to Manchester, well he was born in Manchester and his mother was there. So I decided, well I don’t think I decided, my father said to me, You’re married, you go where your man’s work is now. He said, its an understood fact that where your man goes, you go too. Well that was the days, that was the thing then. So of course we upped and left and came to live round here.

(Ellen)

They had not all been aware of it at the time, although some of them clearly had, but the telling of their story provided them with an opportunity to reflect on these structural issues with the benefit of hindsight, and the knowledge of the sometimes, different experience of their daughters and granddaughters.

Table 2 A Summary of History and Me

History and Me
<i>A Narrative of Generation</i> Difficult times for some The War Years Changing times.
<i>A Narrative of Gendered Lives</i> Education Becoming a wife A woman's place is in the home Working lives Breaking the rules.

Me and My Social World

The literature on widowhood largely ignores the impact of older widows capacity, or incapacity, to engage and connect with others in a variety of social networks over the lifecourse, on their current relationships. And yet, as the literature on friendship in later life clearly identifies, we cannot really make sense of social networks in later life without reference to individual and collective biography, the narratives of self, and the narratives of generation and gender, identified earlier.

The demands on their time, from husbands, children, other family members, work and their acceptance or not of these demands, shaped their social world. For some of the women, juggling work outside the home with housework and family commitments dominated their lives and left little time to develop social networks beyond the family. For others the friendship of other women was important and opportunities were sought to develop and maintain these friendships.

There were many different ways of managing often, competing demands and relationships, and a variety of social skills and confidence were discernable. Indeed, some women were clearly more 'connected' than others. How women feel about themselves, as identified in 'Me, Myself' is clearly significant here.

This part of the stories then, takes as its starting point the view that what older widows tell us about their social world over the lifecourse, their priorities and their capacity to connect with others, enables us to better understand their current social networks, a significant part of the experience of later life widowhood. An analysis of the interview data yielded four narratives, which encompassed both formal and informal networks: Friends have always

mattered; I've never really had friends of my own; I've always been a 'joiner-in'; I've always put my family first.

These four narratives demonstrate that a variety of complex relationships have existed with friends, family and formal organisations, in which older widows have confirmed their identity over the life course. Relationship skills and styles have been developed, change has been managed with or without the support of significant others. As with other parts of their lives, women's social worlds have been highly gendered. That some women are more skilled and more connected over the life course has become visible as the narratives have unfolded. For example, Sylvia tells of never having had friends:

I've never had a group of female friends. I've nobody that I kept in touch with from school. Maybe it's the fact that I had to settle down so early and I never went out with friends and my family were there, well my mum was. You see when I was a child I didn't have much

Whereas friendship has been an integral part of Katherine's life:

He was a kind of reserved man and I used to have friends that I used to go dancing with. He always knew where I was, they were local friends who I'd had for donkey's years. I've always had friends. Oh I used to go dancing and on days out ... he would never go abroad for a holiday but he never objected to me going with my friends ... I've been friends with them for as long as I can remember

Alongside, 'Me, Myself' and History and Me', yet another piece has been added to the jigsaw of later life widowhood.

Me, Now

This final part of that jigsaw presents three narratives, which emerged from the stories the participants told about their lives 'now', many years after becoming a widow: widowhood as a time of loneliness and despair; widowhood is a time when you just have to get on with your life; widowhood is a transition. For some women widowhood could only be construed as a time of deep unhappiness: the few benefits to life 'now' were far outweighed by the disadvantages. For example:

I don't go out much now. I get very little pleasure from life. You know, I rarely see anybody and I get so lonely. So often I just feel 'down'. (Patricia)

Table 3 A Summary of the Narratives and Sub-Plots of Me and My Social World

Me and My Social World
<p><i>Friends have always Mattered</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My friends are part of my life, the ‘social me’ • The constituents of friendship • Friend- makers • It must be awful not to have friends • Significant female friendships over the life course • Restrictions on friendship
<p><i>I’ve never really had friends of my own</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No need for friendship • No time for friends • I don’t know how to make friends • A ‘social life’ but no real friends • Full time employment
<p><i>I’ve always been a ‘joiner-in’</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A descriptor • Managing change • Not joining in.
<p><i>I’ve always put my family first</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An ideology of the family • Interdependence • Family as friends • A small but very close family • Dependence

For those women with very strong continuities in their lives, perhaps in terms of friends and family, life just carried on after a period of bereavement and widowhood became a time for ‘getting on’ with life. For example:

Life goes on and you must get on with it; you have to make the most of it.
(Evelyn)

For one group of women however, widowhood was clearly a time of change, a time of growth and opportunity in which new skills might be acquired or new friendships developed. For example:

At one time I never would have (said what I feel) but I accept more now. I don’t think anything could hurt me as much as that (my husband’s death, and the death

of other close relatives) ... Now I can do things myself and I get such a kick out of it (such as organising a holiday for myself and friends) ... I'll try anything now but I never used to be like that. I have patience that I never had before. I can even encourage other people now. I think I'm more accepting and I'm much stronger. I've grown a lot. You don't ever get over it but each time you achieve something you cope better and each time it gets better. Do you know, I watch a lot more now.
(Edith)

All of the women strongly articulated one of the narratives but within each individual story, links were sometimes made with another narrative, suggesting that the experience of later life widowhood is both fluid and complex. I discuss this further in the next part of the paper.

The Multifaceted Nature of Widowhood

I suggested earlier on in this paper that the dominant narrative of later life widowhood is one of loneliness and loss. I argued that this is a public narrative derived from a problematisation of older women in general and a rigid construction of later life widowhood in particular, which takes no account of either biography or subjectivity. I argued for an alternative approach to the study of later life widowhood, one which, situated widowhood within the life course of all women and which was derived from the stories which older women have to tell about their lives: if we do acknowledge that widowhood is an integral part of women's lifecourse, the narratives which emerge from that life history inevitably have an impact on the current experience

In my analysis of the life stories of older widows therefore, I am suggesting that their lives are much more complex than the restrictive dominant narrative allows. By 'unpicking' the different parts, and the narratives and sub-plots which make up those parts, it is possible to reconceptualise later life widowhood as a time of diversity, which comprises multiple narratives.

So far, I have used the metaphor of a 'jigsaw', but perhaps a 'three-dimensional' jigsaw is more fitting, one in which the parts can be put together in a variety of ways. The way in which these parts are put together will portray, at any one time, the picture, or the story, which is both experienced and presented. In other words, there are many different images, which emerge from the 'jigsaw'; we can't truly understand them without first assembling the **all** the parts, and the individual components of those parts.

The fluidity of these narratives needs to be acknowledged, particularly that of 'Me, Now'. There are times when a different narrative is articulated from the dominant, personal narrative. We all have days when life is difficult, and we may forcefully express that view to anyone who is prepared to listen to us.

However, if we belong to a group who are stigmatised in the way that older widows are, those ‘bad days’ are more likely to be seen as the norm. To put it differently, if that narrative conforms to the popular narrative of widowhood, it is more likely to be heard and confirmed- *your days are difficult because you are an older widow NOT your days are difficult because we all have difficult days.*

Table 4 Summary of Narratives and Sub-Plots of Me Now

Me Now
<p><i>Widowhood is a time of Loneliness and despair</i></p> <p>Loneliness Loss of confidence Someone/something missing in life They don't understand Being different Life is difficult The future is bleak</p>
<p><i>Widowhood is a time when you have to get on with your life</i></p> <p>Accepting the inevitable Good memories and few regrets Aloneness Finances Health Validation by others Keeping busy The future (one day at a time)</p>
<p><i>Widowhood is a transition</i></p> <p>Self awareness Moving from ‘we’ to ‘I’; putting me first Freedom from New friends/ new relationships Interdependence New interests/ new opportunities/ new skills Looking forward Change</p>

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for a reconceptualisation of later life widowhood: one which is grounded in the individual and collective biographies of older

widows, and which can be understood in terms of the multiple narratives which are derived from those biographies. Fundamental to this reconceptualisation is the recognition that later life widowhood comprises:

- Individual continuities and discontinuities (Me, Myself)
- Historical context (History and Me)
- Relationships with others (Me and My Social World)
- The current situation (Me Now)

In this way, it becomes possible to move beyond the stereotyping and problematisation which older widows experience and, instead, hear their voices, recognize their diversity, understand and validate their subjective experience. As a consequence, we are able to acknowledge that widows' lives comprise multiple and fluid narratives and that furthermore, there is no 'one' story of widowhood but 'many'.

A Final Note

This approach to the study of later life widowhood demonstrates the value of involving older women in the research process, and the importance of listening to their voices. For the individual woman, it offers an opportunity to reflect and make sense of her current situation in the light of her whole life, to tell her story to an interested listener and to have her feelings validated. Collectively it raises the profile of an otherwise invisible group, enables the collective to be seen in its full diversity and challenges 'taken for granted' assumptions about their lives.

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¹ *The Sample*

The sample was voluntary and purposive.

All the widowed had been widowed after the age of 55 (the age at which widowhood becomes an 'on time' experience) and have been widowed for more than five years (do not identify themselves as being in bereavement).

Their current ages range from 64 years to 89 years; they all situate themselves historically as belonging to the 'pre Second World War' generation.

Some of the women were previously known to me; others were contacted via a second party; others contacted me because they had heard about the research and wished to participate.

All the women currently reside in a variety of settings in Stockport. These include a residential home, sheltered accommodation, purpose built retirement homes, local authority housing, housing association flats and private housing.

Their financial circumstances vary considerably both now and in the past: several of the women talk about the need to be 'careful' with money since their only source of income is a state pension and other supplementary benefits; others describe themselves as 'financially secure' having been 'well provided for' by their husbands.

Their educational levels cover a wide spectrum ranging from leaving school as soon as possible without any qualifications to undertaking higher education. Several of the women returned to education to undertake part time courses at different levels.

Some of the women have never worked outside the family home, whereas others have juggled domestic work and paid work for most of their lives.

One of the women describes herself as Asian, another woman describes herself as having a long term disability as a result of childhood polio.

Three of the women never had children; one of the three helped to raise her niece and had an ongoing, close relationship with the niece and her family.

Three of the women had married men much older than themselves. One of the women is in an established relationship with a new male partner but has chosen not to remarry. Another woman has begun a new relationship with a male partner but is uncertain about the future. Three of the women now spend a lot of time with siblings who live nearby.