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“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

(mean 79 years) and had been widowed for between 0.25 and 25 years (mean 7 years). The participants came from diverse social and economic backgrounds.

At the time of interview none of the widowers were remarried and were self-described widowers. 2 had been married and widowed twice, 2 had been divorced and widowed, and one was cohabiting. In some other studies of spousal bereavement and widowhood, the sample is restricted to participants recently widowed. In this study we have not done this for two reasons. First, the long perspective on widowhood of some of these men is useful in understanding attitudes toward remarriage and intimate relationships. Second, there is no time limit on when a widower might decide to remarry.

Sampling issues

Both the studies were advertised as studies of widow(er)hood. Our intention was to recruit self-defined widowed people. When we gave information either in writing or verbally we did not exclude widowers who had since remarried. In this respect our sample resembles the samples of Moore and Stratton (2002) and van den Hoonaard (2010) but not that of Davidson (2002) who excluded remarried men in her sample. In contrast to Moore and Stratton's study, none of the men who volunteered had remarried. However, one of our participants was living in a LAT relationship and one was cohabiting (3%). Over half of our sample spontaneously discussed repartnering ($n = 32$). Thus, our data represents widowed men who, whilst not remarried, did spontaneously consider these issues. Our figures broadly represent the national proportions of widowers who repartner. Figures show that 0.6% of widowers, aged 55 and over had remarried in 2002 but there are no figures, at present, for widowers who cohabit or live in LAT relationships, so it is likely that the ONS figures are an underestimation of repartnered widowers (ONS, 2005).

The interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and undertaken in the respondents' own homes, tape-recorded, and lasted between 45 and 90 min. Before beginning the interview, the respondent was given an information sheet to read and asked to sign a consent form; confidentiality and anonymity were assured. The interviews were not tightly structured, rather the aim was to learn what was important to the informants. The approach was 'we are the novices and you have the experience'. Both studies were interested in two broad questions, 'how did you feel?' and 'what did you do?'. The interviews led the participants chronologically through their experiences of bereavement and widowhood. They were asked first to describe their lives with their spouses, then to describe the events immediately surrounding the spouse's death, thirdly to talk about their lives a year after the death, and finally to discuss their current lives. Whilst recognising that memory can be fallible, we also believe that the recollections of widowed people are important for understanding the ways in which they adapt to the new situation.

Directed versus volunteered speech

When we conducted the interviews we did not focus specifically on repartnering. Thus, we did not initiate discussions with the widowers about their attitudes toward women or to remarriage/repartnering. However, when men mentioned these topics we explored them in more detail. Thus, our analysis focuses on *spontaneous* contributions from the widowers. We suggest that the spontaneity of these discussions lends strength to our analysis, rather than weakening it. Our view supports that of Becker (1958) who argues that participants' volunteered statements reflect their concerns more effectively than those prompted by the interviewers' directed questions. Thus, as volunteered statements, discussions of remarriage/repartnering reflect widowers' preoccupations with remarriage/repartnering.

The analysis

Stage 1. This method was the same for both studies. As the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Bennett & Vidal-Hall, 2000; Charmaz, 1995). More specifically, the interviews were read line-by-line to give a holistic impression and then re-read and coded. This process was reflexive, and as new codes and themes emerged, the interviews were recoded. Although the two studies were independent, the content of the interviews had many similarities. The codes included presentation of the wife, death narrative, grief, and staying away from the house. The codes were then grouped into domains that were common to most interviews, which included: death, social, emotional, and life together. All interviews were coded blind by other members of the research team so that reliability across interviews could be assessed – it was found to be satisfactory. One of the codes that significantly differentiated widowed men from women was that of remarriage/repartnering (Bennett et al., 2003). This code was defined as 'Where people discuss the issue of remarriage/repartnering – either wanting to or not wanting to'.

Stage 2. In the secondary analysis, we re-examined the interviews with widowers that contained the code remarriage/repartnering. These interviews were re-read with a view to understanding the issues widowers raised when they spontaneously discussed remarriage, repartnering, platonic and romantic friendships with women, and why they were not interested in such relationships. More than half of the widowers discussed such relationships ($n = 32$). The relevant sections of the interviews were then re-analyzed line-by-line in the manner described above. Six men described only platonic relationships with women. These have been omitted from this analysis since the focus is on romantic relationships. Thus, the current analysis focuses on the remaining 26 men who discussed romantic relationships with women or had clear discussions of not wishing to repartner (43%).

Findings

Four key themes emerge from our data: wife sanctification; uncertainty about remarriage/repartnering; repartnering; and what men call their new women. First, some widowers do

sanctify their late wives in a manner similar to that suggested by Lopata for women. In particular, some widowers report that they will not consider remarriage because of their deep feelings for their late wife. The second theme is uncertainty, and we show how wife sanctification contributes to men's uncertainties about remarriage/repartnering. These widowers are aware of the comparisons they might make between their late wife and their new woman. The third theme concerns positive decisions to repartner, but here wife sanctification does not make an important contribution to the discussion. Here widowers speak more about their feelings for their new woman, and for the desirability of repartnering. Our final theme concerns how men refer to their new women friends and how it is influenced, in part, by wife sanctification. We find that widowers are more likely to refer to their late wife in a more personal way than they do their new woman.

Wife sanctification

As we would expect, some widowers are not interested in remarriage/repartnering. We find 10 widowers who, whilst discussing remarriage/repartnering, make it clear they have no intention of doing so. Seven of these men fit into our extension of Lopata's conceptualisation of 'husband sanctification': wife sanctification. These men hold their late wives up as the ideal and explain how no other woman could compare with their late wife. Matthew (X) illustrates how he has sanctified both his wife and the ideal of marriage:

If it's been true love, (pauses), and a good relationship in the family nobody, whether it is a man or a woman, will get over the death of a partner. ... They'll always be there. They may not show it but they'll always be there. ... I wish I'd got Grace with me you see. You see, I, I, I (words unclear) other peoples' personal lives kind of thing, although I don't know, where you see people of, of where their husband or wife had died they, they've married 2 years later or 18 months or 6 months later to me, I mean Grace and I had discussed that, to me theirs couldn't have been a real marriage relationship there for her to do that. Or for him... to do that. I think if you've got a, a lovely relationship with your ups and downs and your discussions, debates, your disagreements, your love, your love for your children, your children's love for you, to me that is a marriage. And if one goes the other one is suffering... I'd of still been like I am now. I wouldn't of remarried again... Well you see there would be *nobody could compare with Grace* [our italics]. Nobody could ever do that, take that place because *it was a bloody good relationship* [his emphasis].

Not only are there concerns about specific relationships, but there are also concerns about potential relationships, in general. For example, Billy (X) is concerned that comparisons might be made between the late wife and the new partner, not just for him, but also for widowers in general. He suggests that this tendency to compare is not healthy for the relationship:

[did it ever cross your mind to remarry?] No. No. Definitely not. No. ... Not for one minute. No. I, I often think that erhh, when people marry then they incline to erhh, what shall I say, (pause), erhhh, the second wife, you're liable to put

them against the first wife. Compare them, that's the word. Yes, compare. Yeah.

However, wife sanctification does not provide the whole explanation. For example, there are three men who do not wish to repartner but do not appear to sanctify their wives. Brian (Y) talks only briefly about his relationship with his late wife, indicating that it was good but giving no indication that his late wife was irreplaceable. He says, simply:

I never wanted to get associated again.

Thus, wife sanctification exists for widowers but does not explain fully why some widowed men are firm in their view that they do not want to remarry. In these cases the desirability of repartnering may be a more important factor (Hatch, 1995; Wu, 1994).

Uncertainty

Whilst for some men wife sanctification was an important issue in their decisions not to contemplate remarriage/repartnering, wife sanctification can also be seen as a feature of those men who express more uncertainty. Indeed, we were motivated to examine the data in this way by the title quote given by Dave (Y): *you're not getting married for the moon and the stars*. Part of his motivation for taking part in the study was his wish to discuss his new relationship, as illustrated by this quote:

I went out with her a few times you know, and we have now developed a very nice rapport and a very nice type of relationship. But the question I'm asking you is this. I feel very guilty. Now should I or should I not? Now. I do you see — I feel guilty... [are you worried what your wife would have thought?] Um now some people say to me who know I'm seeing a lady, some people say to me, and sensible people, your wife would have been delighted. At least you've settled yourself in. On the other hand what I say in a jovial manner if she's only looking down at me and saying silly old fool, I'd be delighted.

He goes on to say, and this reflects a view of his late wife as an ideal, that a second marriage would be less so:

I don't know if I'll get married again. I mean, at my age, you get married, you're not getting married for the moon and the stars. So to speak. But I probably will do (Dave Y).

He reflects one of four reasons why men do not proceed with remarriage: a second marriage being less successful than the first. He is also acknowledging his increasing age, an issue of eligibility (Wu, 1994). There are four other reasons given by men to explain how they had nearly remarried but decided not to proceed. First, widowers are frightened of making a mistake and what they might lose if they remarried/repartnered. Alan (Y) is worried that he would lose his life in England if he were to move to be with his new woman. He is also concerned that she would lose her family if she moved to be with him:

Fate had it that I met this woman [from abroad] and therefore my life and her life have been complicated

because of the space between us. We almost got married and I chickened out myself. It wasn't her that chickened out. I chickened out because – and at the end of the day – because my life is here and my grandchildren's here and her lovely son and daughter and her grandchildren and her life is there so we've compromised.

The second reason is that the potential marriage may be less successful than the existing relationship. Gordon (X), who is concerned that by repartnering he will spoil the existing good relationship, so wishes to preserve the status quo, illustrates this:

And yes a relationship has developed. And erhm, all the... the kids are quite happy about it, all the people... my friends that I've... erhm, spoke to about it, in fact I've taken her down to see me son John... she gets on very well with them. Erhm, we've had erhm, 3 holidays at erhm, a week in Guernsey in May took the only fine week that there was at that time of the year. And she comes round we spend most weekends together... she helped me decorate this week. Erhm, Monday night is her day off, Wednesday night's my... my day off. Erhm, and we get on very well together and a relationship has developed ... yes, we've both got a similar outlook on life, we both go to the same church which is strange, we're both in similar circumstances I mean she'd been widowed erhm, well a few years I think... 5 or 6 years before me. She was just as lonely as I was getting fed up with life and erhm, yes we just got on alright together as individuals [how is it different from being married for you?] Oh, much better, in a way. Erhm, I can quite understand this business of you know, sometimes people have said to us, oh you two are getting on well together when are you going to get married? I remember once saying, I'm not going to screw up a good relationship... ..by getting married... I think I have the best of both worlds, haven't I, I mean..... I can do my own sort of activities, I can be on my own... get going out for a drink.

Daniel (Y) discusses the third factor that contributes to widowers' uncertainties about remarriage/repartnering. He recognises that widows often do not desire to repartner (Hatch, 1995; Wu, 1994):

They like to be friend [sic] but they don't want to put up with er, they've probably, they've lost their partner and don't want to be tied down.

Finally, at the same time he is acknowledging that the lack of available prospective partners is a factor that deters him from repartnering (Hatch, 1995; Wu, 1994).

In summary, Len (Y) illustrates comprehensively the uncertainties that widowers have about remarriage/repartnering and the variety of reasons influencing their decisions, and his in particular:

I mean I wouldn't marry again now because I think there's an old saying that when she was made they broke the mould... Well yes. I mean – I've just er I've just finished a long – erm 6 years relationship – although I've been with another couple of women anyway. I sat down next to this woman and started

talking to her and she was from W* and I knew W* like the back of my hand – and I just got talking to her you know and but amicably we split up. ... Er just not having constant company I think [of a wife]. You've got a girlfriend but it's not the same.... If I found someone to move in here, I would like that yes. Somebody who was with me all the time.

In this quote he demonstrates the complexities and ambiguities of decisions that widowers make with respect to remarriage/repartnering. First, he suggests that he would not remarry, therefore, he is not eligible. Second he argues his late wife was irreplaceable, and therefore sanctified. Third, he is willing to have relationships with women, and hence, is eligible. Finally, he would like live-in female company, and therefore, finds repartnering desirable. Thus, whilst wife sanctification plays a role in widowers' decisions surrounding remarriage/repartnering, it is only one of several, sometimes contradictory, factors.

Repartnering

Only 4 of the widowers discussed their intention to remarry/repartner, and they appear to be what Stevens (2002) calls consummate relationships. A consummate relationship is one that “shared the following qualities: a long-term commitment to the relationship, public identification as a couple, openly acknowledged love for the partner, and involvement in regular sexual relations” (Stevens, 2002, p. 32) (note that we do not have evidence as to whether these men were engaged in sexual relations). Bert (Y) was divorced after 14 years of marriage, and then remarried. However, his new wife already had cancer when they met and she died after only five years of marriage. He met his most recent partner soon after his late wife died. He said:

Hoping to get married again. Third time lucky I've known (...) ² for 10 years – about two months after my wife died I met her.

He goes on to explain that there are logistical issues on his fiancée's part which make getting married or cohabiting difficult:

We're both hoping eventually that that will be resolved and we can settle down together.

He clearly enjoys being married, but as he said himself, he has not been lucky.

Amongst the widowers there is only one narrative of romance. George (Y) describes in great, and affectionate, detail how he met and courted his partner with whom he now lives.

Well in the meantime a friend of Joan [his wife] who was [abroad] at the time of her death came to see me. She was a friend of mine as well cos she only lived just over the way years ago but she'd moved away and then she'd retired and she was living a good life. Now she came to see me and I told her everything and I told her what happened and everything you know. And I said do you want to go for a drink? I knew she liked a bottle of

² Name indistinct.

Guinness. So a week later I'm coming into town on the bus and who's sitting on the bus but Edie. Where are you going? I says well don't forget if you want that drink. She said, where do you drink? I said oh in the Walker you know. So I gets down there and sure enough Edie comes in so we sat down and had a good draw, a couple of drinks and I took her home. I said we'll have to do it again. Not thinking much about it. She said, well alright, yes, yes I'll see you next Saturday. So this turned out to come into a relationship between us and I'm now living with Edie.

It is also interesting to note that his partner is becoming increasingly disabled, and he had cared for his wife prior to her death. Thus, it appears that the caring role is not one to which this man is averse. In these cases, wife sanctification does not appear to play a role in the decisions widowers make about repartnering. Instead the focus of the discussion is on the new relationship.

How do widowers refer to their new women?

When we were reading the interviews we were stuck by the fact that widowers did not often refer to their new women by name (8 out of 26). We wondered whether this signified anything important. First, this could have been simply a matter of nomenclature without any significance, i.e. perhaps it does not indicate affection or status, but rather is reflection of colloquial speech. Second, it could reflect a masculine script, reflecting how men demonstrate their masculinity, either in conversation or in interviews, in particular. Third, it might reflect a difference in the standing of these women in relation to the late wives. A search of the psycholinguistic literature found relatively little to inform our considerations either in terms of forms of address or personal reference, or in terms of masculinity (see Dickey, 1997; Kiseling, 2004). Dickey (1997) examined verbal interactions between two male speakers with reference to a third. She found that in talking about an intimate acquaintance [late wife] to people [the interviewer] on less intimate terms with the referent [late wife] and or speaker [widower], speakers avoid the use of nicknames or other intimate terms for the referent (p. 268 [our inserts]). None of our widowers used nicknames or intimate terms to refer to either their new women or late wives. Dickey does not examine differences between one referent and another. Kiseling (2004) examined the use of term 'dude' within a framework of gender and suggested that it had become a discourse marker signalling solidarity with the addressee, whether they are male or female. However, it does not shed much light on how older men might refer to their late wives and women friends. We next examined how men referred to their late wives. We had expected that during the course of a long interview men would talk about their late wives in familiar terms and refer to their late wife by name. However, only 14/26 did so, although this was a higher proportion with respect to new women. When we examined what men called their late wives in comparison to their new women we found three themes: late wife and new women called with the same degree of intimacy (n = 8); new woman called with a higher degree of intimacy (n = 2); and, importantly, for this paper, late wives being called at a higher level of intimacy (n = 9).

Both wife and new woman called with the same level of intimacy

Before we examine the discrepancies between wife and new woman, it is useful to demonstrate that some men use the same level of intimacy. Eight of the men called their wives and new women by name or used the same level of intimacy for the late wife and the new woman. For example, Philip (Y) said:

With Jean's mum and dad for a couple of years I stayed [wife].

Me and Brenda for a Sunday lunch two weeks ago [new woman].

Although Len (Y) does not use his wife or girlfriend's names, he does use the same level of intimacy:

Had a sidecar, wife on the back and er we used to go all over the place [wife].

You've got a girlfriend but it's not the same [ex-new woman].

Thus, we can see that some men do not differentiate between wife and new woman in the degree of intimacy they use during the interview.

New woman called more intimately than the wife

In only two cases does the widower refer to his new woman in more intimate terms than his late wife. One of those is Bert (Y), who has already spoken of this relationship being 'third time lucky'. Here is a quote that demonstrates both how he calls his wife and how he calls his new woman:

Well my wife died in the July and I met Deidre in the September I think.

Bert's relationship is already a LAT one, so it might be seen to be equivalent in intimacy to that of his last marriage.

Wife called more intimately than new woman

What was most interesting was that often men would use a less personal form of address when talking about the new woman (n = 9), whilst only two address the new woman more familiarly. Does this relate to wife sanctification? Terry (Y) calls his wife by name and his (now deceased) new woman a widow:

Our neighbour said the only time that I ever knew Harold – that's me of course – and my wife Elsie to have a row was changing the covers on the three-piece suite.

I remembered her husband who was dead – she was a widow – so I went to see her and it went on from there and um I used to visit her at home. She lived on the Wirral finally and we used to go on holiday together.

Another example is Arnold (X), who referred to his wife by name when talking about how they met:

Margie used to go up and down the garden and I used to see her.

In contrast, he refers to his new woman as 'a lady':

I've met a lady who erh, who went to Spain I...I met her in Spain and erhm, we had meals together and erhm, we went on the trips out from, from the base where we were staying at the Hotel.

Although Peter (Y) uses the possessive pronoun when talking about his new woman he still calls his wife by name, thereby maintaining the distance between wife and new woman. A week before his wife died, he said to a friend,

I can't imagine life without Denise [wife].

It was there that I met my friend [new woman].

These examples suggest, through the forms of address, that there may be greater degree of attachment to the deceased wife than to the new woman. We would like to suggest that this might be, in part at least, a product of wife sanctification. Even though these men have new women friends, they still hold their wives in high esteem and wish to demonstrate to the interviewer that their wives are still paramount in their life story. However, it may also reflect, more generally, how relatively little men use women's names in interview situation, perhaps within a masculinity framework. Further, it may reflect the dynamics of the interview situation more generally (Dickey, 1997). Thus, further research is needed to understand the ways in which widowers (and widows) refer to their late spouses and their new friends, and its wider significance.

Conclusions

In this paper we address three questions. First, can we extend Lopata's 'husband sanctification' to encompass wife sanctification? We find that men do sanctify their wives, and that this is most clear amongst men who express no desire to remarry. These men report that no one can compare with their wife. Second, we ask: does wife sanctification explain men's uncertainty about remarriage/repartnering? We discover that men who are uncertain about remarriage are likely to be influenced by their view of their first marriage, and this is often in the form of wife sanctification. In particular, widowers are concerned that a second marriage may not be as successful as their first. This may suggest that the men hold as an ideal both their late wife and their marriage together. Third, we examine whether wife sanctification has a role to play in men who express an intention to remarry/repartner. Here we find that wife sanctification does not play a part. In addition, we also found that wife sanctification may play a role in how widowers refer to their wives and their new women, with new women referred to in less intimate terms. This suggests that wives are frequently held in higher estimation than new women.

Although wife sanctification provides an effective framework in which to understand remarriage/repartnering discussions, other approaches are also valuable. The work of both Hatch (1995) and Wu (1994) is important in understanding widowers' remarriage/repartnering decisions. In particular, there are widowers who have no desire to remarry (Hatch, 1995; Wu,

1994). There are others who are influenced by eligibility – either with respect to themselves or with respect to potential partners (Wu, 1994). Finally, availability is also a factor that men consider in their decision-making. Widowers recognise that, even if they wished to remarry, there may not be available potential partners and therefore are affected by market constraints (Hatch, 1995; Wu, 1994). Thus, widowers are influenced not only by wife sanctification but also by factors such as eligibility, desirability and availability.

What limitations are there in this study? First, the analysis presented here is a secondary analysis of data not collected for the purpose of studying men's romantic relationships. In the interviews we only asked about these issues if widowers raised them. However, we believe that if the issue was important to the widowers then they raised it, and therefore, it is an example of volunteered speech that emphasises the salience of the widowers' discussions (Becker, 1958). Second, we have discussed recruitment issues earlier in the paper, and in particular that our sample is of self-defined widowers, rather than older men who have been widowed. Thus, caution must be taken when applying our findings to all widowers.

Lopata's work focused on widows and ours focuses on widowers. What are the similarities and differences between men and women? Although widowers are more likely to repartner than widows, the numbers in the population are small, and this is reflected in our sample. However, more important is the finding reported elsewhere (Bennett et al., 2003) using the same dataset that widowers are significantly more likely to discuss remarriage/repartnering than widows. As in the work of van den Hoonaard we find that these issues are salient for many in our sample. We also find that we can apply 'husband sanctification' to widowers. However, there does appear to be an important difference. We would argue that widowers invoke 'wife sanctification' in their discussions of repartnering and remarriage, and in the decisions they make, unlike our widows who do not discuss repartnering to the same extent (Bennett et al., 2003). There are a number of possible explanations for these differences. First, there is a cultural expectation that widowers would want to repartner, and therefore, widowers may feel that they are expected to discuss it, even if they do not wish to repartner themselves. Invoking wife sanctification may be seen as an acceptable (and perhaps desirable) reason for not repartnering. Second, wife sanctification may make men more cautious about repartnering decisions, especially with respect to comparisons between late wives and new women. Third, such discussions may reflect a more general masculine discourse about decision-making (see Bennett, 2005).

To conclude, Lopata's (1981) work on 'husband sanctification' provides a valuable framework with which to understand widowers' discussions about remarriage/repartnering. We have shown that our extension, wife sanctification, can account for widowers' decisions not to remarry/repartner. It provides at least a partial explanation as to why widowers are uncertain about remarriage and repartnering. Finally, wife sanctification plays a role in how widowers refer to their new women. As with widows, wife sanctification is the "social purification or reconstruction in memory" of the wife (Lopata, 1981, pp441). However, men's repartnering discussions and decisions are complex: availability; eligibility; desirability; and wife sanctification all have their role to play.

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