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The personal communities of men experiencing later life widowhood

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Abstract

Increasingly men are becoming widowed in later life due in part to a longer life expectancy. Social networks and social support are thought to help buffer the negative consequences of such later life transitions. This paper explores the personal communities of a group of older men experiencing widowhood. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted, September 2013-February 2014, with seven older widowers, 71-89 years of age, in North Staffordshire, United Kingdom (UK). Interviews included personal community diagrams to identify the structure of the older men's social relationships. Data analysis comprised thematic analysis of interview transcripts and content analysis of personal community diagrams. Three overarching themes were identified from the interview data: 'Personal identity and resilience assist transition', 'Continuity in personal communities provides stability' and 'Changes in social relationships and practices facilitate adaptation'. The study identified three types of personal community among the older widowers, comprising different combinations of family, friends and others. The findings illustrate that some older widowers have very restricted personal communities which puts them at greater risk of loneliness and social isolation. The social needs of long term carers should be addressed as isolation and loneliness can begin long before the death of a spouse. It is important to consider gender differences and preferences when designing interventions for older people in order to promote engagement, social inclusion and wellbeing.

Key words

Older men, widowhood, social networks, gender differences, social isolation, loneliness

What is known about this topic

- Later life widowhood can have a negative effect on well-being
- The experiences of older widowed men are under researched
- Men are more difficult to engage in interventions that promote socialisation

What this paper adds

- Social isolation and loneliness is experienced before the death of a spouse
- Some older widowers have limited social networks which puts them at greater risk
- Gender differences and preferences should be considered when planning services

Introduction

Later life transitions such as widowhood can have a negative effect on well-being (Collins, 2014; ILC-UK, 2015). Many older widows and widowers are often in poor health themselves (Hirst and Corden, 2010), particularly if they have been caregivers (DiGiacomo et al., 2013), necessitating the use of health and social care services (Beaumont, 2011). A recent policy report identified life events, such as widowhood, to be associated with increased loneliness and isolation, particularly for older men (ILC-UK, 2015) who tend to have smaller support networks and less contact with family and friends than older women (Martin-Matthews, 2011). Indeed improving the health and wellbeing of older men, including the health impacts of loneliness and social isolation, has been identified as a public health challenge (Milligan et al., 2016).

Although the incidence of widowhood is still greater for older women than it is for older men (Office for National Statistics, 2016), this ratio has decreased over recent years, due in part to the increased life expectancy of men (Hirst and Corden, 2010). Despite these demographic changes, most existing widowhood research has focused on the experiences of women rather than men (Martin-Matthews, 2011). The few studies that have focussed on men in addition to women, have illustrated gender differences in the experience of widowhood in later life. For example, research has shown that older widowers tend to have greater financial resources, while older widows tend to have greater sources of social

support (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Stevens, 1995). Other studies have found that men receive more formal support than women (Bennett, 2009) and are more likely to reduce their social interaction following the death of a spouse (Bennett, 1998). However some research suggests that older widowers are more open to meeting a new partner and remarriage than older widows (Davidson, 2001a, 2001b; Bennett, Hughes and Smith, 2005; van den Hoonaard, 2009, 2010). Qualitative North American research has further explored widowhood from a male perspective, including the resilience of older widowers (Moore and Stratton, 2002), and how men frame their experience within a masculine identity and manage the rearrangement of household tasks (van den Hoonaard, 2010). van den Hoonaard's study also illustrated the importance of father-daughter relationships and keeping busy to avoid loneliness.

Social relationships are thought to assist in the management of later life widowhood, however, research on widowers, their social networks and identity is limited. In particular there is a lack of qualitative research in Britain exploring later life widowhood from a male perspective particularly in terms of the types and characteristics of personal communities during the transition (Collins, 2013). Personal communities consist of relations that provide social capital (Wellman, 1990), they also capture the diversity and flexibility of contemporary familial, friendship and wider community ties (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Chambers et al., 2009; Collins, 2013). Earlier research conducted in the UK explored the personal communities of older widows and identified four types among the women comprising different combinations of family, friends and others, with the 'concentrated family' type being the most prevalent and robust (Author, 2016). The size of the women's personal communities ranged from 6-34 members, however, the quality of these ties were as or more important than the quantity. Building on research with older widows, the aim of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal communities of a group of older men experiencing the transition of later life widowhood. The research questions associated with this aim are:

- What are the personal community types of older widowers?
- What impact does later life widowhood have on the social relationships and practices of older men?
- Are some personal relationships more important than others during widowhood?

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative framework of subtle realism (Finlay and Ballinger, 2006). This theoretical stance and multi-method approach allowed for the exploration of older men's individual experiences of the transition of widowhood as well as for the examination of their personal communities during the change process. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University College Ethics Panel and written informed consent was sought from participants by the researcher prior to fieldwork (Israel & Hay, 2006). In addition, the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2002) was adopted to guide the research process and the men were assigned pseudonyms to assure their anonymity.

Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of seven older widowers (aged 71-89 years) in North Staffordshire, UK, between September 2013 and February 2014. The inclusion criteria were men over the age of sixty-five who had been widowed between one and three years, experiencing the transitional phase of widowhood (Bankoff, 1983). The purposive sampling used in this study was also opportunistic as the older widowers were accessed on a voluntary basis via organisations for older people, and through snowballing. Recruitment took place over several months with the researcher visiting organisations and distributing invitation letters. This procedure resulted in the recruitment of seven participants which is appropriate for a qualitative study (Silverman, 2013). However, asking for volunteers, particularly those who belong to organisations, may have resulted in the recruitment of a certain type of older widower. All the men that volunteered to take part in the study were White British, heterosexual and had children (although not all had contact with them), additional characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to explore the participants lived experiences and subjective meanings of their personal communities during later life widowhood (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview schedule included open questions from a schedule piloted and used in a previous study with older widows (Author, 2016).

Interviews took place in participants' homes and lasted between forty-five minutes and one and a half hours. The interviews were recorded using a digital data recorder and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the interview data personal community diagrams, based on those of Antonucci, (1986) and more recently Spencer and Pahl (2006), were completed by the men in order to identify the structure of their personal communities, refer to figure 1.

The personal community diagrams were analysed for their content based on the composition and centrality of the men's ties (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Author, 2016). Data analysis of the interview transcripts involved the use of thematic analysis, in order to identify patterns and themes as well as contrasts (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software was also used to assist in the analysis of the interview data (Bazeley, 2007). In addition Sandelowski and Leeman's (2012) strategy for translating findings into thematic statements was employed to increase accessibility.

Field notes and a reflective diary were kept throughout the course of the study in order to record the context of the interviews, the non-verbal communication of the participants, as well as the thoughts and feelings of the researcher. This can be seen to increase the trustworthiness and rigour of the data as well as the transferability of the findings (Finlay, 2006). Participant verification was not sought due to the sensitive nature of the interviews, involving bereavement and family relationships, which may have caused emotional distress to the men, and also to their families in the event of their death. However the participants were sent a summary of the findings of the study and invited to comment on these. One participant returned comments on the summary of the findings, which indicated his agreement with them.

Findings

The study identified four types of personal community among the older widowers, comprising different combinations of family, friends and others, refer to table 2. The number of ties included in personal diagrams ranged from 2-26. Three over-arching themes, with sub themes, emerged from the interview data. These are outlined in table 3.

Personal identity and resilience assist transition

This overarching theme demonstrates aspects of personal identity and relational experiences in later life widowhood, which includes the significance of approaches developed over the life course in negotiating change. The associated sub themes include: pathways to widowhood and being a long term carer; independence and overcoming adversity; challenges, ageing and loneliness; and gender and identity.

All of the older widowers who took part in this study had been long term carers. The men talked about their friendships and social connections ending even before their wives died. For example, George said: "You'd lost all of your friends they didn't come because they were disappointed with [her] they didn't want to see her like that". This seemed particularly pertinent to the men whose wives had a diagnosis of dementia:

You don't become a social person anymore, you become introverted...we used to go out playing dominoes...at least once a week, well that went. And then slowly but surely because of the condition, I couldn't leave her, they obviously didn't want that sort of...thrust upon them so...so we became isolated. (Richard)

However, despite the negative aspects of being a long term carer, the role in some ways prepared many of the men for life alone. Almost all of the men talked about adapting to manage 'non-traditional' activities even before they became widowed, for example, Robert said: "I had to do the cooking and washing and everything for past five years while she was here".

The men's accounts largely demonstrate resilience during later life widowhood. This fortitude appears to link back to earlier challenging life course events that the men had experienced, such as serving in the armed forces and dealing with serious illness:

It goes back really to my first disappointments when I couldn't go to [Naval College] and I had TB (Tuberculosis)...I was lying in bed in hospital...I mean I've seen people who came into hospital who gave up, who didn't get better because their mind set was wrong... but if you have a positive attitude you will deal with it. (George)

Despite demonstrating resilience during widowhood, almost all of the men talked about the challenges they encountered in their everyday lives. Becoming a widower in later life seemed to reinforce a recognition of ageing and the men's altered position, this was often compounded by the additional losses of older family members and friends:

Everyone is getting old, slowly but surely dropping off the edge, so that's an ongoing...questionable pleasure. I went to one funeral on Christmas Eve and I went to another funeral last week... (Richard)

All of the men's accounts included references to feeling alone and lonely once they had lost their spouse. This seemed particularly pertinent for the men (3/7) whose wives had gone into care before they died:

Even when she was in the [nursing] home and I was on my own I still had her there, because she was basically not only my wife but my companion and friend and so on...so all that intimacy goes and there is nothing to replace it. (Frank)

Perceived gender differences in the experience of later life widowhood were apparent in the men's accounts. For example, Arthur said: "of course you've mentioned widows, they can't get out really as easily I mean, like now I'm a free agent". One of the widowers described his 'wariness' of widows and also a concern that his actions may be misinterpreted:

You have to watch the widows honestly (laughs) some of them are alright but I pick one up the fourth Sunday of the month take her to church and take her back but she

wants you to go in, well if you go in you sit with her for about four hours when you've got other things to do as well. (George)

The men's accounts also illustrate a desire or need to engage in activities that are gender specific. For example, Richard described a conversation he had with an ex work colleague about an upcoming social gathering: "I said 'it's all women, I don't want to be stuck in with a load of women' and he said 'I feel the same way'". Even when events are open to men and women, there appear to be gender divisions, with men making up the minority:

The Church run a luncheon once a month for people who are on their own...there's an awful lot of ladies on their own...widows and they cater for them, they are all together...the place is a buzz of conversation, and then there's about half a dozen men sit together separately, all either widowed or on their own. (Frank)

Continuity in personal communities provides stability

This overarching theme illustrates aspects of continuity and stability in the men's personal communities, which includes the importance of taking part of the past forward in the management of transition. The associated sub themes include: supportive family, family friction; Christmas and birthday practices; neighbours, friends and organisations; and socialisation and activity.

Three of the men in this study have a 'concentrated family' personal community type. For these men, strong intergenerational ties with family, appear to provide a tangible thread and purpose during later life widowhood:

I always go up my son's on a Saturday morning, yeah, yes, because my son has always played local cricket, I did myself when I was younger, and the two lads [grandsons] are quite good at it. (Robert)

As well as emotional support, the men gave examples of the instrumental, practical support that some of their family members, particularly sons, provide on a day to day basis.

However, in contrast to supportive relationships with kin, some of the men, particularly those with smaller personal communities, gave accounts of friction and estrangement from their family members. This seemed to exacerbate feelings of grief and loneliness in widowhood:

We've got one son yeah. Well two or three years before they went to Australia...he virtually stopped coming here...and we've got four grandchildren. Well what he did...all he did was...send a card...didn't even send a wreath, and it was *typed*...it was *typed* 'hello dad sorry mother has died'. (William)

During the interviews the older widowers were asked how, and with whom, they spent social celebrations such as Christmases and birthdays. The men's accounts largely demonstrated continuity in these practices, however they also illustrate a reluctance to change:

I stop on my own...it's just one thing I decided (tearful)...the family used to come, Christmas and that, birthdays...but they keep on to me about going for Christmas, you know, but no I'd rather be here. I'd ring them Christmas day or they'd ring me...but I'd go out Boxing Day up to my son's. (Robert)

Christmas appeared to be a particularly difficult time for the men who had been recently widowed and who had limited family and friends in their personal communities. For example, William whose personal community diagram consisted of just two friends, said: "I'm dreading this Christmas". However, for the men with family centred personal community types (6/7), Christmas and birthday celebrations provided the opportunity to reinforce supportive relationships with their family members:

Christmas will be with my daughter, it has been for the last few years. For my birthday they took me down to...we met my son, they'd arranged it quietly so I hadn't realised, my son and his two children. (Arthur)

In addition to family relationships, the older widowers talked about important ties with neighbours, friends and organisations when discussing their personal communities. For one

of the older widowers with a 'mixed with family centrality' personal community, neighbours have provided a source of proximal support during widowhood:

[Neighbour] she lives across the road, she's a keen gardener so she helps me with the garden, brings me plants, these are some flowers (points to vase) she brought me yesterday...and next door but one, [neighbour] she was very good she used to bring me food especially in the early days. (Frank)

However, the men's accounts also illustrated some of the challenges to being neighbourly and feeling embedded in their communities. For example, Arthur said: "Not so much neighbours, they are fairly new, you know, people pass away, it's just one of those things".

Existing friendships offer a sense of continuity during later life widowhood, particularly for the men with 'mixed with family centrality' and 'friend centred' personal communities. Often these friendships were as, or more, important than their relationships with family:

I've got some friends down [South]...as we met at [holiday]...they always say... you can make your friends better than relations don't they? Oh he rings, one of us rings, every week. (Harold)

Some of the men however talked about the difficulties in maintaining these long term friendships during later life widowhood, including age related illness, limited mobility and transport, and the spouses of friends:

The only two friends I've got are...but his [wife] is a bit funny, I can ring [friend] up and he's seventy-five and my other mate [friend] he's in a bad way, he's seventy-six in a wheelchair. I go up his house Sunday night...but he lives up [town] and after that that's it...I'm on my [own]. (William)

Associational life and belonging to organisations, often linked to a former profession, provided an additional sense of belonging during widowhood for some of the men:

Being connected with the Church for such a long time they were very supportive. Golf, I was able to keep that going and I was a member of the Association of Engineers, so there were loads of lectures to go to. So I did have those interests. (Frank)

The older widowers made reference to the importance of socialising and getting out of the house, this was particularly so for the men with larger personal communities, for example **George** said: "My partner at Bridge club we go out every so often for lunch...last night the choir put on a concert at [Church] and there were quite a few of us there".

As well as being a useful distraction, taking part in meaningful and purposeful activity appeared to be an essential facet to managing the negative aspects of widowhood for many of the men. However, for some of the older widowers advancing age and reduced mobility have necessitated a decrease in their active involvement, particularly in voluntary work, **Richard** said: "When I retired I became involved in all kinds of voluntary organisations. That gradually reduced, I slowly but surely...I'm still doing four but it used to be twelve".

Changes in social relationships and practices facilitate adaptation

This overarching theme encompasses aspects of discontinuity and change in the older widower's social relationships and practices, **which includes the significance of making a shift from the past in order to adapt to a new way of life.** The associated sub themes include: a different life, looking forward; widowed friends and new associates; extending activities and group memberships; and exploring romantic relationships.

Some of the older widowers described how they have developed a new routine, including practical strategies to help them cope with social practices such as mealtimes without their spouses:

[The] bar in town they do a scampi, chips and mushy peas for £1.99 so I go in on the bus and have half a pint of beer and then come home (laughs) so that's very often a Monday. **(Arthur)**

A different life, being single rather than married, appears to be a common experience which out of necessity has led to the development of new interests and pursuits for some of the men:

You've got no local friends now, you've got new neighbours who don't want to know. So...I then had to explore other fields. So I play bridge on Wednesday, I swim on

Friday and...I've got an art class once a month and the pensioner's they meet in [town] once a month. (Richard)

Looking to the future and putting things in order, is apparent particularly for the more recently widowed men illustrating a commitment to move on with their lives, for example, William said: "what I'm going to do after Christmas I'll get tidied up".

Almost all of the older widowers made reference to having friendships with other widowed men, this commonality of experience and source of reciprocal support appears to be particularly helpful during transition:

He lost his wife about four years ago, and we always kept in touch with him...used to ring him up and that. He said 'come up the bowling green' that's taken most of my life up since, yeah...there are one or two at the bowling club that are on their own. (Robert)

Support is particularly forthcoming from friends who have been widowed for a longer period of time and these friends are sometimes ascribed familial attributes. For example, Arthur said: "Of course [widowed friend] helped in a way, because he sort of 'mothers' me (laughs)". Some of the men's supportive friendships developed via associations, such as the Alzheimer's Society, when the men were still caring for their wives, for example, George said: "most of the ones I know are widowers there are quite a few...you get to know more so you are not short of anything". The role of being a former carer for some men has extended and subsequently led to the formation of new associates and pursuits in widowhood:

PPG (Patient Participation Group), bridge clubs...quite a lot of those people on the outside [Personal community diagram] are people I have met since [wife] died actually. (George)

Two of the older widowers expressed an interest in meeting another partner once their spouses had died. However these desires were thwarted for various reasons including the interference of family members:

I've got somebody up at the cemetery but nothing come of it...her lad was poking his nose in...I was going to take her out for a meal you know but...aye she's nice, she took all her time to speak at one time...lost her husband. (Harold)

Similarly William described his disappointment at not being able to meet a new partner despite joining various groups and organisations in the hope of facilitating this:

I thought there must be loads of bloody widows that are in the same boat and I thought I could just do with meeting one of them...to be friends, nothing sexual...But I've now come to the conclusion that's just a waste of time...it isn't happening. (William)

In contrast one of the older men specifically expressed a disinterest in pursuing a romantic relationship fearing it may lead to further disruption and heartache in later life:

Just at the moment life is quite simple...if you start to involve a relationship...then it gets difficult. If you have to go through this process of adaptation, and having...lost my wife for a couple of years...I wouldn't look to doing it again. (Frank)

Discussion

The aim of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal communities of a group of older men experiencing the transition of later life widowhood. The first area of focus examined the personal community types of the older widowers. The study identified three types among the men, comprising 'concentrated family', 'mixed with family centrality' and 'friend centred', this broadly concurs with previous research with older widows (Author, 2016) illustrating the transferability and trustworthiness of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Three of the men had the 'concentrated family' type and three men had the 'mixed with family centrality' type, which suggests that these two family centred types are the most prevalent and robust. The size of the widower's personal communities ranged from 2-26 members, this is smaller than the 6-34 members identified in a previous study with widows (Author, 2016). This may further indicate that older women have larger social networks than older men (Martin-Matthews, 2011). The 'mixed with family centrality' personal community type tended to have the most members (ranging from 4-26). The 'friend

centred' type in this study is the smallest consisting of just two members. The widower with this personal community did not include any family members in his diagram, including his estranged son who lives overseas. These findings further illustrate that some older men have very restricted social support networks which puts them at greater risk of loneliness and isolation (ILC-UK, 2015).

The focus on the impact of later life widowhood on the social relationships of the older men revealed that all of the older widowers had been long term carers which had an impact on their transition (DiGiacmo et al., 2013). Importantly many of the men talked about friendships and social connections ending even before their wives died which has implications for addressing the social needs of carers in addition to the need for formal support (Bennett, 2009). Again this points to older widowers having fewer sources of social support than older widows (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Stevens, 1995). However, being a long term carer in some ways prepared many of the men for life alone, a number of the men talked with pride about their successful adaptation to different roles, including the management of household tasks (van den Hoonaard, 2010). In addition the role of carer for some men has extended and subsequently led to the formation of new associates and pursuits in widowhood. Some of the men have developed supportive friendships with other widowers, this commonality of experience and reciprocal support demonstrates social capital (Wellman, 1990). Indeed some of the men described these close friendships as being family-like demonstrating flexibility and suffusion (Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Chambers et al., 2009; Collins, 2013). These findings differ to those of previous studies that have found men to be more likely to reduce their social interaction following the death of a spouse (Bennett, 1998).

The final focus on whether some personal relationships are more important than others during widowhood revealed that the majority (6/7) of men in this study have family centred personal communities. For these men, strong intergenerational ties with family provide a tangible thread and purpose during later life widowhood. This was particularly visible in the Christmas and birthday celebrations of these men which provided the

opportunity to reinforce supportive relationships with their family members (Collins, 2013). As well as emotional support, many of the men gave examples of the instrumental, practical support that some of their family members provide demonstrating everyday social capital (Wellman, 1990). Interestingly, most of the older men's familial support came from adult sons rather than daughters which differs to the findings of van den Hoonaard (2010), however this may simply reflect the family structure of the men in this study which consisted of more sons than daughters. Almost all of the older widowers made reference to the importance of socialising and getting out of the house, this was particularly so for the men with larger personal communities. The majority (6/7) of the men in this study belonged to organisations and engaged in voluntary work, again this differs to van den Hoonaard's (2010) widowers who tended not to participate in formal organisations. However, as discussed earlier, this may be due in part to the sampling procedure employed in the present study. Interestingly many of the men's ties with organisations and subsequent friendships tended to be task-focused rather than 'purely' social. This may have implications for engaging men in meaningful activities that promote socialisation and relational opportunities. This is particularly important given that some of the men described feeling marginalised when attending events, such as luncheons, which are designed to provide social support. These findings support gendered interventions, which may help address the challenges identified in improving the health and wellbeing of older men, including the health impacts of loneliness and social isolation (ILC-UK, 2015; Milligan et al., 2016).

Although previous research suggests that older widowers are more open to meeting a new partner and remarriage than older widows (Davidson, 2001a; Bennett et al., 2005; van den Hoonaard, 2010), the majority (5/7) of the men in this study did not express an interest in re-partnering, challenging stereotypes and pointing to diversity of experience. However, these findings may also indicate that widowhood can be a period of growth, development, and liberation for men as well as women, particularly when they have been long term carers.

Most of the men in this study were well supported by family, friends and wider community ties which in conjunction with their own personal resilience enabled them to manage the transition of becoming a widower in later life. However, the findings also illustrate a number of challenges including age-related illness, and loneliness compounded by the additional losses of older family members and friends. These challenges may be particularly difficult for men with restricted personal communities which offer limited support in later life (Martin-Matthews, 2011; ILC-UK, 2015).

Conclusions

This study's exploration of older men's lived experiences of their personal communities during later life widowhood adds further insight to the limited existing research on widowers. The findings reveal a number of issues particular to older widowers and as such, should impact on policy and practice. First, the findings illustrate that some older widowers have very restricted personal communities which puts them at greater risk of loneliness and isolation. **Practitioners should seek out opportunities to explore the deeper content of relationships with family, friends and others when working with older men who are widows.** Second, the social needs of long term carers should be considered **alongside the need for formal support** as social isolation and loneliness can begin long before the death of a spouse. **This requires professionals to adopt a more holistic assessment of carers needs.** Finally, it is important to consider gender differences and preferences when designing interventions for older people in order to promote engagement, social inclusion and wellbeing. **Service providers should offer gendered interventions which meet the interests of older men.**

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Although the findings of this small scale qualitative study are rich and contextualised, generalisations may be limited due to the size and homogeneity of the sample, for example, all of the men in this study were White British, heterosexual, **and had children. Another**

limitation is that all the participants were already in contact with organisations. A future study is recommended to explore the personal communities of older widowers and widows from diverse backgrounds, and with older men and women who have lost same sex partners and/or do not have children. It is also recommended that further research is conducted to examine the effectiveness of gendered interventions in engaging older men in meaningful activities that promote socialisation.

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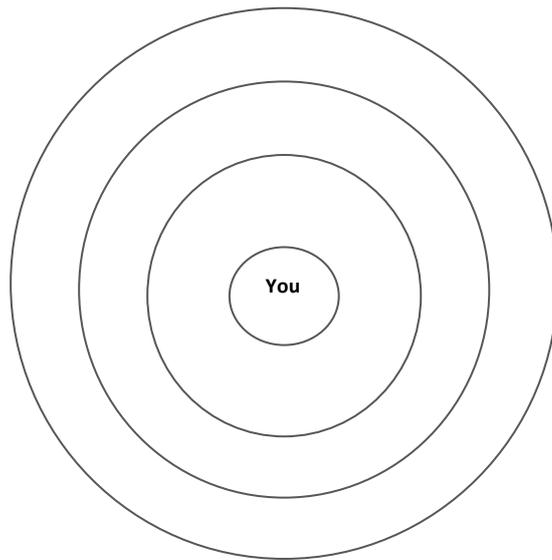
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Table 1 Characteristics of the participants

Participant	Age	Time widowed	Caregiver status	Number of children
Robert	84	2 years, 2 months	Cared for his wife for a number of years at home	1 son 1 daughter
Arthur	89	1 year, 2 months	Cared for his wife for a number of years at home until she went into a nursing home	1 son 1 daughter
George	79	2 years, 6 months	Cared for his wife for a number of years at home	1 son 1 daughter
Harold	88	2 years	Cared for his wife for a number of years at home until she went into a nursing home	3 sons
Frank	71	1 year	Cared for his wife for a number of years at home until she went into a nursing home	1 son
William	73	1 year	Cared for his wife for a number of years at home	1 son
Richard	87	1 year, 6 months	Cared for his wife for a number of years at home	2 sons 1 daughter



Inner circle – name people that are very close and important to you

Middle and outer circles – name people that are less close but still important to you

Figure 1 Personal community diagram

Table 2 Personal community types

Personal community type	Composition and size	Number of widowers
Concentrated family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Majority family, family in centre of diagram• Ranged from 6-12 members	3 widowers: Robert, Arthur, Richard
Mixed with family centrality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Majority friends & others, family in centre of diagram• Ranged from 4-26 members	3 widowers: George, Harold, Frank
Friend centred	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only friends in diagram, friends in centre of diagram• 2 members	1 widower: William

Table 3 Overarching themes with sub themes

Overarching theme	Sub themes
Personal identity and resilience assist transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pathways to widowhood, being a long term carer (n=7)• Independence and overcoming adversity (n=6)• Challenges, ageing and loneliness (n=6)• Gender and identity (n=6)
Continuity in personal communities provides stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supportive family, family friction (n=7)• Christmas and birthday practices (n=7)• Neighbours, friends and organisations (n=6)• Socialisation and activity (n=6)
Changes in social relationships and practices facilitate adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Different life, looking forward (n=7)• Widowed friends and new associates (n=6)• Extending activities and group memberships (n=7)• Exploring romantic relationships (n=3)