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“No Sissy Stuff”: Towards a theory of masculinity and emotional expression in older widowed men[☆]

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Abstract

Men maintain a ‘stiff upper lip’ at times of emotional stress according to theories of masculinity. Brannon’s description of ‘No Sissy Stuff’ is a good example. For older men, widowhood poses a serious challenge to emotional control. How can the emotional consequences of bereavement and widowhood be dealt whilst at the same time preserving masculinity? Data taken from two British studies illustrate how widowers negotiate the conflicting emotional experiences of widowhood and hegemonic masculinity with its emphasis on emotional suppression. The content of the interviews is emotional but masculinity is maintained through the use of rhetorical devices of emotional control, rationality, responsibility and successful action. The context of these emotions is important to understanding how masculinity is maintained; emotional expression may be permitted in private but not in public. Cultural and cohort contexts are also relevant.

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Masculinity in later life and, in particular, how life events impact on notions of masculinity deserves more attention (Fennell & Davidson, 2003). Bereavement is one of the most profound life events experienced by men (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001); given its emotional impact, one would expect it to challenge men’s sense of their own manhood, and yet this subject has received little attention. In previous papers I attempted to redress this balance. I used data from two (primarily qualitative) studies of widowhood amongst older men and talked about the emotional impact of widowhood, touching on its relationship to masculinity (Bennett, 2005a,b; Bennett, Hughes, & Smith, 2003; Bennett, Hughes, & Smith, 2005a; Bennett, Hughes, & Smith, 2005b). This article draws on these data and re-examines them in the light of theories of masculinity. I argue that, whilst the emotional consequences of widowhood provide a challenge to conventional views of what it is to be a manly man, widowers negotiate those emotions in ways that, to their mind, will preserve their masculinity. That negotiation takes place in speech; men discuss their experiences using rhetorical devices through which the emotional content of the story is expressed in the language of control, rationality,

[☆] From Brannon, R. (1976). The male sex role — And what it’s done for us lately. In R. Brannon & D. Davids (Eds.), *The forty-nine percent majority* (pp. 1–40). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

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responsibility and success. This negotiation responds to the contextual framework of time and place, which includes the public versus private domain, culture, generation and cohort. In this article I bring these elements together to develop a theory of widowhood and masculinity.

1. Theories of masculinity

There are remarkably few studies which address the issue of masculinity — among these are: Brannon (1976); Calasanti (2004); Courtenay (1998, 2000, 2002); Kimmel (1994); McDaniel (2003). Brannon's (1976) paper was one of the earliest and most influential, identifying four themes he saw as underpinning the male sex-role: 'No Sissy Stuff' (from which this paper takes its title); 'The Sturdy Oak'; 'The Big Wheel'; and 'Giv'Em Hell!' (p. 12). He defined 'No Sissy Stuff' as, "The stigma of all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities including openness and vulnerability"; 'The Sturdy Oak' was defined as "Manly air of toughness, confidence, self-reliance", 'The Big Wheel' as "Success, status, and the need to be looked up to", and 'Giv'Em Hell!' as an "aura of aggression, violence and daring" (p. 12). Building on Brannon's work and approaching the subject from a social constructionist point of view, Kimmel, writing in 1994, views masculinity as "a constantly changing collection of meanings we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world" (p. 120), and suggests that these roles are the ones against which American men are measured. He argues that the hegemonic definition of manliness "is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power. We equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, in control." (p. 125, his italics). Courtenay (1998, 2000, 2002) reaches similar conclusions in examining masculinity in the context of men's health. He argues that men not only experience social pressure to endorse health-related beliefs of independence, robustness, self-reliance and strength, but also are active agents in the construction and reconstruction of these beliefs. Men must suppress their pain, both physical and emotional, and exercise control over both and to exert power. Two, more recent, articles pinpoint the issues of gender and ageing stereotypes. Calasanti (2004) examines male old age from a feminist gerontological view. Dominant masculinity, she argues, is associated with strength, wealth, and emotional self-control, but old age challenges hegemonic masculinity. As it is socially constructed in the West, old age is associated with loss of strength, control, independence and self-reliance. Thus, older men are already seen as 'Other', even when in other respects they may approach the masculine ideal. Calasanti (2004), thus, confirms an observation made earlier by Kimmel (1994), who drew attention to one particular example of the difficulties faced by older men. Kimmel describes how the actor Jack Palance, still working at 71 years old, complained that film producers were wary of employing him in case he was not capable or virile enough. More recently (14th December 2006), Sylvester Stallone said, at the opening of the sixth Rocky film, that sixty year olds were not over the hill. Rocky is, of course, the ultimate (hyper)masculine role. McDaniel's (2003) work is also relevant. She examines the experiences of men who lose their jobs in mid-life in the light of theories of ageing and gender. Though her research concerns younger men, there is a similarity between job loss and widowhood; her work also stresses the "growing call for ageing and gender to be reconceptualized together" (p. 328), instead of, as in the past, being discussed as separate issues.

2. The Sturdy Oak under attack: widowhood and masculinity

If men are socialized to not resemble girls, to be wary of expressing emotions, especially those which suggest vulnerability, and to become skilled at hiding their feelings as Brannon (1976) has suggested, then the powerful emotions of bereavement directly challenge their ability to live the masculine ideal. Bereaved men, in aspiring to be 'The Sturdy Oak', are required to be tough both behaviorally and emotionally, to not need others' help, at just the time they are suffering a reduction in self-reliance and anxiety about the future. Similarly, 'No Sissy Stuff' demands that men maintain a stiff upper lip even when they have lost a life partner and most need an emotional outlet. In addition, other cherished masculine roles, such as breadwinner and sexual partner, are lost or become marginalised. If the majority of men seldom live up to the masculine ideal even while endorsing it, and thus, often feel *powerless* rather than *powerful*, as Kimmel (1994) suggests, the experiences of bereavement further increase the gap between masculine ideal and lived reality. Men's sense of masculinity may be threatened by bereavement with its associated physical and mental health impacts and, as Charmaz (1995) suggests, lower a man's perception of his place in the hierarchy of masculinity. Finally, Calasanti (2004) suggests that, (married) men still have dominance over their wives even when all other masculine roles are denied to them. So what happens when there is no wife to dominate? Widowed men may then have no masculine roles left to play, I would argue, and therefore, feel that their masculinity is precarious. If one takes this in

conjunction with the popular (and academic) view that widowers fare worse than widows, then widowers are in danger of being seen (not least in their own eyes) as the weakest of the weak.

This brings us to the importance of cohort effects. The men described by Calasanti (2004) and studied by me were born before the Second World War. Over time some masculine ideals may stay the same, but others may change as masculine roles are constructed and reconstructed in social and cultural interaction. For example, not showing emotional weakness and not seeking help for health problems may be considered 'masculine' both by men born in the early twentieth century and by those born later. But, whereas younger men may have no problems about learning domestic skills, older men may view cooking and housework as feminine activities. In this context, the work of McDaniel (2003) is relevant, not only because she discusses age and shows that some issues of masculinity transcend cohort, but because of the parallels to be drawn between bereavement and another significant life event — job loss at a non-normative time. The men she interviews talk about being "hidden in the home" (p. 340), where the new domestic skills they have to learn are under-valued by society; they regret the fact that their lives have become more private and their loss of a public face and social respect. These experiences are often to be found amongst widowed men.

As well as being forced to confront cultural notions of what is 'masculine', widowers find themselves up against conventional ideas (both academic and popular) about what it is to grieve. Western society has constructed a set of expectations for the conduct of people following the loss of their partners that have become normative. Both men and women are expected, for example, to show emotion (but not too much), they are expected to withdraw (at least for a short while) from society, and they are expected not to repartner too soon following their loss. These expectations are in opposition to two dominant masculine ideals: emotional control and public life. Widowed men, I might argue, are caught between a rock and a hard place. If they show too much emotion they are seen as not masculine enough, but if they do not show enough emotion they are seen as uncaring. If they withdraw from society, they are seen as unable to cope and powerless, and yet if they do not withdraw they are seen as failing to grieve properly. I would hypothesize that if they fail to repartner they are seen as not masculine, but if they repartner too soon they are thought not to have loved their wives enough. Widowed men are successful in negotiating these two social constructions. Nevertheless, the balance and timing of these negotiations are delicate.

There are two other qualitative studies of widowerhood which are relevant here. The first is that of Davidson (2001) who examined older widowed men living in the UK. She found that they were more likely than widowed women to repartner following their loss. She identifies an interesting paradox that whilst men are socialized to be independent and self-sufficient, it is they who are the ones who wish to repartner. Moore and Stratton (2003) also recognize that widowed men are socialized to behave in a masculine manner both in terms of domesticity and emotional suppression. However, they suggest that there is evidence that men are slowly changing and are gradually becoming more domestically active and perhaps more open to expressing their feelings.

Four of my previous papers address these issues (Bennett, 2005a,b; Bennett et al., 2003, 2005a,b). In the earliest one I examined the reasons why both men and women believe that women cope better with widowhood, and I discussed these beliefs in the light of theories of masculinity. In particular, I drew attention to the fact that the emotional, social and domestic experiences of bereavement impact on the roles of 'No Sissy Stuff', 'The Sturdy Oak' and 'The Big Wheel'. For example, crying over the loss of a wife runs contrary to both the ideal of 'No Sissy Stuff' and 'The Sturdy Oak'. Similarly, not protecting one's wife enough to prevent her from dying challenges 'The Sturdy Oak' ideal. Having to focus one's attention on domestic, private activities such as housekeeping rather than on running a business threatens the role of 'The Big Wheel'. I also argued that bereavement challenges the masculine ideals described by Kimmel in terms of control, strength and capability. Bereavement takes away control, weakens resistance both physically and psychologically, and requires learning to be capable in new and challenging domains. Taking these ideas further, I later examined how the experiences and feelings of the men in my studies fitted the ideals and roles of hegemonic masculinity (Bennett, 2005a). I examined each of Brannon's roles and showed how some men's behavior fitted this paradigm perfectly; for example, one of my informants (M28, age 80, widowed 20 years) told me, "Housework and that you know — I weren't idle like you know ... Yeah. Well I — my son kept me at work but I never bothered about the house. Didn't worry me". Other men adapted the interpretation of these roles to support their own experiences but, by presenting domestic skills in the terms of masculine traits such as strength and capability, shaped it so it conformed in some way to the masculine ideal. Another informant (M13, age 75, widowed 3 years) explained, for example, "Knowing what she used to do — knowing now that it was a very hard job — oh knowing that I've got to do it myself now". The sense he gives here is that domestic labor is worthy of a masculine role.

3. Method

Participants

I interviewed older widowed men for two independent studies, one in the East Midlands of England (denoted Mr+ letter) and the other in the North West of England (denoted M+number). I recruited from a variety of organizations concerned with older people, including widowers' clubs, trade unions, age concern, social service departments. Most respondents lived in their own homes although several lived in sheltered accommodation. The data consist of tape-recorded interviews with 60 widowers. The widowers were aged between fifty-five and ninety-eight years old (mean age 79) and were widowed between one quarter and twenty-five years (mean years 7).

Participants came from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds, representing the diversity of Merseyside and the East Midlands. We carried out a comparison of socio-economic status of our participants with General Household Survey 2001 norms and found no significant differences (Office for National Statistics, 2001). In addition, participants in the sample held a variety of religious, spiritual and secular beliefs, with no single religious denomination being dominant. Unfortunately, despite our attempts, the sample did not reflect ethnic diversity.

The interview

I tape-recorded the semi-structured interviews that lasted between three quarters of an hour and an hour-and-a-half, conducted in the respondents' own homes. Respondents gave informed consent. The interview was not prescriptive; the aim was to learn from the widowed people what was important to them. The approach was, "We are the novices and you have the experience". I asked about life before widowhood, around the time of bereavement, one year after, and currently. I wanted to know what respondents did and how they felt at these different times (for more details, see Bennett & Vidal-Hall, 2000).

Analysis

I coded the interviews using grounded theory and content analysis methods; see Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000) for a detailed description. One broad theme provides the focus for this paper: emotional expression. This covers a number of sub-themes which include differences between men and women, discussions of the value of life and the expectations of others vis-à-vis emotional expression.

4. Data and theory development

Widowed men face a challenge; they have needs and experiences, both practical and emotional, which conflict with received ideas about masculinity and make them feel less of a man. They react in a number of ways; they may, at least temporarily, abandon the masculine roles; or they may take positive action to reconstruct their sense of their own masculinity.

Abandoning the role — at least sometimes

We found that men who coped better with bereavement were more likely to talk to other people about their feelings — not only feelings about their bereavement, but their feelings in general (Bennett et al., 2005a). It was the willingness to talk, as opposed to the availability of someone to talk to, that was important. We also found that those men who described themselves as 'upset' were also likely to be coping better. It would seem that it is the willingness to admit to emotional distress that is beneficial. These findings point up a difficulty which bereaved men face in the context of masculinity, and which is also identified by Courtenay (2000), that the emotional self-control idealized in hegemonic masculinity is harmful to health. Bereavement literature has long recognized that grief work is an important factor in successful adjustment (Worden, 2003). The potentially unhealthy suppression is identified by M6, who did not speak of his emotions with anyone (and this supports Courtenay's (2000) view). It was only when he began to become ill and sought an outlet for his feelings in the form of bereavement counseling that he recognized that 'bottling things up' was not good for him (but he was only one of very few men who sought help).

I really kept these things – perhaps wrongly – pretty well to myself and it was only when I started going to this counseling. I found it very beneficial. (M6, age 73, widowed 6 years).

Other men abandon the attempt to keep a stiff upper lip much earlier; some allow the grief and words to flow in private, and others just let it flow regardless of situation. This is reminiscent of Goffman's view of human action as performance. In some cases men maintain (to a greater or lesser degree) the 'front stage' and in others men abandon it (1959).

Those who keep their emotions to themselves (or show them only to their nearest and dearest) are endorsing the dominant masculine view of 'No Sissy Stuff' and 'The Sturdy Oak' even though they can't maintain the roles all the time. "Well there's hardly a day goes by without having a good cry", said informant M16, (age 74, widowed 4 years). However, they don't cry in front of others. As informant M11 (age 77, widowed 25 years) says: "You get upset sometimes when you're sitting at home by yourself and things remind you, you know. You get a bit upset", but "You know I wouldn't cry in front of them now".

In contrast there are widowers who do not feel the need to keep their feelings private and who recognize the importance of emotional expression (e.g. Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996).

I find — it was no use just being on your own ignoring other people and I think I've spoke to more people than ever since she's gone. (M23, age 77, widowed 1.5 years).

I just wanted to talk about her to everybody. (M3, age 75, widowed 8 years).
However, they are soon put in their place by others:

I mean we got a new guy on the table some months back – he's not been back since – but he started spouting about how his sisters had let him down and a couple of guys said to him, "We know how you feel but we're all here." In other words you know, "I've got my load to carry — I can't carry yours as well." (M16, age 74, widowed 4 years).

As our son put it, sometime ago, "Dad," he said, "Can I advise you?" he said. "Don't go on too much," he said. "I know how you're feeling, I know ..." [Don't what?] Don't go on talking, like meeting people in the bus-stop, wanting to. Now they want to talk. [Family?] Yes. And the neighbors and that. People at the bus-stop that I bump into like. They ask or pass some comment but I don't go into any detail. (M1, age 78, widowed 6 years).

Thus, it is clear that widowers do not simply suppress or deny the emotional impact of bereavement. The interviews reveal the dilemma of emotional feeling on the one hand and the expectation that emotions will be suppressed on the other. Some of the widowers explicitly discuss the contexts in which talking about one's feelings is permissible and the contexts in which it is not. Broadly speaking, as they see it, it is permissible in private situations (and the interview is a private and confidential space) but not in public ones.

Clearly the men in these examples fall into two categories: those for whom grief is kept private; and those for whom it is allowed into the public domain. This presents them with the challenge of reconciling their personal needs with hegemonic masculinity. For those men who express their emotions publicly there appears to be no conflict: They either do not feel that their masculinity is threatened by their emotional exposure, or they no longer care. These men appear to be able to resist the social pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity. Adjustment to widowerhood requires adaptability and a facility to withstand the emotional (and practical) pressures; perhaps this explains why some men are able to resist these other social pressures.

Reconstruction

Other men address the conflict between masculine expectation and lived reality in bereavement by positive thoughts, words and actions. Early repartnering, for example, may be a way for a man to resume sexual and social roles, and may also be a way of dealing with some of the practical domestic problems an older widower faces (Davidson, 2001). However, I propose that one of the more frequent ways men meet the challenge and restore both their emotional equilibrium and their self-respect is by negotiating the conflict via the language they use when discussing their experiences with others. Talking about feelings is widely regarded as 'a woman-thing', a symptom for some men of 'feminine weakness'. Widowers who want or need to talk yet remain 'masculine', therefore, tend to acknowledge their feelings but transform their personal stories from accounts of 'feminine weakness' into examples of 'masculine strength' through the rhetoric of their discourse. So descriptions of grief, loss and pain are overlaid with talk of control, rationality, responsibility and successful action.

Control

Few widowers deny the enormity of their loss. As one informant (M45 Age 88, widowed 3 months) sums it up: now if ... a man loses a woman, he not only loses his soulmate, his friend, his best friend, his lover in earlier days and all that, but he's also lost the person that's been carrying the burden for the best part of their married life.

But even while the profundity of the experience is being admitted, the story will tend to concentrate on, or at least end with, the restoration of control. As an example, here is a story told by Mr E (age 74, widowed 5 years); initially an account of complete collapse into alcoholic stupor and self-abuse, it ends – eventually – as a success story. Mr E is hospitalized and that provides a turning point. He asks to be re-housed, he is quickly offered another property, accepts it immediately, goes to the pub to celebrate but comes home sober for the first time since the death of his wife, and what is more, remains sober. The implication is clear: Mr E is in control of his life again:

With being a diabetic I shouldn't do what I did do and consequently I ended up in hospital but that's beside the point. [What...?] But then I used to go out at lunch time. [Right.] Which I'd never done. [Right.] Drink at lunchtime. [Right.] Go out every night which I never used to do [...] it was actually started on the Sunday when I had this heartache over it and I just thought, *fuck it*. I went straight round to the pub. Then I came back, then I got my dinner prepared ... Yeah I was diabetic and I, I was drinkin' there one night, *bang*, I was out. [Really?] And the next thing I was in hospital ... Erh, got around and erh, they said leave Brown Road, and erh, I don't know what strings were pulled but when I did ring up the housing place over here and asked them about if I could move erh, they said, "Well, I'll call you back", or she said, 'I'll call you back'. And within an hour she sent me down here the same, the same woman, to look at this place. [Right.] So it was empty, it was all done, so I, erh, decided to take it ... I went to the Red Lion and me friend there they (words unclear), that was the first time I'd gone home sober.

Two psychological states are often regarded, in the context of hegemonic masculinity, as contradictory — emotionality and control. Mr E (whose experience was one of the most compelling) demonstrates the two contrasting states as sequential: first the lack of control (both emotionally and behaviorally); followed by a taking of control, again both behaviorally and emotionally. Like many other widowed men he acknowledged that he was upset, depressed, careless of his own life. So, though on the one hand he is admitting how far he fell short of the masculine ideal, on the other he is discussing (I would argue, reconstructing) his experiences in ways that conform to those masculine ideals.

Other men may present their psychological weakness and their taking control in order to return to some normality as overlapping or simultaneous processes: They were depressed but at the same time knew that it was not acceptable. Here, for example, are informants M15 (age 81, widowed 7 years) and M10 (age 70, widowed 9 years). Note how their use of expressions denoting action ("Never do that", "the first step back", "You've got to make a move", "He said er, "Would you like to retire?" so anyway I said yes"), and words denoting rationality ("conscious", "knew", "thought/think") balance the emotionally loaded terms such as "low", "felt", "couldn't care" that they use elsewhere in the story:

being in a depression which I was conscious of and I knew it was going to lead nowhere ... Oh extremely low. Sometimes I felt like ending it all to be honest with you. I mean I don't think I would have done — I would never do that. Never do that. But I felt that. (M15, age 81, widowed 7 years).

I couldn't care — if the house burnt down ... but you've got to make a move and as I say the first step back on the road ... to normality ... was the Philharmonic ... couple of years after — after she'd died — the person I'd mentioned earlier called me in the office and he said er 'Would you like to retire?' so anyway I said yes. You know I thought about it, it's not going to happen but it did. (M10, age 70, widowed 9 years).

These two men illustrate that both 'No Sissy Stuff' and 'The Sturdy Oak' roles are important ingredients of their self-respect. Mr E also seems to be trying out the 'Giv'Em Hell!' persona, though his violence is turned inward rather than outward. It is interesting, too, that he used alcohol as the means of his own self-destruction, an exemplar of masculine behavior.

Thus, although widowhood inevitably is associated with a lack of emotional self-control, these men present themselves as establishing control over their lives and emotional states. They are thus able to preserve or return to masculine ideals.

Rationality

Rationality is often seen as a masculine trait. Not only that but, like issues of control, it is often placed in opposition to emotionality. The use of rational discourse and unemotional language can be seen as a means of establishing a masculine approach to bereavement and widowhood and thus reconstructing the widowers' sense of their own masculinity. The language which M10, M15 use – and even Mr E uses when describing his initial loss of self-control – is rational and considered. These three men admit that initially they did not conform to the masculine stereotype; nevertheless, they discuss it in a matter-of-fact masculine way.

Other informants present themselves as rational, not only in their language, but by being dismissive of their emotional state or simply not discussing it.

Yeah, felt a bit sorry for myself. [Yeah.] but I intended to get over it and that was it. (Mr C, age 92, widowed 6 years).

I think what went through my mind was, “Well I’ve got to do something about my life”. (Mr H, age 76, widowed 3 years).

I got through it, you know that. (M37, age 72, widowed 8 years).

I’d got to carry on living, so you know. (Mr L, age 81, widowed 7 years).

Life goes on. (M10, age 70, widowed 9 years).

Responsibility

In my 2005b research I found that men often cited their responsibilities when they discussed why they decided to carry on living rather than take their own lives. These responsibilities form a key part of dominant masculinity: The men are capable and reliable, ‘The Sturdy Oak’. Men who are widowed in middle age keep going for the sake of their still-young children, and even the very old express a sense of responsibility towards their adult children. As informant M3 (age 75, widowed 8 years) says: “It was the two lads that forced me ... and it was just the two lads that kept me going”. The people towards whom the next informant feels responsible are unspecified, but they nevertheless are instrumental in his decision to continue for as long as possible: “I’m trying to keep going as long as I can for other people’s sake” (Mr B, age 77, widowed 15 years). Even 98-year-old Mr A who told me that he had said his goodbyes and was now ready to die, explained that he could only do so because he had now fulfilled his self-imposed responsibilities to his family:

And I’ve just had a fortnight in Crete, I came home last Saturday. That’s one of my daughters. I promised all three of them I’d see all 3 of them before I died so, that’s it, I’ve finished now. (Widowed 3 years).

All of these men assert their masculinity by calling on the hegemonic characteristics of reliability and capability that are expressed in their sense of responsibility towards others. They are ‘The Sturdy Oak’, burdened but stoic; they cannot be accused of doing ‘Sissy Stuff’.

Successful action

Widowed men often speak of the ways in which they successfully overcome the depression and emotional anguish that resulted from their bereavement. This informant, for example, went to the doctor to talk about how low he was feeling following the death of his wife (in this respect he was unusual, the majority of the men in this study did not seek help). The doctor prescribed anti-depressants and the following exchange occurred in the pharmacy:

I said I’m suffering from depression. And the old chap says “There’s only one way of getting rid of it. (...) Do some hard work”. [24 hours a day] (...). He said, “In about a month’s time you’ll feel it going out of your hair and your fingernails”, which it did. (M26, Age 77, widowed 9 years).

M26 never took the anti-depressants; instead he decorated his house.

In earlier examples we have also seen how other men matter-of-factly say they are going to get over their grief and depression. I would argue that they are invoking the ‘The Sturdy Oak’ role to demonstrate that they are ‘real men’ at a time when they feel themselves in danger of allowing the ‘Sissy Stuff’ to come to the surface. These men are, of course,

Sturdy Oaks in a very real sense. They are survivors: they have not succumbed to early death; they were willing to be interviewed and were thus demonstrating their success at widowhood; and they believed their experiences would help other widowed people (and they were correct in that assumption).

5. Discussion

I have shown some of the ways in which dominant masculinity is challenged by the experience of bereavement and widowhood. The emotional consequences of partner loss – feeling upset, depression, crying, and feelings of hopelessness – challenge the hegemonic masculinity identified by the roles of ‘No Sissy Stuff’ and ‘The Sturdy Oak’ (Brannon, 1976). Bereavement and widowhood also challenge the masculine ideals of self-reliance, control (both behavioral and emotional), strength and independence (Calasanti, 2004; Kimmel, 1994). Without doubt, widowhood contributes to widowers’ feelings of powerlessness (Kimmel, 1994). Attempts to adhere to these masculine ideals may have a potentially detrimental effect on men’s psychological wellbeing (Courtenay, 2000).

I argue that, on the whole, widowers do not altogether refrain from doing ‘Sissy Stuff’, but they negotiate the situation by describing their engagement in ‘Sissy Stuff’ in terms which reflect the dominant masculine ideal, and which fit comfortably within Brannon’s notion of ‘The Sturdy Oak’. They describe their emotions in terms of control, rationality, successful action, and responsibility towards others. Their delivery is calm and deliberate even when they are discussing life and death matters; and although the content is emotional, it is presented in a masculine fashion using the language of control, reliability and success. Thus, widowers are reconstructing their experiences to conform to dominant masculine ideals. It is not that they are denying their experiences; it is rather that they are demonstrating their masculinity and incorporating their feelings into their masculine personae. I would argue that these men are not aware that they are reconstructing their sense of masculinity. They do not discuss what it is like to be a man or often overtly discuss the ways in which their experiences challenge what it is like to be a man in modern society.

One way in which men appear to be able to negotiate the conflicts of dominant masculinity and socially constructed bereavement is in the context in which emotional expression takes place. Men recognize that if they are to express their emotions it is more acceptable to do so in private (funerals may be an exception). van den Hoonaard (2001) also found this to be true of widowed women. However, the difference between widows and widowers lies in the ways in which they are described, that is in masculine language. This private grief is what has been termed elsewhere as ‘suffering in silence’ (Calasanti, 2004; Courtenay, 2000). Courtenay also points out that the context of masculine ideals is important. For example, he argues that sharing emotions with girlfriends (or in the light of my research, daughters) may be acceptable but sharing it with other men (or strangers) is not. This raises the question of whether an interview is a public or a private context (see Goffman, 1959). On the whole I have assumed that the interview is a private space; many of the men talked about how useful (in a quasi-therapeutic sense) the interview had been, giving them an opportunity to discuss issues that they were unable to discuss elsewhere.

However, there may also be elements of public performance (in a technical narrative sense (Bauman, 1986; Bruner, 1991; Nicolaisen, 1984; West & Zimmerman, 1987)). In earlier work I have argued that the narrative (and for this paper, the interview) acts as a rehearsal for public presentation (Bennett, 2006). Nicolaisen argues of narratives that:

They show events to have structure and meaning and not simply sequence. They selectively duplicate, belatedly rehearse and retrospectively mediate the past for us ... (1984: 176).

Thus, I would argue that the interviews are serving several functions, one of which is to renegotiate or reconstruct a widower’s sense of masculinity (the others are discussed in detail in Bennett & Vidal-Hall, 2000). The widowers may be (unconsciously) rehearsing and demonstrating their masculine credentials during the interview, using the interviewer as a non-judgmental audience and the interview as a safe space to play out the conflicting roles of bereaved husband and man.¹ A widower may be saying, “I was upset, I did feel depressed, but I dealt with it by taking control, being rational, and not dodging my responsibilities towards other people”.

Central to Kimmel’s (1994) view of (American) men and masculinity is the notion that men see themselves not as powerful, as feminist writers would suggest, but as powerless. The data presented here would lend support to his

¹ The interviewees in this study were women. Two were women in their fifties and one was in her late thirties. There has been much discussion in the literature about the gender and age relationships of interviewers and interviewees and the potential influence on the content of interviews (see Speck et al., 2005).

position. Widowers can be seen as having a double, or even a treble dose of powerlessness, at least in comparison with other men. First they are men, but they are not high-flyers, wealthy, or sexually promiscuous. Second, the widowed men are not young and almost all were retired when they were interviewed, and even those widowed prematurely were in mid-life when their wives died. Third, they were widowed — both men and women in my study report being treated as second-class citizens following their widowhood. Thus in comparison with hegemonic masculinity, these widowed men are powerless. Moreover, they are powerless when compared to widowed women. Widowed women are the norm amongst older adults, they are seen to have more useful domestic and social skills than men, and are able to express their emotions without social sanction, and are often found to have better psychological wellbeing than widowed men (Bennett et al., 2003; Stroebe et al., 2001). As Courtenay (2000) suggests, older women should be taken as the standard by which men are compared, and if that is done men are additionally made powerless. Widowed men, therefore, have many challenges to meet when reconstructing their masculinity in late life following the deaths of their wives.

I have shown how widowhood in older men and the emotional turmoil that bereavement entails challenge hegemonic masculinity. Whatever view of masculinity one adopts, whether it be Brannon's (1976) 'No Sissy Stuff', Kimmel's (1994) view of men perceiving themselves as powerless, Courtenay's (2000) view of men being expected to suffer in silences, or Calasanti's (2004) view of older men being seen as 'Other', being an older widowed man is not easily compatible with hegemonic masculinity. However, the data also demonstrate that widowed men can reconstruct their sense of manliness through emotional expression. They use rhetorical devices that express masculinity to discuss their emotional distress. They describe their experiences in terms of control, rationality, responsibility and successful action. Further, they make a distinction between emotional expression which is permissible in private but which is not permissible in public. These widowed men do not convey a sense of emasculation, rather they use their masculinity to overcome one of the most difficult life events they are likely to face.

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