WIDOWHOOD AND LEISURE: THE ROLE OF LEISURE IN PERSONAL COPING

STRATEGIES

by

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ABSTRACT

The loss of a spouse later in life is a common event, particularly for women, 40 percent of women and 13 percent of men aged 65 and older are widowed, according to latest census figures (Konigsberg, 2017). The loss of a husband is an abrupt change in life that leaves the surviving spouse searching for ways to keep moving forward. Dealing with the grief of a tragic loss is a subjective process, but leisure has proven to be a successful influence in coping with the distress of traumatic events (Iwasaki & Mannell, 1999; Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008). The purpose of the present study was to explore the experiences of women who have lost a spouse and what role leisure might play in helping them cope with their grief and move forward.

Given the multifaceted nature of coping and leisure experiences, an interpretive research design was employed for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 women regarding their widowhood experience and leisure involvement. Leisure has been viewed favorably as a way to cope with challenges, because many of the things we associate with leisure, such as enjoyment, socialization (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975; Samdahl & Kleiber, 1989), and a perceived sense of freedom (Iso-Ahola, 1979; Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011) may provide a way to experience positives during dark times. For the women in this study social leisure provided them the opportunity to connect with other women in similar roles, which helped them see that a positive life as a widow is possible. Exploring new leisure activities also contributed to their new self-identity as a widowed woman. Leisure activities were beneficial for providing enjoyable experiences, growing social networks, and providing a tool for reinvention.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"If you live to be a hundred, I want to live to be a hundred minus one day, so I never have to live without you," a popular quote found on everything from greeting cards to keychains, but no one seems to agree where it originated. Regardless of origin, the sentiment describes a storybook love a special bond so intense that you hope to never experience life without it. Those of us lucky enough to find that storybook love and get married say the words and promise to love each other 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, til death do us part.' From then on you move through life as a couple, a single unit. You experience life's ups and downs together; kids, job changes, promotions, loss of parents, buying a house, health issues, absolutely everything. Every fairy tale has an ending, and unlike in the storybooks it is not always a happy one. We do not often consider what it will be like when death comes, and one half of the whole is left behind to pick up the pieces. It is not a happy thought; and we tend to assume that we will have tomorrow together. The reality is that the loss of a spouse later in life is a common event, particularly for women (Fields & Casper, 2001).

Widowhood

Becoming a widow is one of those topics people do not like to think about, believing that if they do not acknowledge it, it will not happen to them. The reality is that forty percent of women and thirteen percent of men who are 65 and older are widowed, according to latest census figures (Konigsberg, 2017). Research has shown that married people have better health than non-married or widowed people for several reasons: spouses discourage risky behavior, couples have better economic well-being, and more

social support (Mineau, Smith, & Bean, 2002). Adjusting to life outside of the "safety" of

marriage can be difficult; the death of a spouse is rated among the most stressful life

events that humans experience (Bisconti, Bergeman, & Boker, 2004). Widowhood is an

abrupt change of life that can leave older women grieving, and looking for a way to find

meaning and continuity (Neimeyer, 2005). Society seems to view widows as a subculture

"submerged in loneliness, chiding each other for self-pity, advising each other to keep

busy, individually hoping for an avenue of escape, and collectively succumbing to an atti-

tude of hopelessness" (Barrett, 1977, p. 856). In many cases, the partner who has been

there to help navigate so much of life is gone; marriage dynamics, spousal roles, and

spousal health all have an effect on the grieving process and how a person moves on.

When a spouse dies, one's previously scripted life may become disorganized, and wid-

ows often have to find a way to create a new sense of identity (Neimeyer, 2005). For

women who relied heavily on their late spouses, adjusting to new responsibilities may

create significant stress, whereas other widows may experience improved self-esteem as

they learn new skills and manage life on their own (Carr, 2004). Not all marriage rela-

tionships are the same, and different marriage dynamics affect the adjustment to widow-

hood. Despite these differences, initial reactions seem similar across the board and

women who have been recently widowed typically describe an initial sense of "numb-

ness" or "a fog" (Bennett, Smith, & Hughes, 2005). One study showed that psychological

adjustment varies greatly based on the nature of the marriage; the adjustment to widow-

hood is most difficult for those whose marriages had high levels of warmth, dependence,

and low levels of conflict (Carr et al., 2000). Widows who reported high levels of conflict

and discontent in their marriages experienced less yearning, a key aspect of grief (Carr et

al., 2000). While marital status has a strong effect on some aspects of the grief process, it is still an emotional experience and a drastic change to life.

Social Impact

To those experiencing grief, it may seem like their world has come to a halt while the outside world keeps marching onward. Bills do not stop coming in, pets still need to be fed, the house does not stop collecting dust, and friends and family still need you. The identity of wife has transformed, but the roles of mother, friend, grandmother, and/or family matriarch remain. Deciding what life looks like as a widow is not easy, and there are many challenges that occur on the bereavement journey. Finding your new sense of self, and your role in the ongoing world is not just a personal journey but a social one (Neimeyer, 2005). A husband's passing can disrupt a woman's ties with his relatives, co-workers and mutual friends, relationships with married friends may deteriorate (Barrett, 1977). Survivors try to find a recognizable self in their ongoing relationships (Neimeyer, 2005). Renegotiating social roles can lead to significant changes in friendships and other relationships through the reduction of social networks (Bennett, 2008) that can lead to feelings of loneliness (Utz, Swenson, Caserta, Lund, & DeVries, 2014). Couple-related leisure activities or group meetings, such as church or exercise classes may be less appealing to attend, but maintaining a supportive social network is important. Social support plays an important role in determining feelings of loneliness after widowhood (Utz et al. 2014). The importance of social support for physical and mental health has also been well-documented (De Vries, Utz, Caserta, & Lund, 2014; Ferraro, Mutran, & Barresi, 2017; Isherwood, King, & Luszcs, 2017; Kaplan, Cassel, & Gore, 1977).

Emotional Impact

Another important aspect of dealing with the transition to widowhood is the emotional burden. The death of a spouse creates tremendous emotional upheaval, but the emotional response can vary substantially among individuals (Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti, & Wallace, 2006). Some individuals experience acute and enduring psychological distress, while others do not (Bonanno, 2004; Wortman & Silver, 1989). The emotional changes caused by spousal loss require loss-oriented coping, while the inevitable changes in daily life necessitate restoration-oriented coping (Hahn, Cichy, Almeida, & Haley, 2011). While there is often an emphasis on the negative emotions, research has shown that some widows actually show improvements in well-being after the death of their spouse (Bonanno et al., 2002). A "blossoming" effect may help women overcome loneliness and find new enjoyable activities (Lopata, 1993).While depressive symptoms subside over time, Utz, Caserta, and Lund (2014) found that women's emotional changes are less linear, and vary from day-to-day.

In addition to coping with how to survive life as a widow, there are financial constraints. Economic risks faced by the current population of older women may reflect their lower level of experience in the working world, and traditional gender norms for women born in the 1920s-40s (DiGiacomo, Lewis, Phillips, Nolan, & Davidson, 2015). Poverty rates among unmarried elderly women are the highest of any demographic group in the United States (Hungerford, 2001). While not a primary focus of this study, it is important to be aware that financial stresses affect adjustment to widowhood, and can exacerbate vulnerabilities (DiGiacomo, Lewis, Phillips, Nolan, & Davidson, 2015).

Coping

Just as the grieving is different for each individual, learning how to cope is also an introspective process. *Coping* is the attempt to reduce physical and/or psychological stress or negative feelings that come about because of difficult circumstances (Houston, 1987; Snyder, Ford, & Harris, 1987). Coping with the loss of a spouse creates the need to process an arduous life-transition, to grieve the death of the loved one, but also the changed life of the survivor, and to reestablish a new life worthy of passionate reinvestment (Neimeyer, 2005). "Losing a long-term partner can disrupt the continuity of the fabric of a life thoroughly and perhaps surprisingly interwoven with the strands of another, even when those lives were apparently self-sufficient" (Neimeyer, 2005, p. 228).

The "widowhood effect" (Moon, Kondo, Glymour, Subramanian, & Lever, 2011, p. 1) describes the increased probability of death among those experiencing recent spousal bereavement, and the effect has been found among men and women of all ages around the world (Moon et al., 2011). The way that people deal with stressful events seems to affect how well they are able to continue on afterwards (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). Dealing with grief is a difficult process that everyone handles differently, but leisure has proven to be a successful influence in coping with the distress of traumatic events (Iwasaki & Mannell, 1999, 2000; Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008). Many of the things we associate with leisure, such as enjoyment, socialization (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975; Samdahl & Kleiber, 1989), and a perceived sense of freedom (Iso-Ahola, 1979; Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011) may provide a way to start building positive experiences back into everyday life.

There are innumerable ways of dealing with all the changes that occur from the loss of a spouse; Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define these as coping strategies. Coping strategies are a person's constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (reduce, minimize, master, or tolerate) the internal and external demands of the person-environment transaction, that is appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources. Coping strategies are malleable and complex; there is not a one-size fits all approach to coping, only successful or unsuccessful techniques. Successful coping strategies promote resilience, ensuring that older women aren't left depressed and emotionally distressed. The effectiveness of the coping strategy is based on how often they help people achieve beneficial emotions (Lazarus, 1991). For example, family gatherings create an atmosphere that fosters happiness and hope, individuals would have a tendency to view this as an effective coping strategy, but if they create anxiety or anger another way of coping should be considered.

Leisure as a coping mechanism

Leisure has been viewed favorably as a way to cope with life's challenges, because many of the things we associate with leisure, such as enjoyment, socialization (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975; Samdahl & Kleiber, 1989), and a perceived sense of freedom (S. Iso-Ahola, 1979; Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011) may provide a way to experience positives during dark times. It is also believed that leisure helps people improve or maintain their mental and physical health, which may give them a better chance of overcoming the complicated and ongoing process of coping (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993a). Leisure also helps bolster mental and physical health, which may give people a better fortitude to navigate the coping process (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993a). Kleiber, Hutchison

and Williams (2002) credited leisure's ability to be a distraction, generate optimism, aide in reconstructing of a new narrative, and act as an instrument for personal growth.

The social nature of many leisure activities also contributes to the attitude that they are beneficial for helping individuals cope with negative life events. Social support through leisure participation can provide a sense of competence, control, and companionship which may enable people to better handle stressful events (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993a). Social support can be especially important to those who have lost a spouse because it marks the loss of a significant source of meaningful and intimate support (Pinquart, 2003).

Study Context

Current findings illustrate that leisure can be a beneficial pursuit for those coping with negative life events, such as the loss of a spouse. This study focuses in on more specific aspects of leisure as a coping mechanism for widows: under what circumstances was it helpful, what types of leisure were most beneficial, most stressful, etc. In doing so, this study endeavors to refine the scholarly community's understanding of the relationship between leisure and coping with negative life events while also providing useful recommendations to widows and their caregivers.

In order to better understand these phenomena, this study was conducted with women who attend one of two middle Tennessee senior centers. St. Francis Senior Center is a large, municipal senior center with over 2,000 regular members located in the heart of a mid-size urban area. River View Senior Center is a small, non-profit senior center that serves several rural counties. Both serve their local senior adult population by

providing meals, activities, and other assistance programs to their members, but the contrasting populations and management designs of these two centers will allow for a broader view of how leisure might be beneficial to different widow groups. Both senior centers provide an outlet for leisure activities, social engagement, and support groups to help those experiencing grief or traumatic medical diagnosis.

Methodology and Methods

With the aim of understanding the role leisure experiences play in the social and emotional adjustments to widowhood, semi-structured interviews allowed me to engage with my participants and generate discussion centered on their perspectives. While the loss of a spouse is overarchingly tragic, the narratives in which the loss occurs are unique to each individual. Additionally, the individualistic nature of grief, including the subjective experience of emotion, makes the qualitative nature of the current study imperative to best capture the personal nuances. The services provided by local senior centers, such as leisure activities, social engagement opportunities, and support groups make them ideal for participant recruitment. Recruiting at the senior centers allowed me to select a sample of women who have made strides to engage in regular leisure and social activities.

Purpose and Research Questions

This qualitative study focuses on if and how leisure activities have been and continue to be beneficial for widows coping with the loss of a spouse. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How did leisure activities impact participants' personal coping strategy?

2. What aspects of the leisure activities, such as social engagement, a buffer from negative feelings, a way to understand or create their new identity, were the most beneficial?

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The loss of a spouse is a traumatic event regardless of gender, but the likelihood of becoming widowed is much higher for elderly women; they are three times as likely to become widowed compared to their male counterparts (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The research on widowhood is vast with topics ranging from grief (e.g. Utz, Caserta, & Lund, 2012; Konigsberg, 2017; Neimeyer, 2005), to adjustment (e.g. Carr, 2004; Perrig-Chiello, Spahni, Hopflinger, and Carr, 2016), social support (e.g. Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996; Kaplan, Cassel & Gore, 1977; Utz, Swenson, Caserta, Lund, & deVries, 2014), and coping (De Vries et al., 2014; Thoits, 1995). The innumerable factors that go into determining how an individual experiences the loss, such as circumstances under which the loss occurs, relationship dynamics, as well as the individual nature of coping, make understanding the experience truly challenging. To better understand what part that leisure might play in coping with the loss of a spouse, the subsequent chapter will review scholarship on 1) bereavement 2) coping, 3) the emotional and social stressors of widowhood, and 3) leisure as a coping mechanism.

Bereavement

In this study, coping was examined in the context of the bereavement process occurring in the wake of the loss of a spouse. Bereavement is the larger experience of having a loved one pass one, while grief is composed of the various emotional, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to that loss (Howarth, 2011). There are a variety of opinions about the length of the grieving and bereavement process, but Stroebe and her colleagues (2001) point out there is not a specific time period before people return to a baseline state of well-being. While most people adapt over one to two years, even then

there are still differences since the loss (Stroebe et al., 2001). Grief is often characterized by feelings of great sadness and anger, in addition to physical symptoms like weight loss, insomnia, and difficulty concentrating (Cohen, Mannarino, Greenberg, Padlo, & Shipley, 2002). Bereavement involves a reconciliation, a process whereby bereaved individuals work to realize the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the one who has passed (Cohen et al., 2002). Thus, bereavement is a process moving past the grief and cope with the loss; it is a process of confrontation and avoidance of the stressors associated with negative life events (Ryckebosch-Dayez, Zech, Mac Cord, & Taverne, 2016a).

Emotional and Social Stressors

While each person's experience is different, there are constraints or adjustments of the widowhood journey that are common. One of the reasons widowhood is such a potent life stressor is the surviving spouse has to manage emotions and changed social, economic, and behavioral environments (Utz, Caserta, & Lund, 2011). When we hear that someone has lost a loved one, I think often times our first response is "How sad!" or "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that!" It elicits an emotional response because we think of all the feelings that she or he might be experiencing, and of course emotions play a large part in the grieving and bereavement processes. As mentioned previously, the natural reaction of sadness, depression, loneliness, and anxiety are part of the grieving process (Stroebe, Hansson, & Stroebe, 1993). It is also important that we recognize that coping with widowhood is not something that occurs linearly, and emotions in the bereavement process will have highs and lows. Some widows show less depression or even relief after a loss,

and generally these are women who were caretakers over a long period before their husbands' passing or rated their marriage as having high levels of conflict (Carr et al., 2000). Widows who had traditional marriages where they were responsible for child care and housekeeping may know little about the life tasks carried out by their husband such as yard work, earning an income, or paying bills (Utz, Reidy, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2004). While overtime reactions and emotions vary and fluctuate, initially there seems to be a consensus of "numbness" (Bennett & Vidal-Hall, 2000, p. 420). Some women are better able to navigate the ups and downs than their counterparts, but research shows that even the most resilient individuals are not immune to at least some harrowing thoughts and emotions related to the death of their partner (Bonanno, 2004).

The powerful emotions associated with the coping process, both positive and negative, contribute to the individualistic nature of coping. Emotional responses arise from personal experiences or narratives about relationships between oneself and the environment (Bolger, 1990). Determining whether emotions are positive or negative is an appraisal process by the individual where they must determine the personal significance of an event (Folkman et al., 1986). We all experience a plethora of emotions each day, but being able to regulate the expression of these emotions has been viewed as a vital component of well-being (Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1993). Emotions elicited in response to stress and coping have been categorized into four types: threat emotions (being worried, fearful, and anxious), harm emotions (being angry, sad, disappointed, guilty, and disgusted), benefit emotions (being exhilarated, pleased, happy, and relieved), and challenge emotions (being confident, hopeful, and eager) (Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003). Being able to understand the extent to which a particular coping strategy is effective or

beneficial, is based on how often they help people achieve each of the four types of emotional states (Lazarus, 1991).

The dual process model of coping describes this fluctuation in emotions as "dynamic process of oscillation" (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, p. 212). Stroebe and Schut (1999) view the flux of emotions as either loss oriented or restoration oriented. More specifically, during bereavement, a widow will confront her loss (i.e., loss orientation), and other times she will actively avoid thinking about it by doing new things or distracting herself from the grief (i.e., restoration orientation) (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This regulation process has proven to be an important part of the emotional adjustment process (Bisconti, Bergeman, & Boker, 2004).

On top of acknowledging and processing emotional changes, navigating new social roles can also be a daunting task. Loneliness is the most consistent and frequent problem reported by widows (Barrett, 1977). Social connections that were previously in place may become unavailable or less available to the surviving spouse, necessitating a renegotiating and redefining of social relationships (Utz et al., 2014). Over time older adults' social networks diminish; loss of friends, siblings, and sometimes adult children leave widows with a small social network. Relationships established through the late husband's connections, such as his side of the family, his co-workers or Sunday school class, may also diminish (Ferraro et al., 2017). Smaller social networks and losing connections to their late husband's acquaintances can contribute to the difficulty of establishing a strong social network (Isherwood et al., 2017).

In spite of potentially shrinking social networks, research has shown that most widowed persons consider increased social activity as an effective way to overcome psychological distress (Utz, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2002). In response, relationships with friends, and children or siblings may become strengthened and evolve as the new social changes of the loss become apparent (Guiaux, Van Tilburg, & Van Groenou, 2007). Participation in formal social and religious organizations can also be convenient for making connections with others who have had the same experience (Ferraro, 1984). Participation in formal organizations has been shown to improve self-esteem, life satisfaction, and decrease symptoms of depression (Pillemer, Moen, Wethington, & Glasgow, 2000). In a study by Utz and fellow researchers (2002), a majority of widowed persons said their increased social participation was an active coping strategy to deal with the negative effects of widowhood. Support from a social network is not only important from an emotional standpoint, but also important to physical health. The late husband may have played a key part in day to day health care or transportation, making social connections imperative for physical support (Isherwood et al., 2017).

Establishing new roles in so many different social settings can be trying. Many widows don't care for the term "widow"; it is viewed negatively and creates an aura of undesirability around the person holding that title (Barrett, 1977). It may feel like a sign over one's head announcing loudly "social pariah, stay away!" Deciding how to navigate and take ownership of new social roles may come about through experimentation, learning a new skill (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), or for some, dominate social norms provide a "provisional self-narrative" creating a link from one identity to another (Neimeyer, 2005,

p. 234). For a woman who has been a traditional wife and mother most of her life, the uncertainty and anxiety of building a new life can be overwhelming; deciding how to establish what her new life should look could be most easily done by looking for social or cultural norms (Heinemann, 2008). Regardless of the process, establishing a new identity can be a turning point in the bereavement process (Stroebe & Schut, 1999) and social support after the passing of a loved one is helpful in many ways. It can provide a shoulder to cry on, someone to vent to, a helping hand around the house, or a brief distraction and a way to identify who the new you is going to be. Social support provides brief periods of emotional relief, aids in creating a new social identity, and can improve physical symptoms of bereavement, but unfortunately it is not able to soften the impact of the loss or accelerate the process of recovery (Stroebe, Zech, Stroebe, & Abakoumkin, 2005). So, how are older women expected to successfully make their way through all of the constraints and keep moving forward? There are several widely accepted coping theories and models, and it is important to understand each might shape this study.

Coping

"Coping" refers to the cognitive and behavioral approaches that individuals use to manage stress (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). People alter their circumstances, or how they are interpreted, to make them more favorable to get past the pain of their new reality (Lazarus, 1993a). It is important to note that not everyone copes with issues in the same way, and it is a subjective and individual process (Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, & Dattilo, 2003). For many widows, the overwhelming and lonely path of overcoming grief and understanding their new life as a widow can be transformed into new and unforeseen life fulfillment (Lee & Bakk, 2001). Other women are not able to cope with the transition as

well; they become depressed, develop poor health habits, and are at higher risk for relo-

cating to a nursing or healthcare facility (Markson, 1984). The ways that people find to

cope vary over the course of time and are adjusted based on the demands of differing sit-

uations (Lazarus, 1993). Everyday life brings unexpected events that can create a variety

of issues that have to be dealt with as part of the coping process; perhaps a song on the

radio or a late payment notification arrives in the mail reminding a widow of her lost

loved one.

   Coping strategies are often affected by the amount of control an individual has or

is perceived to have over the current situation. Problem-focused coping looks at problem

solving as a means to modify the source of the stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). For

widowed women, it is possible that household repairs that used to be done by the man of

the house cause undue stress; hiring a handyman could remove that stress. If nothing can

be done to alter the current situation, emotion-focused coping is employed to reduce or

manage emotional distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). An emotion-focused coping strat-

egy may be seeking out time with friends or family for sympathy or understanding to

managing distressing emotions.   In most situations both types of coping strategies will

play a part in the process (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). What works for one situation may

not work in another, coping strategies may also change as the distance from the stressful

or negative life event becomes further, and the usefulness of any coping strategy can vary

based on the type of life event and an individual's personality (Folkman & Lazarus,

1985).

Stroebe and Schut's (1999) Dual-Process Model (DPM) of coping was specifically designed to look at the stressors of dealing with the death of a spouse, and developed to better understand the dynamic coping processes adopted by bereaved persons. The DPM identifies two types of coping, loss-oriented and restoration-oriented, and describes a coping process where bereaved individuals 'oscillate' between the two (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The DPM also suggests a need for occasional breaks or distractions from the negative emotions as a vital part of adaptive coping (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). While use of the DPM has proven useful in theory and quantitative empirical investigations, Fasse and Zech (2016) found several issues when applying it to actual widowed daily life experiences. Bereaved persons were often unaware of the difference between loss or restoration-oriented coping, the subjective perception of intermixed processes can make distinguishing between the two difficult (Fasse & Zech, 2016). DPM also assumes a very intentional nature to coping, but the women in Fasse and Zech's (2016) study emphasized that their coping processes were often spontaneous and a product of chance. Similarly, many of the women in their study did not consciously seek out distractions from their bereavement. Despite several misalignments with DPM and the daily experience of widowed life, Stroebe and Schut's emphasis on the role of social interaction in coping with bereavement, and the need to take intersubjective and interpersonal processes into account, were affirmed.

Davis, Deane, and Lyons's (2016) strengths-based model of coping with death and dying integrates components of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). ACT encourages those experiencing grief to accept and acknowledge their feelings of yearning or grief, but also asks individuals to use mindfulness exercises to anchor themselves in

the present rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future (Harris, 2008). Their findings showed that focusing on their own personal strengths may be more beneficial to bereaved persons than challenging negative beliefs. Individuals were encouraged to engage in rewarding activities, stay engaged, and build on what is good in life, rather than reflecting on the negatives in order to cope (Jacobson, Martell, & Dimidjian, 2006). Accepting painful thoughts and feelings, in addition to engaging in activities that are enriching, was more important in coping than acceptance alone (Davis et al., 2016). Of the many coping theories and strategies reviewed, I believe that the importance of leisure has been underrepresented in many of them.

Leisure as Coping

Leisure has been viewed favorably as a way to deal with life's challenges and stresses, because many of the positive experiences associated with leisure, such as enjoyment, socialization (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975; Samdahl & Kleiber, 1989), and a perceived sense of freedom (Iso-Ahola, 1979; Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011). It seems reasonable to think these characteristics may provide a way to start building positive experiences back into life, and in addition leisure also helps people improve and maintain mental and physical health, which may give them a better chance of handling the ongoing process of coping (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). As mentioned previously, Folkman and Lazarus's (1980) research showed that when unfavorable things happen people seek a way to remedy their situation or feelings by solving the issues or adjusting emotional responses. Iso-Ahola's (1989) Seeking and Escaping Model illustrates that participation in leisure activities may be one way for people to remedy or solve their issues. Leisure can help insulate individuals from the negative effects of daily life (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996)

and can serve as an outlet for people to change their routine in a way that might help them obtain a more ideal psychological disposition. Paradoxically, leisure as an escape can lead individuals to realize their potential to cope with challenges and learn to move on (Hayosh, 2017). Folkman (2008) found in her studies that positive and negative emotions can occur simultaneously during intensely stressful times associated with caring for a loved one and then actually losing that person.

Folkman's earlier work with Lazarus and Kanner suggested positive emotions may serve as "breathers," "sustainers," and "restorers" (Lazarus, Kanner, & Folkman, 1980). "Breathers" provide a respite from the stress, "sustainers" help motivate coping, and "restorers" provide a chance to replenish resources needed to continue coping. Similarly, Fredrickson's "Broaden and Build" theory of positive emotions describes the benefits of positive emotions in replenishing resources in order to move on (Fredrickson, 1998). Fredrickson's theory suggests that positive emotions broaden a person's mindset, limiting the negative thoughts and emotions of a more narrow mindset (Fredrickson, 2004). The "broadened" positive mindset in turn helps "build" individuals' psychological and social resources, and these bolstered resources can be called on the assist with the coping process (Fredrickson, 2004).

Kleiber, Hutchinson, and William's (2002) study of leisure as a resource for coping with negative life events built on the notion that positivity can be beneficial in coping with negative life events. Leisure's ability to create a distraction, restore optimism, and provide a way to get back to "normal" led Kleiber and colleagues to posit that leisure activities provide a source of self-protection, self-restoration, and personal transformation

after negative life events. Simple acts like listening to music, watching television, a game of solitaire, or going for a hike, any activities that provide a diversion can create a situation of control and stability allowing for self-protection from negative emotions. Some familiar forms of leisure such as weekly dinners, church outings, or regular girl's nights may be beneficial for self-restoration, because they can provide the space needed to reconnect and restore a sense of continuity, reaffirming identity and reinforcing valued aspects of life. Kleiber et al. (Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002) compared the personal transformation potential of leisure to Csikszentmihalyi's work where he describes the "focusing" effect of a tragic event (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In his book, he describes people who have lost limbs, and yet they find that by focusing their attention on overcoming their handicaps, they establish clear goals and find reward in learning to live in a new way, a new personal transformation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Another link between leisure and coping is that both are as much social undertakings as they are individual. Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) found that, particularly for people who viewed their situation as something that could be changed, social support was instrumental to their coping process. Social support through leisure participation can provide a sense of competence and control, but also companionship which may enable people to better handle stressful events (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). It is important to note that in both of these studies it was only under certain conditions that social support and leisure provided a break from stress and enhanced well-being. The perception of control in leisure activities and social support are a large part of what gives them the ability to counteract stress and aid in coping (Rodin, 1986). Research has shown that being successful in leisure activities (i.e., mastering a new skill or gaining acceptance into a particular club) can be a

way of overcoming social barriers, and also serve as a way to find comfort in new social roles (Hayosh, 2017). This sense of belonging and social support is important to the coping process by buffering the detrimental effects of stress on physical and mental well-being (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996).

The relationship between leisure and coping is a complicated one because both phenomena alone are so complex that when combined they become even more difficult to explain how they might work together. Deciphering the relationship between leisure and coping is not a new undertaking, previous literature has provided a reasonable basis for leisure's ability to be beneficial in coping with a variety of stressful and even tragic life events, and one goal for the current study is to continue uncovering how leisure can benefit those facing difficult life transitions. There are a plethora of resources available for those who have lost a spouse from support groups to dating websites, but I feel like the value of getting involved in meaningful leisure activities has been underrated. Research conducted previously with widows and their leisure habits (Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008; Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008a) has examined why leisure is beneficial as a coping mechanism (see also Denovan & Macaskill, 2017; Hayosh, 2017; Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, & Dattilo, 2003; Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Iwasaki, 2006; Nimrod, Kleiber, & Berdychevsky, 2012). Given their complexities, a subjective interpretation of older women's experiences of leisure and coping with widowhood is necessary. Through qualitative methods, I hope to generate a better understanding of how leisure can be a useful tool in coping with the loss of a spouse.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The primary focus of this study is to explore the individual experiences of widowed women and the role their leisure choices may have played in their coping process. No two widowhood experiences are the same, and to best understand the individual narratives of my participants' experiences, I have chosen a qualitative design. A qualitative study allows me to recognize the emotions and physical sensations that occur during leisure and coping which are both subjective. Semi-structured interviews will allow for purposeful dialogue about these women's experiences.

My own theoretical leanings are important to point out as well, because it helps ground the logic, inform my methodology, and make my assumptions about the organization of society known. I have no experience with losing a spouse, so I will be relying on multiple interviews with these women to gather my data. A constructionist epistemology allows for both my participants and me to contribute meaning to their circumstances. As Crotty (1998) suggested meaning "is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (p. 9). Crotty (1998) also points out that constructionism is not seeking a definitive Truth, but a usefulness. Thus, the aim of this study is not to create generalizable truths that every woman who is widowed will experience, but to gain an in-depth knowledge of these women's experiences. Insight into how they handled these events could help others in similar circumstances, and also serve as a starting point for future research.

A social constructionist lens will allow me to make sense of how these women are understanding their new situations. "The social constructionist perspective focuses on

how people learn, through their interactions with each other, to classify the world and their place in it" (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2003, p. 50). Losing a spouse is a major life event that could alter how these women view the world and their role in it. These women's social circles, daily responsibilities, new identities, and possible decreased income are just the start of the changes to their life. The loss of a husband could have a profound impact on these women's social and cultural realities. I want to see how they are coping. Who do they look to for help? How does their view of themselves change? How are their family relationships affected? How does leisure play a part in all of that? The constructionist framework allows for integration of many of the subtler features of widowhood, beyond the traditional concern with universal signs, symptoms, and stages of readjustment in the wake of significant loss (Neimeyer, 2005). Giving these women a chance to share their unique self-narratives, including the 'micro-narratives' of everyday life and 'macro- narratives' that consolidate their self-understanding, range of emotions, and what guides their social performance allows me to construct a shared understanding of their experiences (Neimeyer, 2004, pp. 53–54).

Site Selection

My first morning at Stoney Brook: it is cool and foggy, the lines of the parking lot are hard to make out in the dense fog. As I approach the small, dated brick building I can hear the chickens clucking, ready to be fed, and notice the freshly planted marigolds by the door. The smell of fresh coffee hits me as I walk in, and the center's director greets me warmly as we head towards the kitchen to start getting ready for the day's lunch offering. The "dining hall" is really just the biggest multi-purpose room with tables and chairs packed in tightly to hold the day's lunch attendees. Afterwards the room is

converted for the afternoon balance class. What Stoney Brook Senior Center lacks in space and resources they make up for in their creative use of space.The drive up to St. Mary's is an altogether different experience, a sprawling new building with a large, usually overflowing, parking lot makes the surrounding neighbor's homes seem miniature. St. Mary's has a reception desk for visitors to check-in and receive a badge before they are allowed to make their way to the rest of the facility. An impressive atrium filled with comfy couches and a well-stocked coffee station sets the standard for all of the facilities that St. Mary's provides. Patrons can visit the library, workout room, large kitchen, and dining hall, as well as utilize the numerous multi-purpose rooms.

This study was conducted at Stoney Brook and St. Mary's Senior Centers for convenience. Stoney Brook Senior Center is a small, rural, non-profit senior center in the southern United States that serves about 75 members a day, many of whom come when the doors open at 8:00 am and stay all day until the doors close at 4:30 pm. Transportation is an issue for many of their participants, so their transportation services are heavily used and contribute the prolonged daily use by their members. The center provides a place where seniors can participate in a variety of recreational activities like shooting pool, playing cards, taking yoga lessons, and participating in educational programs. The majority of Stoney Brook's members come from lower income brackets, so the lunch provided Monday through Friday is a popular activity choice. In addition to those who attend lunch at the center, meals are delivered to an additional 55 to 65 older adults in the area. Many of the area seniors have small social circles, limited mobility, and limited income, so outreach programs such as Meals on Wheels, transport to medical appointments, and telephone reassurance programs are important to the local rural area.

In contrast, St. Mary's Senior Center is located in an urban community with an estimated population of over 131,000 ("U. S. Census Bureau," 2017). St. Mary's provides numerous activities that strive to encourage lifelong learning, improvement of health and well-being, as well as opportunities to socialize. St. Mary's over 2,500 regular members attend events or take advantage of services being offered as needed, with very few all-day patrons. The more independent makeup of the community's older adult population means more of a focus on what can be provided at the center, rather than outreach programming. The facility provides free coffee, a cafeteria, a library, gym, and game room. Most St. Mary's members participate in activities at the center as a small part of their larger social life, unlike those at the smaller Stoney Brook facility. The more mobile and independent population of St. Mary's means that programming has a strong focus on continuing education and exercise opportunities over assistance and service programs.

Building Rapport

My previous work with older adults has allowed me to make beneficial connections with the state commission on aging, and those connections have in turn made it possible for me to access these senior centers for my research. To familiarize myself with the facilities and build rapport with the members, I have been a volunteer at both senior centers for several months. I have quickly become accepted and familiar with many members at Stoney Brook, because of their regular attendance at the center. While not all members will qualify for the current study, making those connections, giving back to my community, and getting the chance to talk with them about their life stories has been a rewarding experience.

Making myself a familiar face at St. Mary's has proven to be a more difficult task. The in-and-out traffic and the army of volunteers available for events has made it challenging to make connections. By focusing my efforts on acquainting myself in with the widow's group, I have been able to interact directly with my target participants. The group has moved their monthly meetings to a local church adding to the difficulty of building rapport with this group but, overall, my interest in conducting research with some of the group members has been well received.

Data Generation

For this study, I interviewed older, widowed women about their experiences of coping with the loss of a husband and the role that leisure played (or did not play) as a coping mechanism. Utilizing a purposeful sampling method will allow me to make the most of my small sample size. The smaller, but "information-rich" number of cases will allow for insights and in-depth understanding of the issues central to this study (Patton, 2002, p. 273). Additional snowball sampling increased access to the desired population and helped me reach the desired number of participants (Patton, 2002). To qualify, participants had to have lost a spouse, be 65 or older, and in good mental health. A recruitment presentation was done at each of the senior centers to inform potential participants of what would be asked of them should they chose to participate and help them understand the study's primary goals. Prospective participants were given an initial demographic questionnaire to ensure they met the inclusion criteria before interviews were scheduled. The demographic information for the women who were included in these studies is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Widowed	Years Married	Ethnicity
Ashley	71	Admin Asst	11 years	30	White
Dawn	85	Retired	6 years	61	White
Irene	68	Office Mgr	4.5 years	26	White
Iris	91	Retired	22 years	48	White
Jane	91	Retired	14 years	52	White
Jean	73	Retired	13 years	44	White
Jewel	86	Retired	12 years	56	White
Martha	69	Retired	7 years	29	White
Opal	89	Retired	1 year 3 months	68	White
Pam	66	Retired	4 years 6 months	14	White
Pearl	75	Retired	6 years	49	White
Ruby	85	Retired	22 years	43	White
Wanda	76	Retired	15 years	42	White

Those that met the inclusion criteria and were available to meet for an interview were scheduled. One hour long interview was scheduled with each participant, and a follow-up debriefing phone call was conducted to clarify points and conduct member checks. Interviews were conducted at participants' their local senior center, church annex, or in their homes in order to ensure ease of participation and a familiar environment for participants. Interviews were recorded, then transferred to my password-protected laptop and transcribed as soon as possible. The interview questions for this study were compiled with the goal of being able to understand if and how leisure activities have played a role in these women's coping strategies. Previous studies have explored leisure's role in coping with a variety of life events from stresses of daily life (Hayosh, 2017) to larger life events like traumatic illness and injury (Hutchinson et al., 2003). Previous studies have been conducted on how leisure patterns change when a spouse dies (Janke, Nimrod, &

Kleiber, 2008b), how leisure can be beneficial in overcoming tragic life events (Kleiber

et al., 2002), and how leisure effects the well-being of women widowed later in life

(Janke et al., 2008b). The current study aims to combine those ideas and explore a more

in-depth look at what part leisure plays in widows coping efforts. By using an interpretive

approach and conducting semi-structured interviews my aim was to learn about how par-

ticipants' make meaning of their transition to widowhood, leisure experiences, and what

role those experiences played in coping with their new role in life. A quality interview

can open thoughts, feelings, and experience to the interviewer, but also to the

interviewee, the guided reflection process can make them more aware of things about

their experience they may not have been aware of before (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

Once interviews were concluded, and member checks were completed to ensure

participants' feelings and experiences were represented accurately, coding began. I kept a

research journal to document my personal observations and pre-analysis thoughts. Initial

open coding served as a way to condense enormous amounts of data into more managea-

ble pieces and started to reveal the "essential elements of the research story," and give

way to the development of categories and consequently their connections (Saldana, 2009,

p. 8). The second round of coding consolidated open codes into focused codes to estab-

lish the foundation of analytic categories and start structuring the study's findings. When

a solid set of categories had been established, they were then reviewed to generate intelli-

gible themes. Themes were placed into more abstract groupings to provide a stronger un-

derstanding of how they related to the research questions, and then were compared back

to the data for reliability (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). In doing so, this study aimed to better explain leisure's role in coping with the loss of a spouse.

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to establish the trustworthiness of this study. IRB approval was sought before proceeding with the study. I completed all necessary ethical certifications to conduct research. Member checks ensured the accuracy of my transcriptions, and representations of my participants' experiences. Collaborating closely with my dissertation committee also ensured that my study was conducted ethically and that my findings are reasonable, given the data and my analytic process. Finally, a debriefing presentation was scheduled at each senior center to provide participants and the facility staff information that might be beneficial to them in the future.

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CHAPTER IV: SOCIAL LEISURE AND MOVING FORWARD

Abstract

This study examines the social leisure pursuits of thirteen widowed women, and the potential benefits to their coping process. Using a qualitative approach, the study found that participants often seek out social groups and leisure activities based on their needs and where they are in their widowhood journey. Early on in widowhood, a large portion of support comes from adult children and other family members (de Vries, Utz, Caserta, & Lund, 2014). Relationship dynamics with married friends can become strained, limiting social circles and reducing social engagement (Barrett, 1977). Analysis showed that social leisure benefitted these women in their coping journey by providing an outlet make connections with women in similar situations, and also served as a tool for their own personal evolution and realization of a new reality as a single woman.

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Introduction

> *…the dynamic that I didn't realize was that once you become single and you've got all these married friends…they're still your dear friends but that dynamic has changed totally, and they don't understand. I mean I would still go to dinner with them and so forth, but you just realize they can't relate…I probably started reaching out more towards single friends* - Irene

Losing a spouse can be an isolating experience; it means the loss of a significant attachment figure who provided a meaningful source of social support (Pinquart, 2003). The loss of a husband can leave the surviving widow to grieve not only the death of the loved one, but also the loss of their planned life together as a couple (Neimeyer, 2005). Adjusting to the loss of a spouse is difficult in many respects, but perhaps one of the most difficult tasks is learning to reenter the world and keep moving forward in a new social role. Irene's sentiment above echoes the feelings of many women in this study; after the memorial service is over and family members have gone home it is time to get back to the world outside. Discerning your place in a world that has moved forward, while your own reality has been turned upside down, can make finding a recognizable future difficult (Neimeyer, 2005).

After Irene's realization that her married friends could no longer relate to her, she left the couple's small group and started going to dinner with another woman whose husband had recently passed away. Their weekly dinners became a welcome time to chat about their struggles and victories in navigating life as widowed women. Leisure, often being social in nature, has proven to be a useful tool for overcoming social barriers, establishing new social connections, and as a way to find comfort in new social roles

(Hayosh, 2017). A strong sense of belonging and social support is important for the coping process because it buffers the detrimental effects of stress on physical and mental well-being (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996). Isherwood, King, and Luszcz (2012) found that many widowed individuals reported an enhanced level of social engagement and increased participation in social leisure over the first six years of widowhood. These social leisure opportunities provide a context to connect with women who have been in similar circumstances, a distraction from negative feelings, and eventually a way to realize the 'new normal' (Kleiber, Hutchinson & Williams, 2002). Unfortunately, for those in lower income brackets, in poorer health, or without children living nearby these opportunities for leisure and social contact may be limited (Isherwood King & Luszcz, 2012).

Given the accelerated rate of aging in the United States, the implications of this study are vast. To gain better insight regarding widowed women's social leisure experiences after the loss of a spouse, the current study examines the function that social leisure plays in the coping process. This interpretive study examined the nuanced nature of widowed women's social reality, and the role leisure plays in helping them step into their new reality. Semi-structured interviews with thirteen women between the ages of 65 and 91, who had been widowed for anywhere from one to 21 years, provided a vast range of experiences to explore. This study provides a look into the role of leisure, more specifically social leisure, plays in the reorganization of life. Two primary research questions guided this work:

1. What motivates initial social engagement after the loss of a spouse?
2. How does social leisure aid in the construction of new social identities?

Review of the Literature

The importance of social support to widowed women has been widely studied, and rightly so, if social needs are not met, loss of a spouse can lead to mental and physical health issues (Ten Bruggencate, Luijkx, & Sturm, 2018). Widowed women are at a greater risk for social isolation and loneliness than other older adult populations and understanding the importance of social activities for their well-being is vital (Isherwood, King, & Luszcz, 2012). Widowed women's ability to adapt successfully has been strongly tied to their number of close relationships and their participation level in social activities (Bennett, Gibbons, & Mackenzie-Smith, 2010).

  Social support in widowhood. Widowed women have to deal with, not only the loss of a key figure in their social network, but connections with a husband's family and friends that may change or end (Donnelly & Hinterlong, 2010). Relationship dynamics with married friends can also change potentially reducing social engagement (Barrett, 1977). Having fewer people with whom to discuss their feelings of grief, this triggers an increase in reliance on other sources of social support (Donnelly & Hinterlong, 2010). Regular contact with friends and family has been established as an important factor in the successful adjustment to the loss of a spouse because of the instrumental and emotional support it provides (Van Baarsen, Van Duijn, Smit, Snijders, & Knipscheer, 2001). Family members provide instrumental support by helping out around the house and being available when needs arise, while the companionship of family after the death lends emotional support (Scott et al., 2007). Friends and neighbors provide support by checking in on the widows, being emergency contacts, or taking care of things like putting out the trash can or bringing in their mail (ibid).

In early stages of bereavement emotional support tends to come from adult children (Ha, 2008) however, research has shown that friendships often play a more important role in terms of support than those of family (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993). The sense of freedom and choice associated with friendship creates more supportive and meaningful relationships over obligatory interaction with family (Utz, Swenson, Caserta, Lund, & DeVries, 2014). Support from friends is generally centered around social activities (Chambers, 2005), and the intrinsic motivation and sense of freedom associated with leisure activities encourages the development, maintenance, and enhancement of people's belief that they can persist and achieve successful outcomes (Kleiber et al., 2002).

Social leisure. Leisure activities done with others, or social leisure, have been associated with better physical and emotional well-being as compared to those pursued singly (Adams, Leibbrandt, & Moon, 2011). Kleiber, Hutchinson, and Williams (2002) have suggested that social activities serve four different functions during negative life events: providing a buffer against psychological distress; generating hope for the future; offering continuity with life before the event, and facilitating personal transformations. Going to dinner with grandkids might not take away the negative feelings that result from the loss of a partner, but it can provide a brief distraction from them. The short interruption of those feelings can be beneficial in starting to generate more positive emotions (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). The opportunity to meet up with old friends for coffee can provide a sense of continuity, while seeking out other widows who have successfully navigated their way through the loss of a spouse could spark encouragement, i.e., 'if they can do it, so can I.' Social activities have also been shown to reduce stress, enhance morale

(Patterson & Carpenter, 1994), and improve physical and mental health (Janke, Nimrod, & Kleiber, 2008a).

Previous studies have shown mixed results regarding widowed women's leisure experiences after their husband's passing. Janke, Nimrod, and Kleiber (2008) found a majority of women (61.7%) in their studies disengaged and reduced their participation in leisure activities, but a large number still maintained or increased participation. Socio-demographic characteristics did not differ between the reducers and non-reducers, but the well-being of the women influenced their activity level; women who had a more positive outlook on life after their husband's passing maintained or increased participation in leisure activities (Janke, et al., 2008). Well-being after spousal loss determined activity reduction rather than activity involvement determining well-being (Janke, et al., 2008). Carstensen (1993) suggests that there may be competing cases of widowhood, for every woman who was able to find enjoyment and continued activity, another woman may find social interactions unsatisfying. The social opportunities available to older people influence their ability to adapt to certain social situations, for example when older people do not have nuclear family members, the emotional closeness of social connections appears to be more important for satisfaction of socioemotional needs (Lang, Staudinger, & Carstensen, 1998). Older women who have no family left after a spouse passes may find social interactions with friends unsatisfying, because of the lack of emotional closeness. While older women that still have children available to fill that void of emotional closeness might find outings with friends more enjoyable because it serves as a way to simply have fun rather than a way to replace the emotional closeness they had with their late spouse. The environmental resource variables, particularly interactions

with friends and neighbors, had the largest positive effect on widowed women. However, locus of control may also play a role in how well women handle the bereavement process (Balaswamy & Richardson, 2001). Bereaved individuals who felt they had greater control over life and their capacity to deal with death reported less anxiety and depression (Jacobson, Lord, & Newman, 2017). Socioeconomic status, level of dependence on the spouse, and performance of gender-specific tasks all affect how women adjust to widowhood (Carr et al., 2000). Widows from lower economic levels have a higher negative experience in widowhood than middle and upper class women (Chenube & Omumu, 2011). The loss of their husband can mean a larger decrease in economic resources affecting their sense of control over life. Outside of economic resources, common household tasks can trigger increased anxiety if women were highly dependent on their spouse for those tasks before their passing (Utz, Reidy, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2004).

The events surrounding their husband's passing also affect women's adjustment to widowhood. When a spouse passes unexpectedly it creates a strong sense of shock, which may prolong grief and produce excessive physical and emotional trauma (Straub & Roberts, 2001). The changes to daily life are immediate, unplanned for, and returning to full functioning may take many years (Parkes, 2005). The adaptational value of knowing a spouse's death is imminent cannot be overlooked as it allows time for anticipatory grief, completing unfinished business, preparing for challenges ahead, and processing the reality of the loss (Parkes, 1970). So, the individuality of the experiences from grieving, bereavement, and coping makes it difficult to formulate a consensus conclusion for social leisure's role in the coping process.

Yet another variable in the complicated relationship between leisure and coping is an individual's beliefs regarding leisure's ability to be useful to their coping process. Individual's beliefs that leisure can be useful also affects their interest in seeking out leisure activities to cope with their husband's passing (Iwasaki & Mannell, 1999). Iwasaki & Mannell (1999) also found that individuals who sought out companionship through leisure had improvements in mental and physical health, but mixed results regarding improvement in factors of psychological well-being (i.e., positive relationships with others, improved autonomy, strong sense of purpose). Their findings reiterate the fact that leisure's function vis-à-vis coping efforts is difficult to generalize.

Many studies on leisure and coping have focused on changes in leisure patterns (i.e., Janke et al., 2008; Patterson & Carpenter, 1994) and the benefits leisure can provide for coping (i.e., Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber, & Dattilo, 2003; Iwasaki, 2013; Kleiber et al., 2002; Nimrod, Kleiber, & Berdychevsky, 2012). However, due to the contingent nature of leisure's role in the coping process as documented in previous research, the present study has employed an interpretive approach in the hopes of identifying those circum-stances in which social leisure can positively affect the bereavement process.

Methods

As chronicled above, coping with the loss of a partner is difficult and causes upheaval to several aspects of life, including a woman's social circles, daily responsibilities, new identities, and possible decreased income. As such, a constructionist epistemology and interpretive approach to inquiry allowed me to delve into the nuance of participants' daily lives as well as their interpretive processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). The constructionist framework allows for integration of many of the subtler features of

widowhood, beyond the traditional concern with universal signs, symptoms, and stages of readjustment in the wake of significant loss (Neimeyer, 2005). Thus, the aim of this study was not to create generalizable truths that every woman who is widowed will experience, but to gain an in-depth knowledge of these women's experiences, thereby helping others in similar circumstances, and also serve as a starting point for future research.

The narrow scope of this study made a smaller sample size of 13 women ideal to capture an in-depth, emic perspective from women who have lived through the loss of a spouse. Qualitative interviews were imperative for this study because these women and their experiences occur in a complex and changing social system so explaining how their lives unfold cannot be reduced to numbers (Singer, Ryff, Carr & Magee, 1998). To have these women share their unique self-narratives, including the 'micro-narratives' of everyday life to a 'macro- narratives' that consolidate their self-understanding, range of emotions, and what guides their social performance allowed me to construct a shared understanding of their experiences (Neimeyer, 2004, p. 53–54).

Data collection. Initial purposive sampling was done at local senior centers, and additional snowball sampling was conducted as needed. The services provided by local senior centers, such as leisure activities, social engagement opportunities, and support groups made them ideal for participant recruitment. Recruiting at these facilities also allowed me to select a sample of women who have made strides to engage in regular leisure and social activities. The women in this study were between the ages of 65 and 91, and had been widowed between one and 21 years. They all had grown children and were active members of their local church which may have influenced their choice of leisure

activities. There was a lack of diversity among participants who all identified as white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, and came from middle class backgrounds.

Given the idiosyncratic nature of the coping journey, semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their personal accounts of social adjustment, and highlight the aspects of their leisure experiences they found particularly significant. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to guide the discussion while also allowing participants to bring attention to aspects of their experiences that they deemed significant. Interviews were conducted at participant's preferred location to ensure a comfortable environment for conversation and were approximately an hour long. Interviews were transcribed and pseudonyms were used to guarantee anonymity.

Data analysis. Taking an inductive approach allowed for themes to unfold and be identified over the course of the data collection process (Douglas, 2002). Once the interviews concluded and were transcribed, member checks were completed to ensure participants' feelings and experiences were represented accurately. Open coding was then used to identify recurring pieces of data and condense data into more manageable categories (Henning, 2004; Saldana, 2009). Related codes were grouped into themes, and content was thematically analyzed to start synthesizing the study's findings (Douglas, 2002; Henning, 2004). Then categories were used to establish themes, which could then be put into more abstract groupings and that started to build stronger evidential support for the resulting themes. Finally, findings were compared back to the data for veracity (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Results

Previous research on how individuals negotiate, major role transitions, like the loss of a spouse, have produced many theories about how social networks can assist in the shifts and the phases of negating the changes (i.e. Jacobson, Lord, & Newman, 2017; O'Brien, 1985; Powers, Bisconti, & Bergeman, 2014). The period about 6 months after the spouse's death is often characterized as a stage of reorganization (Morgan, 1989). This study took a qualitative approach to examine participants' experiences of reorganizing and the role that social leisure played in helping them adjust to life as a widow. While widowhood is unique for everyone, there were many similarities to these women's stories. A sense of being overwhelmed by the immediacy and amount of tasks that have to be tended too while they are still grieving their late husband is compounded by the fact that their previous social connections are evolving in ways they did not expect. Social leisure provides them opportunities to escape negative feelings and becomes a way to establish new social circles where they feel supported and understood. Eventually the women found themselves, not only comfortable with being single, but actually enjoying the new reality they have crafted for themselves.

Social support is a key component of successful adjustment to widowhood and the effects of social support on overall health and well-being cannot be ignored (Adams, Leibrandt & Moon, 2011). A more nuanced look at how social support through leisure is beneficial in the bereavement process is still needed. Research has shown that support networks of widowed women evolve and include a greater proportion of friends than family (de Vries et al., 2014; Lund, Caserta, Pelt, & Gass, 1990). Other studies have shown that widowed women associate their most positive times of well-being when they

are with other widowed or single women (Bankoff, 2006). However, these adjustments do not come about without a time of turmoil where widowed women and members of their social network may struggle to find a new balance and way to relate.

      The end of an old way of life. The women in my study mentioned initial support from friends, family, and peers, however, once the memorial service was over reality started to sink in and life picked back up. When asked about what moving on with life initially looked like, Irene discussed the realities of being thrust back into the outside world:

> Let me kind of set it up, he ran a business. I'm working here at the school. When he passed away in June, we were two months away from a wedding and two months away from a baby [grandson] being born. Plus, I was thrust into a business that I didn't know how to run. His service was on a Saturday, family stayed until Monday, on Tuesday I got up and my air conditioner had gone out. So, I had to deal with that, and then I had to deal with his business…so, I'm running the business, I'm working full time, I'm trying to help my daughter finish planning her wedding.

Irene's roles of mother, grandmother, school administrator, and novice business owner took over before she even had time to process her new social status as a widow. Family affairs, home ownership duties, and work are not the only aspects of life that keep moving forward and make it difficult to adjust to the new reality of widowhood. Ruby talked about her son's support right after her husband died, which was appreciated but she expressed her interest in wanting to just be home.

My son came and took me down to his house and I rode around and looked

around, but it wasn't what I wanted, I wanted to come home. So, I came home.

My sister and her husband they called me. She had cancer and had to come up

here, to the Kirkwood clinic. I said, "come on." So, she came, and they operated

on her. She was with me for six weeks. Then after she went home, my friend

called me from the cleaners, her husband they had put him in the hospital. He had

a staph infection. They wanted to know if I could come in and work for a while

until he got better. I said "sure," so I went to work.

Much like Irene, Ruby found that her other roles in life soon needed attention and her op-

portunity to be home and process her grief was short-lived. Ruby and Irene both

acknowledged that staying busy had its benefits; it kept their minds occupied and gave

them other people to focus their attention on the realities of life as a widow cannot be ig-

nored indefinitely. Ruby and Irene's experiences were representative of all the women's

experiences. Several even said they didn't have time to truly grieve the loss of their hus-

band because other life responsibilities had to be handled, and they were overwhelmed by

the thought of suddenly being in charge of everything. Martha describes when she finally

had time to slow down and the grief really hit her. "It was almost like a panic. I was so

busy. I had not had time to really grieve." The circumstances and time it took for them to

slow down and really reflect on what happened and the changes that had been made var-

ied from person to person, but they all described a similar sensation.

Experiencing relationships. Social relationships have changed and connections

that were established through the husband might have been altered (Ferraro, Mutran, &

Barresi, 1984). Participants used phrases like surprised, shocked, and don't understand

when discussing the disconnect that happened between themselves and married friends.

Jean discussed her confusion. "When you're not a couple, you lose friends…I don't know

if they, I don't know why…but you do." Ashley talked about her ineffective attempts to

find continuity in her social life:

> You would go out with your couple friends and all of a sudden…you go from a
>
> couple, to a single and it's just, it's a total different world… being a third wheel,
>
> fifth wheel, you know, because you would go out with your couple friends and all
>
> of a sudden, you know, and then they feel like they ought to be obligated to pay
>
> my bills.

Ashley's experience highlights the struggle to find ways to relate; she feels uncomforta-

ble in situations that used to be enjoyable, but members of her social network she had

been close with were also unsure of how to handle the situation. Irene had been hosting a

couple's Bible study in her home, and tried to continue doing so, but expressed her sur-

prise that an activity she had found comfort in and looked forward to with her husband,

had instead become a place where she felt like an outsider. "The dynamic that I didn't re-

alize was that once you become single and you've got all these married friends…they're

still your dear friends but that dynamic has changed totally, and they don't understand."

Jean felt the same sincere surprise that people who had been such good friends were no

longer a part of her social circles.

> When you were a couple and then when you're not a couple, you lose friends…I
>
> don't know if they, I don't know why, I don't understand that, but you do and, and
>
> some I would've never thought that would happen.

The continuity of friendships is gone, so these women found themselves wondering where to go next? There was no discussion of animosity or bitterness towards their friends, just the surprise that so many friends from married life were no longer a reliable source of support. Areas of life that felt stable, that they would normally have sought out for support and companionship from before have become unfamiliar. The loss of once close friends seems to compound the already difficult loss of a spouse because not only has their primary source of support and biggest confidant left them, but so have their secondary sources.

Martha recalled her first camping trip without her husband, the same group she had been camping with for years, invited her out just weeks after her husband passed as a gesture of support.

So, all my little camping friends, we all ended up in Nashville, we were sitting out on this big deck and we were, they live in West End and we were celebrating Cinco de Mayo. I was sitting there going, something's really weird here. Nobody would mention his name, and it was driving me crazy.

The interaction with long-time friends was unpleasant because it amplified the fact that her husband was no longer a part of the group. Her camping friends were unsure how to act or what topics were safe to discuss, and Martha was unsure of how to express her need to acknowledge her past life while moving forward with her new one. The majority of the women in this study discussed at least one memorable social engagement that stuck out to them because the discomfort for themselves and others seemed to confirm their social identity as a widow. These continued experiences of feeling like an outsider or pariah among old friends prompted changes in their social realm.

Leisure as distraction and reinvention. The process of seeking out new groups and new friends is a unique process for everyone because each woman's life background is different. The experience of losing a spouse is universal, but the events surrounding a spouse's death are unique to each woman. Factors such as being a stay-at-home wife and mother, performing gender-specific tasks, marital happiness, and level of dependence on the spouse during married years all play a role in how women view life alone (Carr et al., 2000). These women found initial attempts to preserve continuity in their social lives led to a sense of confusion and disappointment that once close companions now seemed distant.

In order to find new paths forward, some participants actively sought out ways to "stay busy" or fill a time frame that had been important when their husband was still alive. Leisure as a way to find distraction is a key part of the coping process for the women in this study and a major theme in this study. Ashley struggled the most on Friday nights when she and her husband used to always have Mexican and margaritas.

Friday nights were always tough on me because we always had a Friday night date. I'd sit down out here in the parking lot…and everybody going "oh you know what I'm doing tonight?!" I had nothing… finally, I had this friend that would call me every Friday night and he would talk about his mom, and his dad and his dad's health problems. All I had to do is just listen, but that's it's, it's, a slow process...making new friends. It's hard, but you have to just kind of be open.

Other participants had a hard time being home around when their husbands would normally have come home from work and finding a way to fill that void was a motivation to

find new activities. Pearl had a hard time being home in the afternoons when she was accustomed to her husband coming home from work, so she sought out activities with her new Sunday school class to keep from watching the clock.

> I still stayed busy, then all of a sudden, the worst time, was around 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon when it was time for him to come home, and he didn't come. And that was, that was probably the hardest adjustment… we do things as a Sunday school class a lot and so that, that helps…we're a really close Sunday school class so that really helps.

While there was not a particular time or activity that was hard for Jean, she found being alone with her thoughts was difficult. She volunteered and sought out other ladies with similar interests. "You know I play cards once a week with a bunch of Christian ladies. Um, I just try to stay busy. Like I say, I'm not good at just staying home by myself." While participants kept describing these activities as a means to "stay busy," in reality I think their goal was distraction. Their description of how these activities were able to distract from their problems and concerns are reminiscent of the people coping with traumatic injuries (Hutchinson, Loy, Kleiber & Dattilo, 2003).

Significantly, somewhere in the process there was a switch from seeking leisure as a distraction to actively looking for leisure as a tool for reinvention. The women discussed their experiences finding new passions that they enjoyed and found beneficial in helping them realize their new identity. The only exceptions were Jewel and Opal, their lack of transportation opportunities created a lack of opportunities to choose their leisure activities. As with all things in the bereavement process, the timeline for when and how

this occurs is different for each person, but once the realization that social networks and comfortable routines are permanently changed, there is a turning point.

    Seeking understanding. Realizing that many relationships have changed, and being alone can be difficult, the next part of their social adjustment was to seek out other women in similar situations. Widows can often feel like they have to keep up appearances around friends who are still married: do not be too sad, do not cry too much, and do not talk about their husbands (van den Hoonaard, 2006). Having other women to talk with whom they share a similar experience was appealing for the support. Leisure provides opportunities to immerse themselves in new groups and form new connections. Irene left her couples Bible study, but found connections with another woman whose husband passed around the same time.

> This other lady that had been in our small group, she lost her husband after Bill passed away. So, she and I would go out to dinner about once a week or once every couple of weeks. I had another friend at church who has lost her husband, so I tried to spend more time with people in similar roles.

After a few months attempting to find comfort in the couples Sunday school class that she and her husband had attended together, Jean switched, so she could be in one with other widowed women. "It got to be sort of awkward, you know…when I came into the Sunday school class that I'm in now, it's all women and there's several widows in there, so we understand each other, you know." The word *understanding* came up frequently when these women were looking for new social groups, while widowhood was not a requirement, being able to understand single life seemed to be a more pertinent requirement

for potential friend groups, and this theme of understanding continued throughout the interviews. Ashley found a group that she enjoyed, but left when they started inviting married women.

> So, there was another lady here…that had just gotten a divorce, and she was having a tough time. So, I call her and go, "hey, you want to go with this?" So, we go, and that was my first initial female interaction…it was a lot of fun because it was single women and we could go eat and do stuff...but then they started inviting married women and it wasn't near as much fun.

Ashley said the married women changed the dynamics of the group, resulting in less spontaneity. Opal recalls, similarly to Ashley above, "I probably started reaching out more towards single friends." Beyond the lack of understanding that married friends have, she discusses the freedom of single friends to pick up and go and do.

> I won't call my married friends and say, "Hey, let's go do this." You see, and that's kind of a different thing. When you're single you can do whatever you want to do, and you drop it at spur of the moment, and you're gone.

The sense of freedom that comes with being single, also seemed to be a point of understanding. Opal points out the difference in making plans when you are single and making plans when you are married.

> You know, instead of, as a couple, when somebody says, "Hey Sarah, let's go do this.", and you go, "well, I've got to check with my husband." Now all of a sudden you don't have that check. And so, people feel more comfortable calling you and saying, "come on, let's go, let's go."

The progression through the early stages of coping with a husband's passing, searching for continuity from established social groups, to the search for understanding from new social groups requires a process of innovation and exploration.

new reality.

While a few women in this study had experienced the loss of their husband in the last three years, a majority had been widowed between five and 21 years. This final theme was not as relatable to the more recent widows, but it was an overwhelming theme for the majority of participants. In addition to finding peace in new social roles, several participants mentioned reaching a point where they realized that their late husband would no longer recognize the life they have built on their own, a new reality. They found new hobbies, had established social networks, learned to manage car and house maintenance, and adjusted to doing life on their own. Irene acknowledged missing the life she and her husband had planned together, but also realized she had created a new narrative that did not include him.

> I miss the life we had planned, but there was a point about two, two-and-a-half years into it and I had this thought and I thought, if he came back into my life right now…I would have to make major readjustments. I had become so accustomed to life without him.

Similarly, Jewel talked about how much she realized that she has changed since her husband passed away.

> So, I am a total different person. That's why I don't think I could ever remarry again, because I don't think I could ever go back to...that kind of world. Where you…first of all, I don't ever want to wrap everything around one person again.

That's scary. There's not a single thing in my life now that I would have done had he not passed away.

Jewel and her husband had been married for 57 years when he passed away. She continued going to the same church, but started being more involved. She and her husband always just attended Sunday school and church service, after he passed Jewel started going to Triple L, an older women's group that has lunch together once a month. She also reunited with a group of friends from high school, and they started traveling together. Jewel's expanded social circles provided not only a place to feel supported, but also served as outlets for leisure activities she had not been a part of when she was married. New leisure interests provide a fresh perspective of what life can look like, and generate optimism about the future. Through new social groups she has found a new, satisfying reality.

Ashley's husband passed very unexpectedly 11 years ago, and she describes their nights together at home fondly, but enjoys the active lifestyle she has adopted over the last few years.

I was the [marathon] cheering committee chairman. The third year my friend comes to me and says, "I think we need to do the half marathon." And I said, "I think you are fucking crazy!" Didn't practice, did it. So, then she [my friend] said we need to start riding bikes. So, we did, we got us some bikes. So, she got me into physical activity. Then I had a bunch of girls that said, "Hey, let's go to Costa Rica." There was eight of us women. So, I started traveling, and see Eric did not like to travel. He was just a homebody, which was fine.

An important aspect of relationships is compromise, i.e., two people making joint decisions and concessions to one another as needed. As an individual you are free to make choices based solely on your interests. Ashley found their quiet nights in and Friday night Mexican food dates fulfilling. She expressed earlier in this article how much she missed those and initially sought out activities to distract her from the Friday night reminders of her loss. Now, five years later, her leisure activities and social circles look vastly different, but still fulfilling.

These findings add to the confusion of social leisure's role in the coping process; initially, social activities might accentuate negative emotions and increase frustration, but as time progresses it seems to be a welcome distraction, a means to find support and understanding, a way to generate optimism about the future, and finally as a way to recognize new realities. Reviewing the results of this study, it cannot be denied that leisure played a role in the coping process for these women. While they were intentional in seeking out ways to meet their need for distraction, companionship, understanding, and a new normal. I believe that seeking out leisure was less of a calculated strategy and more of a matter of convenience. Social interaction is one of the most frequently reported reasons for engaging in leisure, so it is not surprising that these women would find leisure activities as a favorable means to explore new social roles (Auld & Case, 1997). Leisure's role in developing close relationships cannot be overlooked. These women were seeking understanding; other women who could empathize and would not treat them as pariahs. While leisure activities are enjoyable and are often associated with life satisfaction (Auld & Case, 1997), the combination of leisure and social interactions is what women in this study found beneficial.

Discussion

This article began with the suggestion that social leisure plays an integral role in the coping process for widowed women. There is a resonance to Kleiber, Hutchinson, and Williams' (2002) study regarding the role of leisure as a resource in transcending from negative life events. Social leisure did serve as an initial distraction from unpleasantness (self-protection) for these women, and seeking innovation in their leisure activities and whom they engage in leisure with (self-restoration) infused positive emotions into their life. Finally accepting and understanding what their new social environment and new normal look like (personal transformation) was important to participants. The disruption of life that losing a spouse can cause makes finding continuity in other aspects of life inviting (Kleiber et al., 2002). This study has shown that the search for continuity early in the coping process seemed to make social leisure detrimental to the women's emotional well-being because friends that they had for years seem distant and could not understand or relate anymore to their situation. The realization that old friends and connections were not as supportive as they had once been was a tough barrier to overcome for several women in this study. While initially, the change in social relationships was unfulfilling and disappointing, it does serve as a catalyst to seek out more fulfilling activities and new social factions. Deciding where you might fit in and reevaluating how social and emotional needs can be met is a daunting task. Starting to branch out in social leisure activities also provided women an opportunity to realize their new social status. Some women in this study were more purposeful in seeking out new social groups that included more widowed women, like Irene who changed to a widow's Bible study group. While for other women like Martha, whose camping group slowly evolved from old familiar faces to new

friends the process happened more organically. Martha said she did not know how she ended up with the friends she has now, she was just "being open" and now her social circles include very few people who knew her late husband. The women in this study emphasized the importance of finding other women who could relate to and understand issues entailed in the loss of a spouse. This finding is consistent with previous research that has shown the importance of social support to replace the lost companionship and support of their late husband (Van Baarsen, 2002).

Williams (1984) explains that negative life events require a certain level of "narrative reconstruction," this reconstruction provides an opportunity for a new future to be realized but also accommodates the fond memories of the past. While the term "widow" tends to carry a negative connotation, successfully navigating the social stresses of losing a husband, can give women an opportunity to define what widowhood means for them. Participants in this study illustrated a quest for understanding and validation in the ongoing world of relationships and responsibilities. Reconstructing their personal narratives gave them a chance to convey meaning, a sense of self, and the emotional context of their journey through widowhood (Bennett & Vidal-Hall, 2000). For these women, their sense of self emerges as a part of their coping process, so that they are able to find a continuity between what life was and what it looks like now.

This opportunity for self-recreation and innovation was fulfilling and empowering. The women interviewed for this study discussed the opportunity to do things they never would have, had their husbands still been alive. It is important to note that the constraint of marriage in which decisions are based on two people rather than one, was not viewed as a burden; however, these participants reached a point where the spontaneity

available as a single woman was appreciated. This phenomenon Lopata (1973) called "blossoming," has continued to be a recurring theme in the literature on widowhood. The meaningful changes widows exhibit, including renewed or increased engagement in enjoyable activities, improved self-esteem, and increased freedom are examples of the improvements in women's personal and social lives and increased freedom (Lee & Bakk, 2001). This sentiment of confidence in singlehood was not something that came about without determination and sustained coping efforts. This process of coping, from the realization of changes, to reorganization of social opportunities, to innovation of new social persona, has been well-illustrated in this study. While social leisure did not prove a positive tool in every step of the adjustment process, it was found to have positive benefits and opportunities once the changes in social roles have been accepted. Son, Kerstetter, Yarnal, and Baker (2007) described the ways in which women were able to develop new roles successfully, thereby building confidence and adding to their leisure repertoire. Social leisure proved to be an effective tool for reevaluating social roles, reestablishing oneself as a valuable group member, and realizing the potential to have a fulfilling future without one's husband. In essence, social leisure outlets provided these women with opportunities to develop and to reinforce a new identity (McFarland & Pals, 2005).

Several limitations of this study help identify potential future avenues for research. For example, this study focuses purely on women's experiences of widowhood and social readjustment, and previous studies have pointed out the very gendered nature of widowhood (H. J. Lee, Lee, Chun, & Park, 2017; Sasson & Umberson, 2014). A similar investigation of widowers' experiences might offer different insight into the timing, opportunities for, and function of social leisure. Additionally, while there was a variety of

educational attainment, there was a general lack of diversity and all participants were white, middle-class women from the southern United States who lived independently in their own homes. This study's findings might have been different had it been focused on women in assisted living facilities, women who identify as lesbian, or women who have less access to resources, including transportation or income.

Conclusion

The benefits of leisure have been well documented for coping with a variety of life events and circumstances (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Hutchinson, Bland, & Kleiber, 2008; Iwasaki, Mactavish, & Mackay, 2005; Nimrod et al., 2012). Continued review of leisure's role in the "blossoming" process is warranted to examine the role leisure plays in identifying a new self-narrative, including a new identity as a single woman. Understanding leisure's part in life later in the coping process could be an important part of the puzzle. The gender differences in dealing with the loss of a spouse could also mean that leisure would have different benefits for widowers. The passing of a marital partner results in substantial increases in morbidity and mortality for men and women, but the effects are greater for widowers than for widows in the early grieving period (M. Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). Research has shown that men are more likely to rely on their wives as confidants, where women often have confidants outside of marriage (Thoits, 1986). The differences in social support could potentially change leisure, particularly social leisure's effect on the coping process.

This study provides vital information for community groups that offer services for older adults, given participants' disinterest in formal grief support groups. There was no interest in grief support groups from the women in this study and finding other single

women to interact with was preferable to the formal grief support. A widows' bowling league or painting class for single, older women may be a more enticing place to share their experiences. A better understanding of how and when social leisure opportunities are beneficial to bereaved women could have major implications for senior centers, church groups, and family supporters who want to support widowed women. Previous research has shown that women's success in adapting to widowhood has been strongly tied to the number of close relationships and amount of participation in social activities (Bennett et al., 2010; Isherwood et al., 2012; Taylor & Stanton, 2007). While there may be a variety of variables that contribute to their negative view of the grief support groups, I think it is important not to ignore the interest in social activities. Given the evidence that adapting to widowhood has been strongly linked to 'close' social relationships and participation in social activities perhaps rethinking the automatic suggestion of a formal support group and instead provide information on local card playing groups, running groups, or dinner clubs catering primarily to widowed women.

Finding leisure activities and social outlets that satisfied their changing social needs throughout the coping journey was beneficial, but not effortless. The realization that their social status changed relationships with friends that they had had for years was difficult. Being in a different life stage than their married friends made relating to them difficult, not that those bonds were completely severed, but the need for a community that can relate to them seemed vital for these women to continue their progression through the adjustment to widowhood. For these women choosing social groups where they felt understood and feel a strong sense of comradery gave them a safe space to explore the adjustment to widowhood and learn from other women who have already been there. Being

comfortable in their role of widow and seeing that others have navigated the transition successfully, they found opportunities to expand their leisure choices. Using their leisure time to explore new hobbies, learn new skills, or simply enjoy the freedom and spontaneity that life as a single woman offers created a sense of optimism and positivity. The positivity generated from these leisure pursuits creates a sense that maybe, it will not be this painful forever, maybe I can run a household on my own, maybe I can see the world and run marathons. Not to say that leisure provides only positive benefits or it provides a faster route to getting over the loss of a husband, but the role that leisure played in these women's progressions through the social and emotional stresses show that leisure does serve a valuable purpose and deserves to be a part of the coping conversation.

As baby boomers begin reaching old age, the number of widowed individuals will increase (Donnelly & Hinterlong, 2009). Given the findings in this study, future efforts should be made to focus on supporting community-based programs that promote social involvement for older widowed women. encourage engagement in the community. Thinking outside the box of grief support groups to assist this population is imperative. Understanding the importance of close relationships, local communities should develop programs to increase social connectedness and improve quality of life for widowed women. Innovative approaches to increase leisure involvement and improve access to organized activities benefits the older adult population and the broader community.

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CHAPTER V: BLOSSOMING

Abstract

Semi-structured interviews with 13 older widowed women suggest that positive adjustments after the loss of a spouse can lead to a positive, new self-identity. Overcoming their fear of being alone, managing a home and property on their own, and investing in new social connections meant allowed these women to create a new self-identity and find a fulfilling life as an individual. Using semi-structured interviews with 13 older widowed women in the southeastern United States suggests that positive adjustments can lead to the development of a positive self-identity after the loss of a spouse. Learning to overcome their fear of being alone, managing a house and property on their own, and learning new skills created a sense of positivity about the future without their spouse. The women in this study were able to create a new self-identity and find a fulfilling life as an individual.

Keywords: widowhood, leisure, blossoming, qualitative inquiry, self-identity

Introduction

The term widow does not conjure thoughts of happiness or positivity. The overwhelming sense of loss, negative emotions, and stress make it hard to believe that there could be a happily ever after when instead it feels like your life story has come to a harsh stop. The average age of widowhood is 55, and many widows go on to live another few decades after the death of their spouse (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017), and the fact that most widows go on to live long lives, raises issues of tremendous importance they must somehow establish a life independent of their late husband, deal with evolving family relationships and support networks, and meet emotional, health, and practical needs (Hansson & Remondet, 1988). This study explores the experience of widowhood after the intense grieving has passed, and focuses on the transformation period and the implications for the remainder of their lives. As former roles and sources of satisfaction are lost, this transformation process requires efforts to replace lost personal relationships with new ones, accept limitations, and find new ways to feel life has purpose and meaning; a new self-concept has to be discovered.

Self-concept is a multifaceted, hierarchical construct shaped by experience and interpretations of a person's environment (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). It is formed by a combination of cultural norms and the realities of an individual's situation. It is also reflexive in that it is influenced by an individual's perception of their identity as determined by cultural standards and comparisons to others, the roles that people enter and exit through their lifespan impact their self-concept (Lopata, 2015). Redefining this self-concept can be difficult for widowed women because of the lack of continuity; retaining the past identity that was based on a marriage relationship is impossible. However, finding a

way to move forward with a new life, while still preserving memories and connections to the past can be a complex undertaking. Women's identities are traditionally centered on their provision for others, their ability to conduct interpersonal interactions, caring for and provide nurturing to others (Lopata, 2015). Establishing a new autonomous identity centered on the self can be an important tool to reduce psychological dependence on the late spouse, reduce feelings of helplessness, and encourage successful coping (Parkes & Weiss, 1983). Their new identity, ideally, retains positive aspects of their past as a wife, in combination with positive aspects of the present and future (Lopata, 1973).

Participants were questioned about their experiences of widowhood after their initial grieving period. Since grief is not a one-dimensional experience, each woman's trajectory of when and how they were able to see the blossoming effect in their own lives was different, but there were three main themes that emerged from their experiences (a) new skills were developed and adjustments were made to continue on with the "gotta do it" stuff, like car maintenance, yard work, and paying bills (b) as their social circles evolved, they found fulfillment in hobbies and activities that had not been part of their life prior to their husband's passing (c) most of these women reached a point where they realize so much has changed that their late spouses would no longer fit into their new life.

A social constructionist (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2003) lens allows me to make sense of how these women are interpreting their new situations. The social constructionist focuses on how people learn through interactions with others to make sense of the world and their place in it helped me explore how these women have been able to establish a new self-concept after the loss of a spouse. The purpose of this project was to examine the process of reinvention and possible "blossoming" for 13 women. In-depth

interviews were conducted with women between the ages of 65 and 91 who had been widowed for at least one year. This study provides a look into how these women went about reorganizing their lives and establishing a new self-concept after their initial grieving period had passed. Two primary research questions guided this project:

1. What role do adjustments made in widowhood have in the coping process?

2. How did adjustments to widowhood contribute to their self-identity?

Review of Literature

There are few life events that affect adults more profoundly than the passing of a spouse (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). Despite the emotional upheaval that the death of a loved one brings, tackling the heterogeneity of the widowhood experience cannot be overlooked. An immense number of factors may influence a woman's experience including current health, income, coping style, personality, social support, and nature of marital relationship, just to name a few (Fried et al., 2015; W. Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Schut, 1996; W. Stroebe, Zech, Stroebe, & Abakoumkin, 2005; Van der Houwen et al., 2010). Some women seem to experience prolonged distress and are not able to move past the negative emotions, while other women seem to experience less long term distress (Bonanno, 2004). There is increasing evidence to indicate that a majority of bereaved adults actually experience positive emotions more often than they expect to (Bonanno, 2009). Many studies have shown the benefits of positive emotions for bereaved individuals, from counteracting stress (Ong, Bergeman, & Bisconti, 2004), to building social resources (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997) and providing an opportunity for "cognitive reappraisal" (Kleiber et al., 2002, p. 227). Lopata (1993) suggests a tendency for women to "blossom" through new experiences after their husband's death. Similarly Lee and Bakk

(2001) described women's ability to "develop their own sense of personal identity and begin to live full lives" (p. 54).

Regaining control. As former roles are lost or altered, it is vital that widows are able to accept limitations and find new ways to feel like life has purpose and being able to adapt (Hansson & Remondet, 1988). When a woman's husband dies, it changes her life in fundamental ways; she experiences strong emotional reactions, there are financial things that need taking care of, and she is suddenly alone in many parts of life. Overcoming many of these issues means finding a way to reassert control by changing life's structures to accommodate the negative event such that she can start seeing it in a positive light, or as a way to create new, positive goals (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). The ability to assert personal control in the face of these challenges is influenced by many factors, such as cultural norms (Lopata, 2017), coping resources (Lopata, 2017), and personality traits (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There are emotional reactions to be played out and practical problems to solve, which one may never have faced before because of a traditional division of tasks in an enduring marriage. However, there are also psychological tasks, such as reshaping identities and self-perceptions to fit current circumstances and reconstructing a life without the deceased spouse.

As with so many things in widowhood, how women face these new tasks varies; some women find themselves overwhelmed with the chore of taking on tasks their spouse had once done, while others find tackling these tasks a helpful way to keep moving forward (Van Den Hoonaard, 1997). The adjustment may be more difficult for women who maintained traditional gender-role specialization during their marriages (Ciabattari, 2001). Women, who have been in marriages that divided tasks along traditional gender

lines often possess little knowledge of the tasks their late husbands managed (Utz, Reidy, Carr, Nesse, & Wortman, 2004b). For grieving individuals, learning new tasks and pursuing goals they find important can help them stay engaged and move forward (Davis, Deane, & Lyons, 2016).

Changes in self-concept. Many complaints about widowhood come from feelings of incompetence, incompleteness as a person, and strained social interactions (Lopata, 1973). Women's identities are often based on their relationships and caring for others, so losing a spouse means losing a piece of their self-concept (Rice, 1989). As Lee and Bakk (2001) asserted, once women became widows "…they develop their own sense of personal identity and begin to live full lives" (p. 54). Lopata (1993) described this phenomenon as "blossoming" and noted that the reduced caregiving responsibilities may contribute to women's increased focus on themselves. The blossoming effect is the idea that role loss can be liberating, and new activities become part of the personal transformation (Jaumot-Pascual, Monteagudo, Kleiber, & Cuenca, 2015). Part of focusing on themselves can mean finding activities to be involved in, and being a part of meaningful activities can serve as a coping strategy (Janke, Nimrod & Kleiber, 2008).

Research has suggested that in certain situations leisure has proven to be a useful tool in, not only the coping process, but also in identity construction. Kleiber, Hutchinson, and Williams (2002) suggested that leisure may be useful in personal transformation after negative life events, because it provides a way to achieve a new normal. Familiar leisure activities can reinforce important aspects of life before the loss, and aid in affirming one's identity (Kleiber et al., 2002). Coleman and Iso-Ahola (1993) cited lei-

sure's benefits to adjustment because it offers a chance to be expressive which may contribute to the meaning making process and help generate a sense of direction. Additionally, Kleiber (1999) argued that continuity and change in leisure may be beneficial following major life events, by disengaging in unfulfilling activities, continuing meaningful activities and engaging in new activities a new sense of self and increased sense of self-worth may be possible. Being successful in new activities may also aid in the tendency to "blossom" (Lopata, 1993). Women develop their own sense of identity and begin to live full lives outside the roles they held as a wife. Lee and Bakk (2001) found that in widowhood, women still embraced meaningful changes, renewed engagement in pleasurable activities and enjoying increased freedom. Widowhood can act as a trigger for re-evaluation and revision of personal goals (Jaumot-Pascual et al., 2015). This loss of self-concept requires a reorganization of life and self-identity.

Methods

Given the fundamentally interpretive nature of self-concept, a qualitative approach to research was taken as it allowed us to explore "the thinking and processes that people undertake in their everyday lives about events, both miniscule and life changing" (Warren-Findlow, 2013, p. 407). Qualitative methods can shed light on the rich perspectives of marginalized groups, contribute to understanding, and potentially develop theory (Warren-Findlow, 2013). By asking participants to describe their thoughts, feelings, and adjustments after their spouse passed, a qualitative design allowed for participants' "voices" to play a prominent role in illustrating of their lives (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.

56). In other words, rather than the data being limited by the expectations of the researchers, the participants were allowed to guide the data collection and broach topics they deemed meaningful (Charmaz, 2006).

Sample. The women that participated in this study had been widowed anywhere from one to 21 years, allowing for a broad perspective on adjustments during widowhood. We did not limit participants by the length of widowhood because of the incongruity of the experience with women reach different milestones functioned to illustrate the different stages of transformation in a widow's self-concept. Participants were identified and recruited through fliers at the local senior centers, third parties known to the researcher, and subsequent snowball sampling. Snowball sampling increased access to the population of interest and also facilitated rapport (Patton, 2002).

To be considered for participation, women had to be age 65 or older, widowed for at least a year, and in good mental health. Participants were Caucasian and living in one of three cities in the southeastern United States. Eleven of the 13 participants were retired, although for varying lengths of time. Participant's ages ranged from 65 to 91, and had been widowed from a range of one to 22 years.

Data collection. Qualitative data were collected from 13 widowed women through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in a private setting where participants could freely discuss personal experiences (Henderson, 2006). Each participant completed a semi-structured interview that lasted an average of about one hour, and they were asked about their initial feelings and responses to their spouse's passing and any major adjustments they noticed soon after. Subsequent questions focused on participants' experiences in later years in order to understand how their routines and lifestyle

have changed over their time as a widow. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded throughout the data collection progression using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2006).

Data analysis. Open coding allowed for data to be broken down into major categories (Creswell, 2006). Axial coding aggregated the open codes and began the process of assembling data into their categories to produce "more precise and complete explanations about phenomena" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). These categories were used to establish themes, that were compared back to the data for fidelity (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Then themes, were placed into more complex groupings to create more substantial support for the resulting themes. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Member checks were conducted by mailing hard copies of interview transcriptions to participants ensuring accuracy of representations (Henderson, 2006). At the conclusion of the study all participants were called for debriefing and to thank them for their participation

Results

There is no one, predictable pattern for how women adjust to their status of widow. There are many alternative identities available to modern women, and the future they choose is often a surprise to themselves and others (Lopata, 1973). Most women who are aware of changes they have undergone, report positive identity traits like more independence, being freer and more active as well as increased competence (Lopata, 1973). Additionally, personality traits or identities that may have been restricted or limited during marriage are uncovered. The findings presented here go beyond previous work by clarifying and identifying the positive side of widowhood and the resilience of the women who participated

in this research. Past studies have identified sources of positive emotions (Hutchinson et al., 2003; Ong et al., 2004; Ong, Fuller-Rowell, & Bonanno, 2010; Scott et al., 2007) or aids to the coping process (Bennett, Smith, & Hughes, 2005; Mineau, Smith, & Bean, 2002; Morgan, 1989; Ryckebosch-Dayez, Zech, Mac Cord, & Taverne, 2016), but since Lopata's (1993) suggestion that many women have a tendency to "blossom" through new activities after their husband's passing, little research has been focused on these positive consequences. Findings from this study help demonstrate how adapting to new social roles and redefining one's identity may stimulate personal development.

Being alone. One of the first adjustments brought up by women was their concern about being alone. Iris had grown up in a large family and moved straight from her parent's home into a house with her husband, so for 70 years of her life she had never been alone. When asked about her first memory of adjusting to her husband's passing, she responded "Coming home to an empty house. I'd always had somebody in it." Similarly, Dawn said being was alone was one of the hardest parts for her, "I didn't know if I could stay by myself, but I wanted to try. It was hard and I never tell anyone that is easy." Opal's story was similar to Iris's in that she went from her parents' home, where she had lots of siblings, and into the home she shared with her husband. "Living alone. I've never been alone, I grew up in a large family and it was so different to be alone."

A majority of women in this study had never lived alone, so it is understandable that being alone in an empty house would be a unique situation for them to face. While the adjustment to being alone was not an easy one, the idea of being alone appeared to be more intimidating than actually being alone. The fear of the unknown is a "fundamental fear," i.e., an emotional response to stimuli that are perceived as threatening (Carleton,

2016, p. 39). Overcoming fear of the unknown means facing that fear, which often trig-

gers a cognitive restructuring or improved acceptance that allows people to realize that

reality is not as intimidating as they had imagined (Carleton, 2016). Similar to women in

Bonanno, Wortman, and Nesse's (2004) study that looked at possible resilience patterns

of widowed women, the participants in the current study seemed pleased with themselves

and surprised at how well they handled the transition. Iris's faith was helpful for her: "I

really thought I would have a hard, hard, hard time being here by myself and I didn't. I

did not. God removed all that for me. I was not afraid to stay in the house by myself."

When asked about how she dealt with being alone, Dawn reflected back on the positive

things they had together and was thankful for the nice memories they had.

> I did a lot of talking to myself. I thought, well we were married 61 years. He
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> could have died when he had that heart attack, but he didn't. We had 35 years [af-
>
> ter the heart attack], we both retired 22 years before he died. And we traveled, we
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> went to Europe, we went to Hawaii, we went, did a lot of extensive traveling.
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> You've got to go on, you've got to look around and see that there's a lot of other
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> people in worse shape than you are.

Conquering their fear of being alone at home was only step one of the adjustment for

these women, but an important one. Overcoming this early challenge can set the stage,

and instill confidence that they can handle the more difficult times ahead.

Learning new things. Part of being alone, means being the sole proprietor of a

house where the workload was once shared. The women in this study found they had not

been aware of all the things their husbands did around the house or had lacked appreciation for the tasks they handled. Even small tasks like paying the car tags each year, Irene discussed noticing those changes most.

> He would plan it and take care of it and those kind of things; so it's forced me to have to do some of that. Then just stuff like, you know, he would always take care of the car tags and stuff like that. All of a sudden, I am now 100% responsible for everything, if I need a repairman to come to the house I need to be there. So, I'd say those are the kind of things I notice more than anything.

Two more major adjustments the women discussed were learning to drive and handling the yard work. There were mixed responses to tackling these tasks. Some women like Iris, had no experience doing yard work because the rather traditional division of labor during their marriage meant that the yard was considered "man's work."

> He did man's work and I did woman's work. I learned how to mow my lawn with the riding lawn mower, which he never wanted me to do. I enjoyed doing it and I would come home and maybe mow that side over there one afternoon. And then on weekends I'd mow the rest of the yard.

While Iris found working in her yard a positive experience, Ashley and Jane found that yard work was less fulfilling and had to adjust by using hired help for their lawn care. Ashley's situation was similar to Iris's in that housework had previously been divided along traditional gender roles.

> You know, I've got to do everything…he did the outside and I did the inside of the house or something. So, I didn't really mow; he would do it. But, and then all

of a sudden, I had to do it myself and it wasn't near as much fun when I had to do
it. So, I did that for one year and then I hired that out now.

Jane and her husband had worked together on the yard work, but now that she found her-
self in charge of the entire workload, and her declining physical health, she was unable to
continue doing her own yard.

I prepared the yard, I did the trimming and weeding and stuff. He did the cutting.
You know in my yard. It's just terrible now. And you cannot hire anybody to do it
halfway right. When you hire someone, and you see them coming and you just
pray they know how to use the lawnmower. Anyway, I've adjusted.

Performing household tasks can be a tremendous source of stress, when widowed women
lack the experience or skills to do them (Carr & Utz, 2002). This stress can be particu-
larly high if the widowed women were highly dependent on their late spouses for house-
hold tasks (Carr et al., 2000). Adjusting to responsibilities around the house, can mean
adjusting to the amount of workload but also to personal limitations. Learning new things
did not always mean for these women that they tackled the tasks themselves, they also
had to learn what their limitations are: 'what am I physically capable of?' 'Can I make
this fit into my schedule?' 'Does my financial situation allow for this?' Ruby downsized
to a home she was better able to handle on her own.

I downsized from our home, which was about 4300 square feet with about an acre
lot and a swimming pool to a home half that size. It's in a gated community with
just a little yard. What I've realized is he was such a handyman, if I needed to
hang mirrors or if I needed to have these little chores done around the house, he

was really good at doing that, fixing things. Now I've had to find somebody that I

can hire to come in and do that.

While these tasks seem mundane, finding a way to accomplish them can provide a sense of optimism about their ability to overcome larger obstacles on their journey as a single woman. An important aspect of maintaining independence is reliable transportation, because it provides a sense of control and personal freedom (Searle, Mahon, & Iso-Ahola, 1995). Two women in the study relied solely on their late spouse for transportation because physical limitations did not allow them to drive. Public transportation and relying on children and friends allowed them to take care of necessities like visits to the grocery store or doctor's offices. The other women had the ability to drive, but didn't enjoy it or only drove short distances so learning to get around town or make longer trips to family members homes was out of the norm. One of the things Irene's husband did for her was to chauffeur her around town. He would drop her off at the door and wait patiently for her to finish her shopping, and then pick her up and take her to the next destination. "I'm pretty independent so I can still go and do. I don't like to drive, and he used to drive but now I've just had to learn to drive." Irene claimed proudly that she is and always has been a busy person so her motivation to learn to navigate around town was to keep up with her many social engagements. Opal's motivation was to see her son and grandkids in Tennessee.

> I'd never driven a car by myself. I did drive the car by myself to Tennessee, and
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> sometimes I'd stop and cry and then the minute I met my son, I'd throw myself in
>
> his arms and start boo-hooing and he'd say "It's okay mother, it's ok. You're al-
>
> right, you're ok."

Opal and her husband used to make the trip together so doing it alone was hard for her because it brought up memories of making the drive with her husband. She mentioned several times the happiness that spending time with her grandkids brought her so seeing them was worth learning to make the drive on her own. Like other participants, Ashley disliked driving, but the freedoms it allowed her meant she eventually appreciated it. "You have to make your own decisions and you've got to drive your own self, you know. But I like it now. Now it would be hard for me, I think to become a couple." Just as the adjustment to being alone was not immediately rewarding, learning to tackle housework, getting yard work done, and driving took time to evolve into a satisfying venture. While not 'earth shattering', activities such as remembering to get car tags or hiring someone to do the yard, provided a means for self-discovery. The sense of accomplishment and competency from learning to not just survive, but thrive as a single individual can be a catalyst for positive emotions and a hint at what the future as a widow can be.

  Recognizing a new self. When I asked the women if they have reached a point where they felt like this was their new normal, understandably, Opal who had only been widowed just over a year felt like she was still adjusting to lots of things. Among the other women there seemed to be a difference of opinion, several women enthusiastically said that life had changed, to the point that they even mentioned their late husbands would not recognize the lives they had built. Irene described this dynamic well.

   I would say that [embracing life without her husband] took about two and a half to three years, and there are still times when I very much miss him. I miss the life we had planned but there was a point about two, two and a half years into it and I had this thought and I thought, if he came back into my life right now…I would

have to make major readjustments. I had become so accustomed to life without

him. I mean, you still miss that, but you know I'm ok. I would say I'm adjusted.

Jean echoed these sentiments "After 13 years I have to say, you've built a new life. You

know, you built a new life for yourself. I mean every day I still think about him." Reach-

ing a positive place without their husband does not mean that they've forgotten them or

that life is better, but different. Ashley felt like everything in life was different, and she

enjoyed the freedom of being single. Her life had transitioned from staying at home

watching tv, with the occasional date night or day trip, to being a social butterfly, rarely

home and traveling the world.

> There's not a single thing in my life now that I would, that I would have done had
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> he not passed away. I mean, you know, other than working, and I love to work an-
>
> yways, but seriously, none of this stuff. If I looked at my schedule, my calendar
>
> for the year, none of that would've happened. So, I am a total different person.
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> That's why I don't think I could ever remarry again, because I don't think I could
>
> ever go back to...that kind of world.

Martha also expressed an improved image of herself after several years of coping and an

enjoyment in being single.

> It was at that point four years after he passed away and then after that I started
>
> feeling better about myself. I started realizing this is it. This is…I'm…this is me.
>
> I'm back. It's kind of going back to the way you were before you married. Then
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> after a while you kind of enjoy it.

Participants reached a point where they appreciated the spontaneity and freedom of being single. In a marriage decisions are made based on two people; decisions from where to eat to what color the new couch should be are often based on compromise.

There was an overwhelming positivity towards the lives they had created for themselves, and a sense of pride in what they were able to accomplish over the years. Iris reflected back over her time without her husband and felt like she had done well.

> I'm happy with my life. My age doesn't bother me. I think I'm a pretty happy person. Yeah. I really do. I think have realized this is my life and you've got to either go forward or you're going to sit. I'm not going to do that. I think I'm okay. I don't know what other people think, but no. I know this is my life. And, and I mean I've adjusted real well.

Similarly, Ashley felt like making it through the loss of her husband had made her stronger and is able to look back and see her growth.

> I think there's not a whole lot in life that I can't do now, because if I can go through that [losing a spouse], what I went through with him, I can do this. It makes you stronger. You know, they always say what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. So, I think every cloud has a silver lining because even if it looks bad, what's going on with you right now. It's going to make you who you are, and I'm kinda happy with who I am now. So, all the negative that's happened in my own past life has made me who I am now.

The widows in this study exhibited determination and success in their efforts to confront the most arduous transition of their lives. They learned they could survive without their husbands, learned to master tasks they previously felt they were incapable of doing. All

of the adjustments they made along their widowhood journey helped enhance their self-confidence, find a sense of purpose, and realize a new way forward. Reviewing the results of this study, it suggests, as others have before (Blieszner, 1993; Lopata, 1973) that learning new things enhances women's self-image and aids in their coping efforts. All of the women expressed a sense of pride in how well they had handled the various aspects of adjustment to widowhood. The findings of this study also strongly support Lopata's (1993) idea of blossoming through new experiences. The reinvention process these women experienced through learning to overcome obstacles helped them create a new identity. Pearl talked about how a major shift of social roles allowed her to reestablish herself outside of the ties she had to her husband. "I was no longer looked at as the 'first lady of the church', which took a lot of… the eyes off me and I was glad for that. I was able to be my own person and not be the pastor's wife." Ashley's new self-identity did not come from losing a title associated with her husband but from no longer compromising about how free time should be spent.

> I started traveling, and see, Eric did not like to travel; he's just a homebody,
>
> which was fine. I've done a lot of travel since then… so it's a total different world
>
> than what I had when I used to go home at night and watch television.

By no means is the loss of a spouse an easy thing to process and overcome it, rightfully so, has been described as the single most stressful life event (Lee & Bakk, 2001). The variegated trajectories by which these women have experienced profound loss, preserved the memory of their past lives, and discovered their self-identity were not free from complications. These women's experiences help illustrate that with determination and resilience a positive future is possible after the devastating loss.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the potential positive outcomes for women navigating life on their own. Understanding how widowed women make it through their process of reinvention is important for the literature on coping because research on the positive aspects of widowhood has been understudied. The current findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g. Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; Cuenca, Kleiber, Monteagudo, Linde, & Jaumot-pascual, 2014; King & Raspin, 2004) that have found small positive events can be beneficial in aiding coping efforts. While coping was not the focus of this study, it would be impossible to separate the adjustments and journey to a new reality and new self-concept from their coping efforts. This study illustrates, as Lee and Bakk's (2001) study, that women have the potential to develop a personal sense of identity and live full lives after their spouse passes. This study suggests three ways that managing these adjustments may help women find a positive new self-identity. First, discovering that they can be alone, can improve confidence to overcome larger tasks; second, mastering new skills can create a sense of positivity about the future; and finally a realization that a new reality has been reached and finding peace in a new identity.

Loneliness is a common occurrence for widowed persons (Pinquart, 2003). Overcoming loneliness means getting used to living alone and doing things as an individual (Utz et al., 2014). The women in this study found that with help from their faith or being thankful for the time they had with their husbands' they were able to handle being alone better than anticipated. The fact that many of the women in this study had never lived alone before, probably contributed to their fear of being alone. As all the women were 65 and older they grew up in generations where it was common for young women to move

from their parents' homes to their husband's. Being alone was one of the earliest adjustments that these women faced, and the common sense of surprise at how well they were able to handle being on their own created a sense of positivity and instilled confidence that they could adapt successfully to a new way of life. This finding contributes to the increasing amount of research that has shown that this infusion of positivity has many adaptive benefits during bereavement (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999; Bonanno, 2004). The results of this study provide support for Ong, Bergeman, and Boker's (2009) findings that positive emotions can lead to enhanced well-being. The women in this study talked about the way in which their lack of confidence gave way to many successful adjustments that in turn led to talk about being happy, fulfilled, and comfortable with their new self-identity. In addition to aiding in a positive sense of well-being, the generation of positive emotions has also been shown to be an important indicator of later adjustments to widowhood, by decreasing psychological distress and enhancing social relations (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997). In short, the simple act of adapting to being alone can be a catalyst for bigger adjustments.

Learning new tasks is important to productive aging (Ardelt, 2000). There are numerous benefits of learning for older adults, including enjoyment, self-confidence, satisfaction with life, coping ability, and better health (Dench & Regan, 2000). Early on, the women in this study did not seek out the opportunity to learn new things, but were forced to pick up the responsibilities that had once been shared. The fact that learning was forced on them did not seem to lessen the resulting benefits such as confidence and the ability to cope with other challenges. These women discussed the sense of competence they felt when they learned to run the household on their own. There was also a sense of

confidence that came from realizing they could be independent. This matches sentiments generated by the older adults in Chang's (2015) study on stress, which indicated that overcoming challenges can generate confidence and hope for the future. Getting through the challenges of learning to handle things that had once been tended to by their husband allowed them to feel that they were able to move forward.

Creating a new identity as a widow is a struggle that requires finding strength in new interests, developing the confidence to manage alone, and finding a sense of peace in being a single woman (Bennett, 2010). As a married woman, self-concept is maintained through social interactions and relationships with their spouse (Lund, Caserta, Diamond, & Gray, 1986). For these women suddenly familiar places seemed uncomfortable, close companions treated them differently, and the self-identity they once had was fractured. It is understandable that their early reactions were doubt in themselves and their abilities. For these women overcoming their fear of living alone and mastering household work, helped them derive a sense of competence. These findings are similar to van den Hoonaard's (2009) study of widows and widowers' experiences of living alone where women, particularly from this older generation, have spent so much of their lives taking care of others that living alone gives them a chance to focus on themselves, and live how they choose to. Successfully making these early adjustments may set the tone for blossoming later in their widowhood journey. Living alone was not the only opportunity for these women to learn new things about themselves, seeking out new social outlets and activities to compensate for lost intimacy and connections that were made through their late husband. Previous research has shown the importance of support from other single women in positive well-being (Bankoff, 1983; Ferraro et al., 1984). Women in this study

echoed that sentiment often, when they felt like married friends no longer understood them or it was cumbersome to continue in certain social circles, participants said they found themselves gravitating towards other women who could better understand them. These patterns are beneficial to the literature and continued understanding of widowed women's experiences but also should encourage us to recognize widowed women not as passive recipients of social support, but active members of society who "have built, and continue to occupy, full social life spaces as they age" (Lopata, 1996, p. 215). Opal was the most recently widowed participant in this study, and she was still navigating these social role adjustments and had not yet made it to a place where her new self-identity was clear to her. She was still in the *budding* process, just as flowers continue to develop a stronger root system to better absorb water and nutrients, widowed women continue to develop their support systems and grow by identifying what works for them. For the other women in this study, they had fully blossomed and found an appreciation for what their life had become. Phrases like "This is me," "I was able to be my own person," and "I'm happy with my life," are good indicators of the comfort that these women found in their new identities. They clarified that they still missed their husband and thought of them often, but they also acknowledged that their late spouses would not recognize the life they now led. The adjustments made throughout the process all help develop small aspects of their new identity. Adapting successfully builds up positive resources that allowed these women to start expanding their social circles, choosing new activities, and being comfortable with a new reality (Son et al., 2007). These are similar findings to Lazarus and Folkman's (1980) that small successes can facilitate hope and in turn an appreciation for the new opportunities. The current study also adds credit to Kleiber,

Hutchinson, and Williams (2002) suggestion that positively-toned experiences can increase positive emotions and create an opportunity for reappraisal. Along those same lines, Kleiber, Hutchinson, and Williams (2002) study focused on leisure experiences, but leisure often plays a role in positive experiences, so the current study adds support to the proposition that leisure may be a vehicle for personal transformation. While leisure alone, was not responsible for the blossoming effect these women reported its role in discovering their new self-identity cannot be ignored.

There are some limitations to the current study that should be noted. Firstly, a lack of diversity amongst participants should qualify the findings. All of the women were white and came from similar middle-class backgrounds. Physical health, financial stability, and social networks all affect how one adjusts to widowhood (Isherwood, King, & Luszcz, 2017). Poor health or financial constraints can impact widows' ability to participate in social and leisure activities and could cause engagement friends and family to decrease (Isherwood et al., 2017). Making the adjustments addressed in this study would likely be different for women who had fewer resources available. Participants also all lived independently in their own homes, which could affect their adjustment patterns. Adjusting to widowhood in a retirement community where there is a built-in support system, and maintenance staff to handle household chores could alter the way they adjust to life as a widow. The advantaged social life of community dwelling older adults provides more opportunities for interaction with other widows (Hong & Duff, 1994).

Taking into account differences in life circumstances, future research opportunities could compare women who have adjusted well to widowhood and women who have adopted more maladaptive tendencies. Comparing the choices made and actions taken by

each group would add to the literature on coping and identity formation by narrowing down why certain strategies work better than others. This may best be accomplished through professional counselors, realizing that women who are not coping well may be unable or unwilling to participate in the research process. Given that women often felt the need to hide their emotions or act like everything is alright, women who are coping well may overstate how well they are handling their husband's passing. Professional counselors could provide a more objective and honest description of their clients' ability to cope and success of their efforts. Additionally, a longitudinal study following several women throughout their coping process, beginning immediately after their spouse's passing, could provide real time information to get a more nuanced picture of how and when achieving a new normal is possible. Individual interviews every three months over the course of their first two years of widowhood could be therapeutic for participants in addition to reducing recall bias. At the end of the two years asking women to talk about their adjustments and experiences, and comparing that back to their real time reactions could provide a better understanding of the "true" widowhood experience compared to the experience portrayed years later.

Conclusion

There is a prevailing sense of negativity surrounding widows and widowhood, understandably so, but the conversation should be broadened to acknowledge the opportunities it presents. Being widowed is a stressful and traumatic life event, but it can also serve as an engine for change, especially for one's self-identity. Much like the field of positive psychology focuses on flourishing, individual's strengths, and the belief that people want

to cultivate their best selves, death and widowhood studies should consider a more positive orientation. Positive psychology does not intend to replace or ignore traditional psychology but rather compliments it, by providing a balance to the negative pathology. Similarly, a more positive vein of widowhood studies could encourage acceptance of the past, excitement for the future, and encourage a sense of contentment with current circumstances rather than focusing on the negatives. It could also serve to expand the limited understanding of loss and coping.

The results of this study found that women are able to uncover aspects of their personalities that may have been suppressed during marriage and thereby cultivate a new reality. A shift from seeing the adjustments as burdensome, and the label of widow as damaging is possible with time and perseverance. Understanding how we can better help women build resilience, find empowerment in their new reality, and blossom is worthy of continued research and a step towards removing the stigma surrounding widowed women.

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CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

There is no way to simplify widowhood; there is no "one size fits all" grief plan where you can follow the steps and come out on the other side healed and happy. The primary purpose of this study was to understand these women's journeys through widowhood, and the role leisure played in getting them where they are today. Additionally, this study aimed to extend the current research on coping with the loss of a spouse. The nuanced and personal experience of widowhood warrants continued research, and I am thankful for the resilient and strong women who agreed to be a part of this work. This project taught me lessons outside of the scholarship; I learned things about myself as a researcher and a strengthened passion for continued work with older adults going forward.

This study aimed to provide a better understanding of the adjustment to widowhood and social leisure's role in that process. Social networks have proven beneficial in the adaptation to the new role of widow (Cheng & Chan, 2006) and can facilitate a smoother transition to life without one's spouse (Li, 2007). Participation in social activities satisfies social needs by fostering connectedness, and encouraging participation and independence (Ten Bruggencate et al., 2018). Leisure has also been proven beneficial in coping with a variety of stresses and life events, from daily life stress (Hayosh, 2017) to traumatic injuries (Hutchinson et al., 2003) and chronic health issues (Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012). In the first article, Chapter Four, my research questions sought to understand their motivations to seek out social leisure opportunities and how those opportunities aided in creating a new reality. As part of that new reality, participants started to feel

a sense of independence, overcome fears they had about being alone, and realize their

place in the world as a widow. They also get the chance to discover a new self-identity.

The reduced care-giving responsibilities, and chance to focus on themselves gives way to

Lopata's (1993) "blossoming" phenomenon. The loss of previous roles can be liberating,

and through mastering new skills and engaging in enjoyable activities women can find

their new role as widow and a personal transformation (Jaumot-Pascual et al., 2015). My

second article, Chapter Five, was constructed from participants' discussions regarding the

adjustments they made and how this contributed to their new self-identity. For the major-

ity of the women in this study, their lives today have little resemblance to the life they

had as a wife, a fact that at different times was bewildering, but also liberating. Each arti-

cle endeavored to bring awareness to the uncertainties these women faced as a result of

spousal loss and their approaches to thriving in the face of adversity. Additionally, I hope

my work brings to light the importance of researching spousal loss in a more positive

framework, focusing on accepting the past, building resilience, finding meaning in the

present, and hope in the future.

Concurrent Losses

The many stresses that come about with the loss of a spouse require a certain amount of

adjustment and reorganization to overcome. The convoluted nature of widowhood, cop-

ing, and leisure as individual phenomena is complicated, making understanding how the

three interplay all the more challenging. The concurrent losses when a spouse dies are of-

ten cited for contributing to the difficulty in adjusting to widowhood, like health issues,

reduced mobility, financial strain, and loss of friends or family members (Carr, 2006). In

Chapter Four, the women in this study discussed, not only the laundry list of responsibilities, but the speed with which they had to jump back into life. While widowhood was likely the most prominent change there was barely time to process what that might mean before bills had to be paid, home repairs to do, or other family matters reared their head.

The loss of close social relationships was discussed in both articles. This disconnect was surprising to women, why would their closest friends not be more supportive? Surprisingly, none of the women verbalized any animosity towards friends they had lost, and perhaps it was because both parties shared the discomfort and uncertainty of the situation. The women in the study seemed unsure of their place during an outing and friends, particularly with married friends, uncertain about how to conduct themselves, what topics of conversation are safe. This part is significant because it emphasizes the continued social stigma surrounding death and those associated with it. It also brings attention to the need for better education to correct these stigmas. There are a variety of resources available for those suffering a loss, but the lack of education for those close to the widowed women is detrimental and contributes to the ignorance surrounding death and grief. Better educational resources for those in widowed women's circle of support could help them better understand their own grief and provide better support. If friends, family, and colleagues are more aware of normal reactions to grief and the grieving process they could be better understand how to be supportive and encourage support beyond the typical six-month period.

Leisure's Role

Leisure's role in these women's journey was multi-faceted. In Chapter Four, the women found leisure provided a welcome distraction; a way to "stay busy" during times that they

found it difficult to not dwell on their husband's passing. Leisure as a palliative escape is not a new finding, several previous works have touted the benefits of leisure as a temporary escape (e.g., Iso-Ahola, 1989; Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002). The interesting aspect of leisure's contribution to their coping journeys, in both articles, is that somewhere along the way leisure transitions to a tool for reinvention. Similar to Coleman and Iso-Ahola's (1993) findings that show leisure as a beneficial aid in the course of adjustment when activities provide a way to generate meaning and direction, the women in these studies found leisure most beneficial when they were with other single women who could understand them. Finding outlets where they could be understood, helped them establish a new reality and hope for what the future can be, this seemed to be a turning point where they started to see more positive changes. Keeping up appearances and the perceived pressure to not showcase their strong emotional reactions around others added to the stress of being around friends and family. Connecting with women who have experienced similar losses relieves some of the uncertainty regarding appropriate discussion topics and show of emotions. Being around other women who they felt better understood them made it easier to be themselves, in Chapter Four, the women discussed how leisure provided a way to engage with new groups and form bonds with other widowed or single women.

In the second article, Chapter Five, forging new connections and finding new fulfilling activities was a catalyst for discovering a new sense of self and improved self-esteem. Seeing that others have overcome the obstacles and found a new, satisfying life may offer hope that they can also overcome and move on. I think these positive interactions help explain some of the lack of interest in grief support groups. The few women

who attended a meeting or two, found them discouraging and depressing; sitting around with others who were still sobbing uncontrollably, sometimes years after their husband had passed was discouraging and undesirable. That is not to say that there is not a time and place to spend time in those emotions or that the negatives should be ignored but seeing that there is life after those most depressing days may be beneficial to coping. In this study, finding other women who were facing or had faced a spousal loss but showed more positive signs of adjustment was more desirable.

All of the women participated in several leisure activities that were different from those they had done with their spouses. Ashley discussed transitioning from working out to living an active lifestyle, a change from working out at the gym a few times a week to running marathons regularly. Leisure provided them ways to explore new lifestyle choices and uncover parts of themselves that may have been suppressed during their married life. The exploration and experimentation that leisure offered was beneficial for their sense of self and opened the door for them to realize what a future self could be. Even the activities, like bible study or camping that they had done with their husbands were modified to meet their social and emotional needs as a widow. So, while these were not new leisure pursuits they still helped these women find understanding and support when they needed it.

New Reality

One of the most important things to recognize from these studies is that widowhood is not a static state; over time being a widow takes on a different meaning and the experience evolves. In Chapter Four, these women describe their surprise at the dissolving of social bonds. This loss of social support compounds the already painful loss of their

spouse. Transitioning from an outsider meant seeking out other women who carried a similar status and would provide understanding. Finally, widowhood can feel empowering. There is a sense of freedom in making decisions based on their own feelings and needs, versus the compromising and joint decision making of marriage. This fresh perspective generated optimism about future possibilities, shifting them away from grieving for the future they were denied. Just like any evolutionary journey this takes time, adjustment, and occasional missteps but the women who made it to this point of recognizing a new reality, reflected positively on the changes they were able to make and impressed by their own resilience.

Chapter Five dove deeper into this new reality and looked at how a new self-identity was realized. Fear and uncertainty plagued these women in the early stages of widowhood, but each time they were able to overcome an obstacle they found improved confidence. Building confidence in themselves allowed them to make it to the next hurdle surer of their ability to face the next challenge. Their confidence and positivity continued to grow as they learned new skills, and found strength in social connections with women who understood them, until finally they were able to realize a self-identity. A self-identity of a woman who is capable, strong, independent and has a bright future ahead. These women's experiences illustrated well, Lopata's (1993) idea of "blossoming." By embracing the opportunities to learn, engaging in leisure activities, and connecting with other women on an intimate level, they were able to blossom into their own person, free to express themselves and engage in whatever activities they choose.

Implications for Practice

The findings from these studies have encouraged me to advocate for improved support offerings for widowed women, options outside of the traditional grief groups. Positive programming that focuses on helping them overcome the obstacles they face, not simply how to deal with the grief has potential to be beneficial. A basic course at local community centers that teaches older women simple home maintenance tasks and might offer a list of references for local businesses with a "silver certification" (an idea I will address more in a moment) could quell some of the initial overwhelmingness of managing a home alone. This could help ease fears about who they might be letting in their home or that they will be gouged on pricing, these are common concerns I hear from my grandmother when major house repairs need to be done. Another beneficial community offering could be an events and adventures type of group, but for widowed women. A group that offers a variety of different leisure activities, would be a more positive, but still understanding atmosphere to meet with other women. As discussed by participants, this would provide a safe space to talk through experiences and connect with women in similar situations with the added advantage of introducing new leisure interests.

It should be noted that I do not feel that a better way to do widowhood falls solely on the widowed women's shoulders, community efforts should also be evaluated. Classes to educate friends and family members to help them better understand the experience and how they can be supportive, especially after the initial few months when support starts to drop off. These community efforts should not be limited to only providing resources to its widowed population, but all older community members. Providing a community course educating local businesses and service providers on appropriate practices for working

with older adults and avoiding "senior speak" could bring better attention to ageist practices. Implementing a one-day course for local service providers and awarding them a "silver certificate" to show they have made an effort to understand their older clients and are committed to fair pricing would educate local businesses about issues older adults face and how they can best serve this portion of the population. By distributing a list of all "silver certificate" businesses to area seniors, companies would receive free promotion and widen their reach in the community.

I would also encourage communities to see their older adult population as a valuable resource by boosting civic and social engagement. Communities benefit because older adults generally have more time than younger groups to work for causes they believe in, and they can bring practical knowledge and wisdom from their lived experiences (Freedman, 1999). The older adult population benefits by finding a purpose, feeling needed, and staying active which are all important for positive aging. Bringing the focus back to widowhood, there are still many social and cultural biases against widowed women that need to be adjusted. Widowed persons are often viewed as being "others," suggesting that being married is the only or more desired state (Blieszner, 1993, p. 173). Lopata (1978) discusses the failure of the community to provide resources to support widowed women. Although she is discussing Chicago specifically, I believe this issue is a common one, the lack of community resources means widows have to try and rebuild their lives through dependence on children and friends or risk living out life unsupported (Lopata, 1978). Allowing older women the opportunity to advocate for themselves and break those stereotypes means providing them better resources to break through those barriers and positively adjust to widowhood.

Several community institutions already possess the resources needed and are well poised to aid in the restructuring of views about widowed women. Local universities, generally, pride themselves on being places where inclusion, diversity, and outside the box thinking are welcome making them a great launching point for community efforts. Universities also provide a convenient arena for a multidisciplinary approach to issues. Programs like MTSU's recently launched Positive Aging Consortium are a step in the right direction for compiling and disseminating information to the local community through online courses and community events. Understanding that positive aging is not an issue that must be addressed from a holistic approach is key; health, finance, psychology, or social work alone cannot solve the issues, but together they can provide a more big picture idea of how to address issues facing widowed women and older adults.

Given the benefits leisure provided these women groups like The Red Hat Society or Blue Thong Club, self-proclaimed "play groups" could provide positive alternatives to grief support groups. The Red Hat Society promotes itself as a place to reconnect, make new friends, and rediscover the joy of getting together with other women "for the express purpose of…having FUN!" ("About Us - The Red Hat Society, Inc.," n.d.). The Blue Thong Society, while they allow membership to women of all ages provides similar social support and encourages a positive attitude and emphasis on being "fun, fabulous, and philanthropic" ("About," n.d.). While these may seem silly or unnecessary the benefits being engaged in these type of positive organizations provide women opportunities for leisure with like-minded women, but also encourages them to represent themselves as enlightened, dynamic, and strong women regardless of age.

My Scholarly Journey

As a novice investigator these works were enlightening beyond the research. The opportunity to intentionally interact with these women in order to gain insight into their lived experiences was not only rewarding, but inspiring. I found a new appreciation for the struggles of life after the loss of a spouse, but also feel strongly that going forward I have a responsibility to advocate for the older adult community. The challenges I faced when things did not go as planned gave me a new appreciation for qualitative research.

      Semi-structured interviews. For capturing individuals' voices and understanding the ways people make meaning of their world, interviews are a flexible and powerful tool (Rabionet, 2011). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to ensure specific topics were covered, but also allowed for participants to tell their stories. Quantitative methods would not have well represented the sensitive topic of losing a spouse and the nuanced nature of the coping process. Quantitative methods, like questionnaires have narrowed the scope of topics (M. Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2003). Important aspects of widowhood or grief may be missed because a certain topic was left out of the questionnaire. Qualitative work allows the researcher to explore socially and personally constructed realities, and discover the unique and common perspectives of participants, making them the more appropriate choice to review meanings that underlie bereaved individuals (M. Stroebe et al., 2003). Qualitative work allows for participants to guide the conversation and bring up topics within the scope of the conversation they deem important. Treating an underrepresented and often ostracized group, this research adds to the necessity of qualitative work to ensure the voices of widowed women are present in the research (Kirkby-Geddes & Macaskill, 2016).

Qualitative research is intimate and requires a connection with each individual participant. Efforts were made to establish a solid rapport with my participants by volunteering at each of two senior centers in the area. While these efforts did not go completely unrewarded, I do feel that a better rapport could have been established with my participants. A more consistent communication would have been ideal and would perhaps have resulted in richer data collection. Occasional appearances at the senior centers a few months before data collection were not enough face time for members to really get to know me well before I approached them about participating in research. While there were always cordial interactions, and being a younger face helped me stand out, there still seemed to be a prevailing sense of "why is she here?" Going forward in my research pursuits, a better effort will be made to integrate myself as a positive presence with the local older adult populations without the motivation of research. I have made plans to establish community connections with local senior centers and advocacy groups as a part of my upcoming move to East Tennessee. I feel like the age gap also created some skepticism as to why I would be interested in talking to "a bunch of old folks like us." Here again, making sure I am an active participant in local community groups may help quell some of this skepticism.

Different methodological approaches may also help overcome some of these difficulties. The story-completion method is time and resource efficient, and provides a playful means of exploring participant's perceptions, understandings and social constructions (Braun et al., 2019). Story completion asks participants to complete the opening lines of a story, an example for this current work could have been to ask the women to complete a story plot based on the opening scenario of losing a spouse. The nuanced way in the way

which people might deliver the narrative and relative anonymity allows people to say things they might not in a face to face interview (Braun et al., 2019). By offering participants a fictional character to voice, it opens up the opportunity for them to be more honest when talking about potentially sensitive topics like sexuality or race. If there was some hesitation because of the age gap between myself and participants or an unwillingness to confide things to a female researcher, this method would offer a way to gather while avoiding the face to face contact which may make them uncomfortable. The responses from participant's in these current studies were overwhelmingly positive, not to say that these women's responses were untrue, but they did confide that there was pressure to act appropriately and control emotions. A story-completion method might have provided an opportunity for these women to more openly admit or discuss areas that they felt like were downfalls or they did not handle well.

Implications for Future Research

These studies showed the positive outcomes that are possible after spousal loss, but also the coping mechanisms like leisure, learning new skills, and social support that built up participants' confidence and resilience along the way are important. The findings from the current studies contributed to the research on widowhood and will hopefully open the door to more positive conversations on the topic. The positive transitions made by these women described in their conversations with me, indicated several key pieces of information. First, the path through widowhood is not a smooth upward trajectory and there are stumbling blocks along the way: days you just want to wallow in the grief and stay on the couch, days you doubt your ability to go on. This seems obvious, but the fact that women felt they needed to not be too open with their negative emotions (i.e., would cry

in the shower or the car and then put on a strong face for others) means that social stigmas still strongly effect their grieving experience. Future research could further explore the perceived social norms for widowhood and the ways they help or hinder those trying to cope. After the obligations and duties around the funeral, the role of widow becomes mysterious because American culture does not offer any rules of conduct or appropriate traditions for mourning (Ashton-Shaeffer, 1997). Lopata (1996) describes widowhood as an inescapable identity, rather than a social role, leaving women unsure of the rights, privileges and appropriate behaviors. Future research to better understand why widowed women's previous social circles are altered quite so drastically would be beneficial. Interviews with the widowed women, and their close friends at the 3, 6, and 12-month mark would provide better information about why those relationships might devolve and the perception from both sides. Since social support post-loss has a positive association with adaptation to widowhood understanding what might influence the support received and why support may decline would be beneficial for widows and those in their immediate support circles (Anusic & Lucas, 2014). Current research shows that social adjustment to the loss of a spouse varies greatly between widows and widowers, so more research to focus on the changes in social status for widowed men and their support and adjustment needs would also be warranted.

Leisure's benefit to widowed women. The benefits of leisure activity for coping with a variety of life situations have been well documented, including in the current study. This work and others have discussed the leisure choices people have chosen or found beneficial, but future research should contribute to community understanding. Quantitative surveys focused on widowed women's desires for leisure and community

engagement options would aid communities by letting them know what programs they could offer outside of grief support groups. Ageism is a major issue for recreation and leisure fields, the pervasive ideas of decline and deficiency mean that less physical activities and social involvement opportunities are offered (Wearing, 1995). These survey responses from widowed women would allow communities to better serve their needs, by providing what they desire and feel would be beneficial, rather than dictating to them what is acceptable for them to participate in.

      Blossoming. One of the most pervasive findings in these current studies has been the realization of a new reality or new self-identity, which adds to the minimal research on the positive outcomes of widowhood. As mentioned previously in Chapter Five, a longitudinal study following women throughout their widowhood journey could provide vital insights into the nuanced process that leads to a positive adjustment to widowhood. A better understanding of how emotions changed throughout the coping process and what specific events helped them move past the bad days could benefit women trying to navigate the process of the loss of a spouse. As I have mentioned several times already, the individual experience of widowhood and numerous variables make it difficult to find definitive answers.

      Another aspect of the blossoming effect should come from the feminist perspective. While great strides have been made, much of women's worth still seems to be based around the roles of wife and mother so for older widows whose children are already grown the only remaining role of "value" is wife. This idea minimizes women as valuable and worthy as an individual. A feminist perspective of blossoming could emphasize the importance of leisure and positive aging for their potential resistance and renewal

properties for women enmeshed in a patriarchal society. Arguments for this resistance, are based on the idea of leisure and a new self-identity as vehicles for "personal choice, and self-determination, which can also provide opportunities for individuals to exercise personal power" (Green, 1998, p. 172).

Feminist theory is also important to the research on widowhood to ensure that when discussing the possible positive outcomes, to make sure we are researching these outcomes for members of nondominant racial/ethnic and class groups as well. A full understanding of the possible blossoming effect of widowhood means looking at the intersecting influences of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. The positive outcomes and community resources I hope to research and advocate for should not be limited to middle class, white, widowed women only. For those with less economic resources or less social connections, it is possible that the liberation experienced by the women in this study might never be achieved.

The strength and resilience of these women have inspired me. While I have not experienced anything as devastating as the loss of a spouse, talking with them and learning from them has changed ideas about my own future. Being an older woman does not mean I have to be less valuable or that life has to slow down regardless of what society says about older women. They have also given me confidence to know that even when life gets rough there are ways to overcome and there may be a silver lining down the road. My interest in researching older adults to ensure their voices are heard and to be an advocate against ageism has only grown. My future research will focus on older adults as a community resource, the potential symbiotic benefits are too great to continue writing off older adults as a burden rather than an asset.

I feel like it would be remiss to not point out my own blossoming journey through this project, and really all of my doctoral program. Starting off as a first semester teaching assistant with little teaching experience and none at the college level, fears of the unknown were prevalent. Things that now seem routine, grading papers, disciplining students, and even just standing in front of 45 undergrads and trying to keep their attention every class period, were terrifying. Then as my workload progressed learning how to balance my physical, mental, and emotional health was easier with an office of comrades to complain to and commiserate with, while I falsely told the outside world "School is going great!" All of this has gotten me where I am today, not quite Doctor Standridge but a better equipped, more confident teacher and researcher ready to step into the new reality of Assistant Professor in the fall.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROMPT AND QUESTIONS

With your permission I would like to record the things we talk about today, are you ok if I turn on the recorder? (wait for response) I would like to thank you for agreeing to meet with me to discuss your experience as a widow. Participation in the present study entails minimal risk to participants' emotional health, because of the topics being discussed, such as your marriage, events surrounding your husbands passing, and your emotions around that time. You are not being asked to do any activities that you are not already engaging in as part of your regular leisure time. You are not being asked to increase your activity level or attempt to engage in new activities, and there is no need for you to change your daily habits. Focus Group discussions and interviews will be respectful of participants' feelings and will be discontinued, if necessary. Materials with information on grief counseling resources are available if you want them. I realize that some of these topics may be sensitive and I appreciate your willingness to talk with me. There are no anticipated benefits to you by participating in this study. This research will contribute to the literature on leisure in the lives of widowed women. Participating in this project is voluntary, and refusal to participate or withdrawing from participation at any time is allowed without penalty. While we are talking if you have any questions, please feel free to interrupt me at any time. The data we collect during the focus group and individual interviews will be confidential, your identity and all identifying information will be removed from transcripts and any subsequent representation of the data. Audio files and transcripts will be stored for three years on the PI's password-protected computer. Before we get started, do you have any questions for me? If not, let's begin.

Tell me a little about your husband and your marriage. How long were you married? How did you meet? Children? First marriage? [Leading to an investigation of whether this was a happy marriage.]

When did your husband pass away? [probe, probe, if needed]

Can you tell me about some of the circumstances around his passing? [expected, unexpected]

Can you tell me a little bit about your initial reaction to his passing?
        [maybe, how did day-to-day life change right after his passing?]

How do you think (spouse's name)'s passing has changed aspects of your life?
        Your job?
        Friendships?
        Activities?

How did you deal with your loss in the beginning?

What did that look like for you?
  Activities you participated in?
  Things you wanted to accomplish?

Did you feel like any of those things helped you cope?
  If so why were they helpful? [dig, dig, dig}

How did your free time change after your loss?
  How did you respond to this change?

What kinds of activities did you engage in the early stages of your life after your loss?

Why do you think that those were the activities you were initially attracted to?

Were those things you did before as a couple or were these new activities for you?

Did you find those activities beneficial in helping you cope with all of the changes you faced?
  Why?

Was there a point where you felt like you accepted your new reality? This is what life looks like on my own?

If so, what was it that helped you reach that point?

So there's a thing called the "blossoming effect" talking about, not necessarily that your husband passing was a positive, but more the discovery of new things about yourself. Is that something that sounds relevant to your experience?

Have you continued to do those things or have your activities changed?

If they've changed, what activities do you do now?

Are any of these activities beneficial to your coping efforts?

Is there anything else that I may have missed that you wish to discuss further?

Is there any advice that you would like to give to newly widowed persons?