

**Brief of**  
**Deborah Kestin Van Den Hoonaard: Identity Foreclosure:**  
**Women's Experiences of Widowhood**  
**as Expressed in Autobiographical Accounts**

Sociology 140

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The focus of this study is to understand women experience their new status and through analysis find and describe similarities, patterns. In the introduction she explained that in the few years of research she devoted to the subject she noticed that the "voice of widows themselves" were missing from scholarly resources. Therefore she decided to base her work on autobiographical books. She supports this decision by quoting a source that describes narrative data as the "richest and thickest source." She slightly contradicted herself--in regards of the absence of widows' voices--when disclaimed that British literature on widowhood did include narrative accounts. Besides giving the bibliographical information, no further explanatory words were wasted on them, so we do not know how extensive those were.

Before moving onto the description of the accounts, books themselves the author mentioned that she did interviews widows and learned from them that they valued these books, because they helped them and learned what widowhood meant for others. There can be no doubt that ten books chosen as the source for this study present authentic emic perspectives. However even Ms. Van Den Hoonard acknowledges that editors may have changed the content. Furthermore we do not know what the widows themselves chose to omit. The author decided to treat the books as interviews. This might have been useful in thinking about the issue, but is still a conceptual mistake. Making interviews are social interactions between two or more people (interviewer and subject), while writing books are mostly solitary exercises. They provide different results, different answers or at least emphasis on different aspects would have surfaced via interviews than books. Mixing the two methods/processes can result distortions.

The first serious criticism regarding this essay is in the sample selection. Van Den Hoonard forewarned the readers that generalization drawn from such a limited source may be

misleading. She understood that the sample is from Northern America only, all the authors are writers or related to the publishing industry. However she does not spell out that this implies class restriction in itself. Working class widows are automatically excluded from the sample. As long as she does not make claims for the whole world limiting the study to a certain Geographic area is acceptable. But why does she refer to British studies then.

I consider an even more important issue that the sample is self-selected. It includes only those women who chose to write about their experiences. Women who could not, did not want to, or had no resources to do so were not considered. The author wrote that "these books do not represent a cross-section of widows." I think this is an understatement, because it represents a very narrow segment. For example I am aware a trend that women who have been married to their husbands for 50+ years often die soon after their husband departs. I do not have solid numbers on this phenomena but it made me realize that the whole class of women who could not cope with the loss as effectively as these writers could were not covered.

There were no distinctions made by age and length of marriage. Women are at a very different stage in their lives at the age of 20, 40, 60... To become a widow at different age must present different kind of challenges, e.g. in child-rearing, finding new partners, work obligations, filial duties... None of these were mentioned, the widows were all lumped together as one coherent group. This is ironic because one of the points she makes later on is that society treats widowed women as a single group, similarly to any other that has a stigma attached to it. The author recognized the issue, but fell into the trap herself.

A final note on sample selection: financial issues were mentioned, but the ten authors are all secure. Women without minimal financial security might not have the luxury to spend significant amount of time to deal with their emotions, identity, relationships to friends and to

society. They may just have to struggle for survival. Those experiences seemed to be defined as unworthy for studying. I suspect the omission was a matter of convenience. It is easier, simpler, faster and cheaper to read books, than to seek out real people.

The main focus and finding of this work is about "identity foreclosure." The term, coined by Van den Hoonaard, refers to the process that women go through when they realized that "hang[ing] on to their identities as wives, they no longer had the social resources to do so." The author delimited it into three levels: personal, informal, formal.

By personal, aka self, foreclosure she refers to the feeling that "widows do not know who they are to themselves." This statement is supported with a wealth of quotes, all showing that the widows identity was so closely tied to their husbands that when he was gone their way of life and sense of self was demolished. This state was compared to "people who voluntarily left roles ... [and had] a sort of hangover identity." The conclusion: "Until a new concept of self was developed, these women did not have an identity."

Next we learned about the identifying moments when the widows were hit by the realization of widowhood. They had to start the process of internalizing the role of the widow. The first time they had to fill out a form and check the "widow" checkbox under marital status "pierced [her] like a lance." This can trigger in them all the negative connotation the word "widow" carries with it. The books' authors recalled their former identity as "child-brides". Not having read the books, I have to assume that all of these women married young and did not have an extended period of adult life between finishing their studies and getting married. This trend may not be representative any more even for Northern America.

The next level of foreclosure refers to how personal relationships have changed. This whole section of the essay was talking about how formerly friendly married couples terminated

their relations with the newly widowed women. It did not talk about single friends or non-married couples (including non heterosexual couples.) The widows often did not have the tools ready to handle the loss of friends. They also noticed being treated as second class citizens, placed in a lower status, like a child or servant. They were no longer invited to functions, parties, events, because their social network could not treat half of a unit as a full one. I would like to remind the reader that these observation are all based on personal accounts and we the readers did not have access to other sides of the stories. I surmise that these subjective experiences may not reflect the wide range of objective reality (if there is one.) I also referred to earlier that widows were treated as a stigmatized group, widows are supposed to belong together.

The third level of foreclosure can be traced in impersonal, formal relationships. This section talked about widows not having a credit history and rating on their own, because they shared accounts with their husbands. However the rest of this short section pulled examples that would have fit better in the previous one. In other words, the author did not provide a wide enough examples to support her claim. It might be true, but she did not paint a detailed enough picture for us to know how important the foreclosure is at this level.

The next two parts cover the widows new identity and how they built it. How they learned to do everything in the house, including the half that their husbands used to do; how the "new responsibilities and emotional adjustments" gave them confidence. It is here that we learn, that all of these women were concerned about money, despite having sufficient funds to live on with or without having to work. Their sense of new identity is strong. This "newness" was contrasted with a position that suggested that bereaved people find their old selves more or less. These women described themselves at the end of their books in positive, but new terms, such as integrated, independent, sociable, tolerant, confident, stronger.

The first implication Van den Hoonaard mentioned was that widowhood is a process. She showed it by summarizing the structure of the studied books: husbands' illness and death, realization of widowhood and its consequences, closing off previous identities at every level, and finally complete transformation of the identity. I found the "seven threads of connectedness" framework useful. The more number of these are shared or perceived through your spouse the larger the disruption his departure will cause: roles, help, network, selves, myths, reality futures. The four closing conclusions also seem to be helpful: learning to do things on your own can help to embrace your self, the grieving period is variant, the word "widow" is disliked, new projects help to develop new identity.

The article presented intelligent insights into the lives of widows. It helped me to understand them better. Hopefully my next encounter with a widow will be enhanced by my new knowledge. However the critiques I mentioned earlier still stand. Furthermore one may wonder how the study's findings would have been different if male widows were to be included.