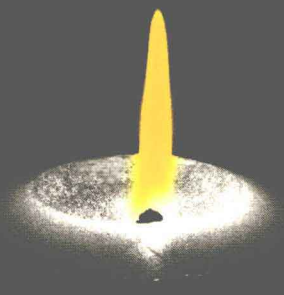


Helena Znaniecka Lopata

Current Widowhood

Myths & Realities

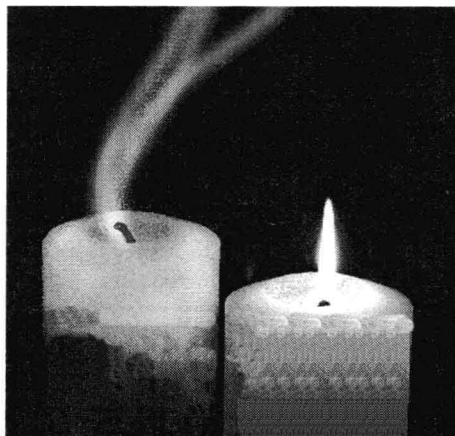


LIVING WITH
FAMILIES

Helena Znaniecka Lopata

Current Widowhood

Myths & Realities



**UNDERSTANDING
FAMILIES**



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Preface

Some time ago, the distinguished dyad of editors for this series on the family, Bert Adams and David Klein, invited me to talk with them at the meetings of the National Council on Family Relations. They then convinced me to pull together into one volume much that I know about widowhood from both my own research and that of other scholars, students, widowed women, and people working with and providing resources to widowed women. It really did not take much convincing, for such a project would culminate my years of interest in this very important subject studied through a variety of sociological concepts and perspectives.

My research on role modifications, support systems, and the situation of widows in America, as well as in other places in the world, began in a rather serendipitous way. I had come to the United States during World War II, completed my PhD at the University of Chicago a number of years later, and then could not find an academic position in the Chicago area, where my husband was determined to remain. We moved with two small children to a suburb, and there I became fascinated by the gap between the apologetic way women in the community talked about themselves and the creativity and competence with which they actually carried out their roles and developed a completely new lifestyle (a lifestyle that male sociologists deprecated in a number of 1950s books). This interest led me into a study of suburban and urban homemakers, and the Midwest Council for Social Research on Aging (MCSRA) granted me several fellowships to ana-

lyze the interviews, sociograms, and other data that I had been collecting. The result was published as *Occupation: Housewife* in 1971 (Lopata, 1971b). While I was finishing that project, Warren Peterson and Al Westin, MCSRA honchos, kiddingly asked me what I was going to do on aging to pay back the psychological and financial support I had received from their organization. I immediately responded that I would study widowhood. Actually, this response was not as ridiculous as its spontaneity might suggest. Homemakers do age, and I was curious as to what happened to their roles when their children left home and their husbands died. When I was developing a proposal and starting the research, I knew of only two studies that focused on widows: Peter Marris's research in London and Felix Berardo's study of both widows and widowers in Washington State. The field was ready for greater exploration with a variety of theoretical tools.

I was funded in the late 1960s by the Administration on Aging. (Considering how long, on and off, I have been doing such studies, I should know something about the subject!) That research on role modifications in widowhood, which was published as *Widowhood in an American City* (Lopata, 1973d), was followed by an even more ambitious cross-cultural project supported by the Social Security Administration (SSA). Doctor Henry Brehm, then Director of Research Grants and Contracts at the SSA and an expert in quantitative research methodology, became the project officer. The SSA had permission to use the U.S. counterpart funds (Pub. L. No. 480) for this project in Egypt, Poland, and Yugoslavia. These funds accumulated in countries where the United States sold grain but whose money our government did not wish to receive. Instead, the moneys were diverted for embassies, research, and humanitarian uses. My team at the Center for the Comparative Study of Social Roles at Loyola University of Chicago and Hank Brehm of the SSA were joined by Dr. Nada Smolic Krkovic and her research team at the Institute of Social Work in Zagreb, Yugoslavia; Dr. Adam Kurzynowski of the Szkoła Główna Planowania i Statystyki of Warsaw, Poland; and Dr. Nawal Nadim of the American University in Cairo, Egypt. Dr. Jacqueline Toubia of the University of Teheran, Iran, obtained funds from her own government, and we all started the long process of working up an interview that could be applicable cross-culturally. That was not as easy a task as it may sound. In fact, the original theoretical framework for the research, based on a symbolic interactionist perspective of social roles,

proved too complex at this level of comparison. We finally hit on the concept of support systems by breaking down into segments of rights and duties the relations between the central social person and the social circle in each role. Defining a support as any object or action that the receiver or giver regarded as contributory to a lifestyle, we developed four systems of supports: economic, service, social, and emotional. The reader will learn more of these in this volume.

Political reality interfered with the project when the Yugoslav version of the interview was sent (for reasons we were unable to discover) to the Department of War—and it wanted no such project. The Polish government also nixed the project in the last minute. Dr. Nadim left the results of their interviews behind when she left the American University due to internal conflicts, and those data were never analyzed. Luckily, Dr. Touba got out of Iran with her data. The theoretical framework and the interview, or parts of it, have been used in research on widowhood in Korea, India, China, the Philippines, Australia, Turkey, Israel, Canada, and several locations in America (Lopata, 1987d, 1987e).

In the meantime, Hank and I pulled together material on the economic situation of widows with special emphasis on the history and consequences of the policies of the United States toward women and children (Lopata & Brehm, 1986). My part of the cross-cultural study was published in *Women as Widows: Support Systems* (Lopata, 1979).

I have been lucky to have been invited to many conferences dealing with aging or the roles of women, where I met scholars interested in the same subjects and exchanged ideas and sources—a vital link to the world outside of one's space. I have written many chapters, articles, and papers for scientific meetings resulting from these stimulating interchanges.

It is really impossible for me to thank each and every person who has helped me during these 26 years of work on widowhood. This includes both the many widowed women who have contributed their life experiences to our knowledge and the scholars in America and the world over who have used various ideas and methodologies in their own work on widowhood. Many thanks go to all those sociologists and others involved in the Center for the Comparative Study of Social Roles at Loyola University of Chicago. As always, my colleagues in the sociology and anthropology department at Loyola have lent support, both social and emotional. In addition, they helped me to

deal with all the technological changes that have made knowledge retrieval and writing so much easier now than when I first started this work. Of additional help have been all the friends and colleagues involved in my other projects. (As a symbolic interactionist, I look at the world construction of a variety of people, using a variety of concepts.)

It is hard for me to thank my family at this time. My husband, Richard Lopata, to whom a number of my books have been dedicated and to whom I have expressed gratitude in many prefaces, died on July 13, 1994. We found out that he had inoperable cancer and insulin-dependent diabetes 18 months before that. I had started working on this book before we knew he was ill. I continued developing the ideas and pulling together the material throughout that time, except for a 5-month period surrounding his death when I could not even look at the then almost-completed manuscript. There is much truth to the statement that there is a vast difference between understanding and feeling empathy for the emotions and sentiments of others and understanding and feeling such emotions oneself. Living through the devastating illness and death of someone with whom one has shared everything for 49 years and all the aftereffects of these events is a different kind of pain from any that I had ever experienced before. On the other hand, knowing what others have gone through and the many different, ambivalent, and intensive ways they have felt has helped me personally. Also, having to put all this on paper has, I believe, eased the grieving. I only wish that Dick were alive to share the results.

My daughter Teddy and my son Stefan have been marvelous throughout all this, as always. Their contributions followed the gender-specific lines expected from my research, and I am glad that they complemented each other so well in providing me with different supports. They and their families have always added to the pleasures of my life.

And so, what is this book all about? Since the 1960s, the amount of knowledge about widowhood has exploded due to the contributions of both widowed women and many scholars studying the role changes, support systems, problems, and results of widowhood. In this work, I have organized this vast database around two major themes. The first theme focuses on the uneven and often convoluted influence of changes in societies, communities, and personal resources resulting from modernization or social development. The second theme focuses

on the presence of numerous myths, stereotypes, and assumptions that surround widowhood and all the circumstances of becoming and being a widow. Even I found myself influenced by these at the start of the research. Many of these myths present a dismal and limiting picture of women, which has grown out of a variety of traditional and even modern cultures and subcultures. I discuss these throughout the book, pointing, when possible, to research showing the realities of actual life. I also indicate areas in which we need more research to test the assumptions behind the myths.

Current Widowhood: Myths & Realities is organized with an initial comparative and historical perspective on the situation of widows in other parts of the world and in special communities in America. In Chapter 4, I proceed to show the effects on a woman of the role of wife and the circumstances by which a woman experiences the illness and death of her husband. These circumstances move her first into the temporary role of widow and then into a pervasive identity of widowed woman. This pervasive identity enters her various social roles more or less significantly. Following this discussion are analyses of the effects of widowhood on the roles of mother, kin member, friend, and participant in the larger community.

This book ends with an overall picture of the major themes of the effects of social development and of the myths surrounding widowhood. These themes had led me from the beginning, along with the help of Herbert Blumer's (1969) "sensitizing concepts." Most of my analysis evolved gradually as I tried to systematize the vast body of knowledge in the grounded-theory method now so common in sociology. I am a symbolic interactionist, concerned with the construction of reality, or the meanings of life, for people who are going through an experience. I hope that this perspective is evident throughout.

The methods used to pull all this together are quite varied. They include interviews, questionnaires, participant observations, personal experiences, census and other statistical resources, and the unexpected findings through which all of us carry forth our studies. Above all, they include the guiding concepts through which organizational structure emerges. The reader must remember that many scholars contributed to this volume through their works, which I have used selectively. I have obviously benefited from my own research. The analytical concepts and perspectives used in the various projects range from the broad macrolevel of societal change to the intermediary stress on social role, role modification, and support systems, to the microlevel

of personal experiences, such as loneliness and grief. Always present for sociologists are the questions of the representativeness and validity of the data.

I consider one of the major contributions of this book to be the set of conceptual themes through which I have been able to analyze, organize, and present an extensive body of scholarly knowledge. Another major contribution is making available to many readers this world of knowledge from so many different studies, which were conducted by means of a great variety of methodologies. I have an advantage over other scholars working with the general subject of widowhood and its various topic areas in that I was present at the beginning and helped to influence the development of this broad area. My theoretical perspective has supplied some of the concepts and areas of focus that have defined this research. Luckily, other social scientists have approached widowhood with other conceptual and technical methodologies. We have all added cumulatively to knowledge and to the concepts used in other areas of investigation.

In the meantime, I have learned much from all the work of others and from the maturation of my own ideas. The recent work to which I refer in Chapter 9 has helped pull away the dismal image (with which even I first approached this subject) of the ever-limited, ever-suffering, ever-dependent widow. The picture of widowhood that now emerges is much more complicated and varied than I had been able to grasp in my first study in the late 1960s.

In addition, of course, ideological and sociocultural changes in American society, as well as changes in the social life spaces and self-concepts of women, have resulted in new cohorts of widowed women and of women who will at some point in their lives become widowed. These changes will help dissolve any remaining old myths. The feminist movement has been a major change agent influencing directly both American women and many of us scholars. As a result, while providing opportunities for women to express themselves, we have been reexamining the images of women in general, of different "types" of women, of women in many different situations, and of individual women. This reconstruction of womanhood extends, of course, to widowed women. We are learning much in recent years, and I hope that this book will help others in their learning processes.

Fortunately, this particular book has had help from new sources. Annette Prosterman came on this scene during the past 2 years as my research assistant. She became so interested in this volume (especially

in the community and societal responses to widowhood) and was of such assistance with its preparation that I asked her to contribute a chapter on this topic. She has worked with me on the references (always a painful job) and is an excellent editor who forced me to think out many questions. David Klein and Bert Adams have also asked the penetrating questions and pushed me to greater clarity and consistency. Kirsten Gronbjerg and Judith Wittner also guided me in these directions.

To all of them, I owe a great debt.

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1

Studying Widowhood

Studying widowhood is not easy. People become widowed in several ways, and there are numerous influences on the consequences of this process. For these reasons, I have selected widowhood as it affects women only and will focus on American women, with some comparative and historical foundations. We can agree that a widowed woman is a woman who had been married and whose husband has died. We do not need to eliminate women who were not living with their husbands, who were perhaps even divorced from their husbands, when these men died. Their living and marital arrangements form part of the influences on widowhood. Women who were widowed but who have remarried will also be included, because remarriage is one of the ways widowhood is changed.

The bare situational essentials defining widowhood camouflage great variations the world over by many societal, community, and personal factors. Societies differ considerably in their social structure and culture. In addition, societies are not stable, changing rapidly in recent times.¹ The more complex the structure, the greater the resources for social integration at all stages of life. At the same time, complex societies require considerable knowledge and individuated, voluntaristic, social integration. The more heterogeneous the culture, the greater the variety of ways people are integrated through a variety

of social roles. One of the problems for members of changing societies is that social change removes traditional forms of social integration without adequately replacing them before the people are socialized into new methods of social engagement.

A person is also affected by the community in which she or he is located, in terms of its size and availability of resources for all members, as well as for different kinds of members, to develop lifestyles. Social class, minority, and gender identification influence choices and restrictions.

Finally, a person's characteristics determine if she or he is able to take advantage of opportunities or is limited to a narrow set of social roles—that is, life space—within the society and community. To understand this statement, we must reach an agreement as to the definition of concepts, including social development, social role, social life space, the role of wife, the role of widow, widowhood as a pervasive identity, and myths and reality.

Basic Concepts

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Several concepts summarize the direction of change in societies of the past century or so, including social development, modernization, and complexity of scale. Although there is quite a bit of debate as to which of these concepts best represents both the changes and the differences between societies, depending on the extent and kind of change, I prefer to use the concept of social development.

Generally speaking, societies have been moving in the past couple of centuries, at varying rates in different areas, toward increasing complexity of social structure and social units with the help of the industrial, technological, and knowledge revolutions; mass education; urbanization; and mobility of population. At an ideal-typical level, societal members expand their social life space (see discussion later), construction of reality, and social roles as they broaden awareness and identification. With this expansion comes increasing rationality in problem solving, individualization, and choice. In addition, these changes are influencing more and more of the population, providing people with personal resources to choose from extensive societal

resources. These people can build flexible social life spaces in cooperation with equally self-developed others.

An additional complicated factor in our understanding of widowhood is the unevenness in the development of various aspects of societal life and community and personal resources even in the 1990s. Many older Americans, let alone members of other societies, were socialized in traditional settings, with ascribed—that is, assigned—social roles. Those socialized in transitional times suffered much strain from the anomalies of contradictory norms and relations. People needed to develop their own solutions to problems throughout the life course, or they might have had the help of a limited number of role associates. Modern times still contain many contradictions and vestiges of the past social class, racial, ethnic, rural-urban, gender, and other constraints. Relatively few people have really been socialized to take advantage of existing resources or create their own resources to build complex, flexible, and satisfying life courses. This is particularly true of older American women, many, if not most, of whom have been systematically disadvantaged in their ability to reach even existing resources. This is reflected in their role as wife and in widowhood.

SOCIAL ROLE

A social role is a set of patterned, interdependent relations between a social person and a social circle encompassing rights and privileges, duties, and obligations on all sides. The social person is the title bearer: mother, father, student, professor, and so forth. Each role is organized around a purpose. A total individual is not involved in each social role. Rather, only certain characteristics, physical, sociopsychological, and behavioral, are required for each role because of the nature of the duties and rights. The person must somehow prove to the social circle, through various testing methods, that she or he has the characteristics assumed to be necessary to perform the negotiated duties and receive the negotiated rights. The circle consists of everyone with whom the social person relates in the role, those who provide the cooperative rights and privileges and who are recipients of the person's duties and obligations.

In general, most social circles contain beneficiaries of the role, assistants who help meet obligations to the beneficiaries, suppliers of necessary objects and services, colleagues or others with whom the

person works, and administrators, in the case of an organized group. Sometimes the person pulls together her or his own circle, but frequently the circle precedes the person, seeking, testing, and then accepting and cooperating with the appointee. The person needs to win acceptance of each segment of the circle. The duties are directed not only to the beneficiaries but also to all members of the circle, if only in recognition of their presence and their contributions. Thus, the duties and obligations of a wife are deeply influenced by not only her husband but also by other members of her social circle as a wife. She has duties not only to her husband but also to all the people in the social circle who make it possible for her to be the kind of wife that all of them, including her, have negotiated to accept. The social circle members, in turn, have obligations to her and must give her the rights and resources she needs to be that kind of wife.

Although each role is unique in that the relations are negotiated between a social person and a specific circle of people, the culture within which they interact contains the model for the role, and other persons and circles are usually involved in that kind of role at the same time.

With social development, social roles have become increasingly open to selection, much more negotiable, less institutionalized, and able to flow with the needs of the social person and circle members (Turner, 1962, 1970). We shall see this throughout the book.

SOCIAL LIFE SPACE

At any one time and throughout the life course, each individual is involved in a variety of roles. Some of these roles are more similar than other roles, sharing a somewhat common institutional base. For example, the roles of daughter, sister, wife, mother, and kin member in general all fall into the family institution, defined as a set of established procedures organizing a major area of life. Social life space refers to the figurative portrayal of the complexity of the role cluster of any member of society. Some people have a relatively flat social life space, being involved in social roles that fall into one institution. The richness of their involvement in that dimension can vary by the number of roles in which they are active. Other people have a multidimensional social life space, being involved in social roles in several institutions.