AUSTRALIAN WAR WIDOWS: A CASE STUDY TO CHALLENGE PUBLIC POLICY

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Abstract: This paper explores public policy in relation to war widows. The effects of public policy are rarely analysed from an individual's perspective. The paper draws on interview data to analyse the case study of a 51 year old Vietnam War widow and compares this to the experiences of six other war widows. Findings are part of a larger study on widowhood. Life histories were gained through unstructured interviews and then constructed as case studies that enabled an analysis of the relationship between the individual lived experience of the women and broader social forces that influence this. The findings suggest that women may feel differently about being categorised as 'war widows' in public policy and the reasons for this are varied. The paper suggests that an extension of this study be conducted to more fully explore the reasons for the differences in war widows to inform future policy review/revision.

Introduction

War widows in Australia have been eligible for pensions since the 1917 and 1920 Repatriation Acts. At this time the pension provided subsistence, however the formation of the War Widows' Guild of Australia in 1946 resulted in significant expansion of the pension and its associated concessions/benefits. The continuation and expansion of these benefits in public policy owes much to the pressure exerted by the Guild. By 1951, the Guild was able to claim that public policy had increased the pension, secured payment of accrued recreational leave pay to soldiers' widows, included medical, dental and optical benefits and provided for the educational costs of children (Thorpe Clark 1986). A war widows pension was significantly higher than a civilian widows

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pension until the 1970s when the base rate for both were equalised (Roe 1983). Other differences, however, have continued. For example, the war widows pension is not means tested and certain benefits are not available to civilian widows. Although the category 'widow' enshrined in public policy in 1942 for civilian widows was dismantled (included as sole parent pensioners or unemployed) in the late 1980s, the category 'war widow' has continued to the present day.

One of the major tenets of feminist research has been the acknowledgment and validation of the experience of women (Skeggs 1995). In the process of making experience visible. However, Scott (1992: 25) argues that critical examination needs to include "the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation…, its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate...". This paper examines the lived experience of war widows. It uses case study material from war widows to explore how the category 'war widow' is taken up albeit reluctantly by one Vietnam war widow and considers why this might differ from other widows' experiences. The emphasis on a single-subject case study is particularly useful where it highlights assumptions and generates different reactions from what is considered universal because of "the dissonant character of the findings" (Dukes 1972: 221). Case study also extends social understanding by focusing on rich detail of an instance. The aim is not to investigate the prevalence of an experience and findings may not be generalisable. Instead case study is useful for examining individual effects and differences in fine detail and the thick description may resonate as meaningful. The findings from this examination may then inform larger studies to further investigate such meanings.

The study

The central question of how broader social forces influence the experience of widowhood was explored through oral life histories in a qualitative study of 36 women. Seven war widows were interviewed as part of this larger study and this paper explores the differences found within these women's experiences of widowhood. Unstructured interviews around particular life events such as childhood, education, work, marriage, motherhood and widowhood were conducted. As Connell (1995: 89) noted oral histories are "a first-class method for the study of social change". An individual "constructs an image of [her] life

course — past, present and future — which selects, abstracts, and distorts in such a way as to provide [her] with a view of [herself] that [she] can usefully expound in current situations" (Goffman 1976: 139). In this way, current constructions are reflected in the interviews with the women and past events reflected on by each woman using her current position with these reflections shedding light on the process of change and the process of construction.

A life history should not be seen as representing 'reality' directly but rather as a story meaningfully constructed within a given interactive situation or situations. Each woman's oral history was written as a case study that both preserved her unique experience and allowed comparison of cases to explore and analyse similarities and differences. To identify the patterns, themes and meanings emerging from the widows' stories immersion in the text allowed intimate familiarity with each case. The case studies transformed the women's narratives of their experiences to sets of constructed meanings and interpretations about widowhood produced within and after the interview. Thus, as Connell (1995: 91) notes "[w]riting up each case study was both an attempt at a portrait of a person and a reflection on the portrait's meaning as evidence about social change". They were used to organise the life history material, give voice to the women's experiences and to interpret and analyse the social processes through which meanings are constructed (Personal Narratives Group 1989: Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander 1995; Dowsett 1996). The analysis of the women's case studies was aimed at making clear the relationship between the individual lived experiences of the widows and the broader social, political and historical contexts (Plummer 2001; Sherman Heyl 2001). The explanations constructed from the analysis of each case were grounded in the researcher's engagement with the widows' stories. Although the women had been widows for varying lengths of time, the analysis of the case studies capture their personal and social experiences through the telling of their life stories (Clandinin & Connelly 1994).

The major finding of this research is that although several characteristics of widow identity have persisted across time (honoured by the State, in need of charity. deserving) their salience may be wavering. Factors contributing to this wavering salience include women taking up multiple identities (worker, mother, active citizen) and the degree of social valorisation of war if war is the reason for widowhood. In the current times a personal dialectical tension exists between being forever wed to an Australian soldier and being a modern self-

sufficient, self-determining woman. An ambivalence may exist for some women between the desire to identify with the proud traditions of what it means to be a war widow with the romantic memories of the past, and the desire to be future oriented and self-sufficient. The following comparison of in-depth material from a 51 year old Vietnam war widows' case study with understandings arising with six other war widows elaborates on this tension. Using material from a single case study is appropriate and useful when a "supposed universal relationship is questioned" (Dukes 1972: 217). The similarities and differences in the case studies of war widows are explored to identify that their experiences can depend on generational differences and the circumstances of war and death. As Sadler (1985) argues, case studies are useful in providing valuable insights into the way in which policy is experienced at the receiving end.

Generational Differences and the Circumstances of War and Death

Julie's husband had fought in the Vietnam War and died suddenly, two years prior to the interview, of a war-related illness, leaving her a widow at 49. It was Julie's second marriage. She divorced her first husband when her daughters were aged 2 and 4. Her second husband also had two children from a former marriage who lived with their mother.

Julie's initial schooling was similar to the majority of the women interviewed in that she completed Year 10. Unlike the other women, however, she pursued a career throughout her married life. She would have preferred to continue with her schooling but the declining health of her ageing father prompted her to leave school and earn a living.

> *…mum had left school at 14, 15. So it was deemed that it was necessary for me to do the same…she had the same perception with my daughters too…when* [husband] *died she said the girls would have to stop going to university and go out and earn a living.*

Julie completed a secretarial course, worked and saved money to enable her to travel. At 21 she left Australia, traveling around various countries for 9 months before she met and married her first husband. Julie and her husband returned

to Australia where her daughters were born. She was then divorced, and found that her situation had changed dramatically.

> *We'd gone from a very privileged life-style to nothing…so we went virtually over a period of a couple of weeks from having a BMW car and flash houses and units everywhere to having absolutely nothing in the bank. I couldn't believe how naive I'd been and that's why I had to go back out to work and start to earn a living.*

Two years later Julie married again to a professional army officer, which meant moving frequently during the 14 years of the marriage. Damousi (2001) found that the experiences of the wives of professional army men were different from those whose husbands had volunteered or who had been conscripted. It was argued that although the pressure on wives was intense as "[m]oving house became a lifestyle" (Damousi 2001: 156) they were accepting and accommodating of this commitment. Julie, on the other hand, was wary going into her second marriage and was determined that she would always have her own money and despite high mobility continued to support herself and her daughters through her own work. Julie had completed business management courses that resulted in career advancement and she enjoyed work immensely. Julie believed that her commitment to her career had been a positive influence on her daughters.

> *It made them very resourceful, resilient, independent and they admit this, they think they actually have an advantage over kids whose mothers have been at home. They are stimulated, their friends are envious that their mother is "switched-on" in their word… No they actually see it as an advantage, huge advantage.*

Julie was not aware that she was entitled to a war widows' pension when her second husband died. Her husband was a heavy smoker, returning from Vietnam smoking three packs a day and his death was determined to be related to this heavy tobacco consumption. A friend of her husband who worked for Legacy[1] initiated the application for Julie's war widows' pension. When the pension was granted, Julie objected but was persuaded by this friend that she was entitled to the benefit. Julie's sense of guilt was not only associated with the sense that she was accepting something she did not work for but because her husband died of a smoking-related illness. Believing that his death was only indirectly related to the Vietnam war, receiving the pension felt fraudulent:

> *I will quite honestly admit that I had a lot of trouble accepting it because well, it's a basic mental block that anything I haven't worked for in my life, I don't think I'm entitled to… I am grateful for it, enormously grateful for it but still feel a sort of a guilt that I am accepting something that I am not physically doing something for.*

Julie felt ambivalent about accepting a pension. Her ability to provide for her daughters independently had been important to her throughout her second marriage and she rejected the identity of widow because to her it signified dependence.

> *I've always supported myself because* [husband] *had two children from a former marriage and was supporting them to the hilt and I wasn't getting any maintenance from child support or didn't get property settlement or anything so it's the case that I've bought this house and I've a mortgage on it so I still work to pay it off and support the girls.*

Julie would not be eligible for any financial support from the state as a civilian widow. Because her husband's death was considered war-related she received the war widows' pension. This pension is unconditional, it is not means tested and she will continue to receive it throughout her life even if she remarried. Julie accepted the pension and its associated benefits but remained ambivalent. The other war widows interviewed experienced no such ambivalence. Their husbands were involved in World War II and their deaths were also attributed to war-related illnesses. Some like Julie, were in paid work but, unlike Julie, saw no injustice in receiving the pension and working as well. Their work was mostly low-paid and part-time, something that had supplemented their husband's previous income and subsequent pension. The 'breadwinner' role was seen by these women to be the primary responsibility of husbands or, on their deaths, the state.

Four issues are apparent in terms of Julie's ambivalence about receiving the pension. First, her husband was involved in the Vietnam War, a war that was never seen with the same national pride as World War I or II. She talked about Vietnam widows not openly identifying themselves as being widows of men who were involved in this war. Damousi (2001) also found that Vietnam war widows were embarrassed about their husband's involvement in this war often concealing this because of stigma and shame. As Damousi (2001: 48) argued

the lack of recognition for remembering the Vietnam or "Dirty War" is characterised by "outrage, resentment as well as silence".

The World War II widows in this study however recalled their experiences of wartime and of being the widows of men involved in this war with pride and a sense of collective unity. Although they admitted that wartime was difficult their memories of these times were filled with a sense of everyone working together to get through the hard times; a collective national effort. There is not the same sense of collective unity in terms of Australia's involvement in Vietnam. Many thought that Australia should not be involved in this war; it was a more distant, individualised and isolating concern for those involved. Another important issue for Julie was that she married her husband after he returned from the Vietnam War. She did not experience being a war wife.

The World War II widows interviewed were proud of their identity as war widows and found that this sense of self had strengthened over time. Importantly here in terms of the women's strong identity as war widows is that the war widows' pension does not convert to the aged pension. Once categorised in public policy as a war widow the woman is always a war widow. The War Widows' Guild has been important in mediating and reinforcing this identity as well. Many of the older war widows interviewed were members of this Guild. Julie was contacted by Legacy to establish a support group for younger war widows. Legacy was concerned that young war widows were not receiving the same support as World War II widows. Julie had found that younger women tend not to be involved in the War Widows Guild because they do not perceive themselves as war widows. They feel that the Guild represents an organisation for World War II widows only.

> *…No, we don't regard ourselves as war widows, mainly that would go back to the men that came back from Vietnam weren't heroes. A lot of them never let on that they'd been in Vietnam. There were all sorts of perceptions in the community out there from a lot of people still that they shouldn't have been there so you don't run around and say my husband fought in Vietnam because there's a lot of ill feelings against them from a large number of people. A lot of WWII widows that I've spoken to in the War Widows Guild seem to feed off their husbands' careers in a different way. They were very proud of what their husbands' achieved... There is a big thing in memories, very few*

> *of the women whose husbands fought in Vietnam have the privilege of doing that because most of us saw a different side...*

One of the older widows acknowledged this view and admitted that the Guild needed to become actively involved with the Vietnam and Korean widows if it was not to die out.

> *Yes we had I think 2 of them join us. One unfortunately passed away very suddenly and she was very active and very good in what she was offering. But the other one is on the council but she offers nothing and she doesn't talk to anybody. So I think because of the age difference they feel they don't quite fit in…*

Secondly, Julie did not automatically assume that wives are entitled to economic support, unlike the others in this study. This may be related to the other widows' historical and social backgrounds. Julie admitted that her experience and qualifications resulted in high-salaried employment. Her paid-work has never been seen as supplementary. She has never seen the 'breadwinner' role as another person's responsibility. As Julie had not seen herself primarily as a soldier's wife she had difficulties with identifying herself as a war widow. She believed that she didn't have to wear her widowhood "like a badge".

> *…that's the difference…they projected everything with their husbands… but now that he is gone, they've got no resources, they don't know what else to do with their lives, they haven't got an identity…I just wasn't* [husband's] *wife…a lot of military wives tend to just be swallowed up by their husband's careers…*

Julie had always been economically independent and she interpreted the pension as a reward for the way in which her husband died. This however adds the third dimension to her ambivalence as his death was only indirectly related to the war. The general feeling of ambivalence towards Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War also influenced Julie's reluctance to see herself as a war widow. Lastly, the negative response Julie experienced from various administrative bodies (those where she could receive concessions or rebates) because she was seen as a younger woman receiving a pension may have also contributed to her sense of not 'deserving' such benefits. Widows in general are perceived as older women and there is disbelief from the community if you are not in the older age group. More specifically, war widows are seen as women

who were married to World War II veterans and Julie has often been asked if she had been married to a much older man because of this perception.

Conclusion

Not all war widows in this study experience receiving the war widows pension with the same sense of entitlement. The passage of time, the changing role and potential for women, the nature of the war in the public psyche, and the degree to which society romanticises war may be important factors in this difference. The case study of one Vietnam War widow has highlighted, through comparison with other war widows' stories, some of the differences in the experience of widowhood for these women.

For the World War II widows in this study, their identity as war widows was important to them and, although the war ended more than 50 years ago, this identity had strengthened over time. How men die was important to widows' sense of self and being a WWII widow was sacred for them. Australian's involvement in WWII was celebrated and revered. WWII widows felt part of this and as such believed they were deserving of a pension that in some ways rewarded them for the sacrifices made by themselves and their husbands.

Australia's ambivalence in its involvement in Vietnam is reflected in one widows' sense of reluctance about her entitlement to an unconditional pension. This reluctance may also be attributed to this woman's sense of self, a self not defined by a single identity, but several. As 'wife' had not been this woman's primary identity, she does not identity herself as 'widow' and therefore any associated public policy benefits are not seen as entitlements but more of an embarrassment. It is important that policy makers, government officials and the thinking public reflect on the reality that a war widows identity is not static, or fixed. Whilst war widows need to be honored and valued in our society since they represent courage, patriotism and family it is also important to consider women's changing place within society. Women who have lost their husbands through war are not just widows and yet they will always he so. Carefully considered polices are needed that acknowledge this tension and at the same time signal to the larger society that soldiers will always be supported. An extension of this study is needed to more fully explore the diverse issues around widowhood for all war widows to further inform public policy. If governments

are serious about moving towards a more inclusive policy development process, then they need to facilitate a multi-dimensional widowhood experience. How this is enacted in policy is a matter for continuing public debate.

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Endnotes

1 Legacy is an organisation that assists widows and dependants of deceased servicemen. Assistance can be social or financial. Recreational and educational programmes are also included in the range of activities provided by Legacy (Legacy Australia 1999).