

GENDERED GRIEF: DEPICTIONS OF CONJUGAL
BEREAVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

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GENDERED GRIEF: DEPICTIONS OF CONJUGAL
BEREAVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my work to My Favorite Mother who watched my babe so I could watch my movies. Thank you Mamacita and Papski for the love you share with us all.

Love,

Your Favorite Daughter

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ABSTRACT

GENDERED GRIEF: DEPICTIONS OF CONJUGAL BEREAVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

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This study analyzes the depiction of gender in the context of conjugal bereavement in mainstream film during the last decade (2002-2011). Understanding the gendered representation of grief can help to recognize the social construction of death and loss. I evaluate the portrayal of 21 recently widowed main characters in United States mainstream film through ethnographic content analysis. This study finds that though women are more likely to lose a spouse during their lifetime, they receive much less representation in film on the subject of bereavement and none past middle age. When depicted, women are much more reliant upon other men to help with routine needs and cope with the loss of a spouse. On the other hand, grief spurs men into action-based plots of thrill and adventure. The depicted expectations for bereaved men and women in film largely fall in line with traditional hegemonic norms. These findings support other research that confirms gendered representations in media. It also demonstrates that gendered norms and scripts exist in the common but often overlooked rite of passage of death and widowhood.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The United States population continues to grow as baby boomers increasingly join the ranks of retired and older-age. Movies depicting death, grief, and loss are popular, and as America's aging population grows, the topic is cultural, contemporary, and relevant (Cohen and Weimann 2000). The experience of viewing these films gives movie-goers the opportunity to demystify grief and ponder a topic commonly avoided. Widowhood in particular is something many never experience first-hand. Media allows us to "learn about death indirectly by experiencing the death of others," especially if we have not often experienced loss (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2003:460; Clarke 2006). Because the topic of death is not a daily experience for most, media is one of the most common and influential sources of people's perception of dying and grief.

In studying how people cope with grief, sociologists uncover socialized aspects of death and grief, how we draw meaning from life experiences, and the various ways we interact with others and structures to process grief. At the individual level, studying how we process grief in daily interaction can give insight into socialization and role expectations. Gender is also a deeply engrained aspect of socialization and experience (Bandura 1977; Bandura 2002). Researchers describe both gender and the grief process as continuums of experience (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Holland, Neimeyer, Boelen, and Prigerson 2009). Researchers have evaluated the theme of gender, death, and grieving through content analysis of television shows (Schiappa et al. 2003), advertisements

(Kahlenberg and Hein 2010), interviews (Bennett, Hughes, and Smith 2003), and surveys (Versalle and McDowell 2005).

While previous research evaluates the reality of widow(er)'s experience, little research analyzes how the bereaved are represented in mainstream media, none based on film. Understanding the gendered representation of grief in media can help us better recognize the social construction of the corporate and individual experience of loss (Wicks 1992; Bandura 2002). The merit of studying gender during critical moments in the life course is well documented when looking at childhood development, sexual encounters, dating, marriage, children, and the workplace. This study is important because it focuses on the common but often overlooked critical life experience of bereavement. It also encourages the study of experiences often found in later life as our society ages (although my specific findings note the underrepresentation of older-aged adults in film on bereavement). I analyzed the depiction of gender, bereavement, and widowhood in mainstream motion pictures in the last decade. I conducted a qualitative content analysis of 21 films that portrayed a recently widowed adult to evaluate how mainstream media depicts gender in the context of grief.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Constructing Gender in Media

Dichotomous characterizations of masculine and feminine continue to persist in culture even though feminists have long-challenged socially constructed gender norms in support of much more diverse and multifaceted understandings of experience. Most contemporary gender scholars maintain that gender is socially constructed. Candace West (1996) argues that Goffman's legacy to feminism involves his study of demeanor, that "there is *nothing* natural about manly or womanly 'natures,' save for our capacity to depict them that way" (p. 362). As a part of culture, media plays a role in shaping and being shaped by society. Magazine advertisements and photos are scripted and hyperritualized, a "simulated slice of life" (Goffman 1979:15). Movies are in some ways the ultimate display of simulation, grand performances with attention paid to every intricate detail of the setting, actors, score, and script.

The learning of gendered scripts and schemas begins young and continues as a self-regulating process by monitoring our own behaviors as well as others' (West and Zimmerman 1987; Wicks 1992). Media offers a primary source for observing gender. Four stereotypes most notable and present in American movie, music, and television include woman as sex object, victim, domestic goddess, or power woman (escaping oppressive forces) while media often represents men as either strong and assertive or wimpy, effeminate, and sexually incompetent (Crothers 2006; Wallis 2011). Films

regularly under-represent or negatively portray women (Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, and Harris 1997; Fouts and Burggraf 2000; Markson and Taylor 2000; Collins 2011).

Underrepresentation is particularly an issue for women and minorities, especially when looking at leading roles (Signorielli 2004). Older individuals receive little attention in media or are negatively represented as losing aspects of gender (e.g., strength, family, beauty) (McKay 2003; Signorielli 2004; Crothers 2006; Calasanti 2007).

Although much of gender studies focus on the experience of women, media also contributes to the complex construction of multiple masculinities. Masculinity is defined by appearances, affects, sexualities, behaviors, occupations, agency, and dominations (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Pompper 2010). Not all characteristics associated with masculinity are created equal (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). For example, heterosexuality remains an important aspect of masculine privilege (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Martin 2009; Solebello and Elliott 2011). Heterosexual men are most overrepresented in media (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, and Lund 2003; Desmond and Danilewicz 2010).

Research shows masculinity in the media as idealized with only small movement toward incorporation of broadened gender scripts. Ricciardelli, Clow, and White (2010) identified multiple masculinities in Canadian men's magazines but note that an ideal, heterosexual, strong male reigns. In film, Eschrich (2011) notes that mainstream film, specifically in films about Jesus Christ, do not allow for alternative masculinities. Only in small budget and independent films did Eschrich find gender representations that challenge the status quo.

Grief and Widowhood—A Socially Scripted Experience

Even if some aspects of grief occur in private, it is also subject to social expectation and influence. The existence of bereavement theories speaks to the normalization of sorrow within society. Grief theory at large suggests not only that society expects grief after a death, but that there is also an appropriate way to grieve. Just as expressing too much grief for too long may not conform to societal standards, neither does too little grief for too short a period conform to norms. The consistent management of one's impression, in politeness and decorum over time and in all settings and situations, is an achievement of widowhood. "A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated" (Goffman 1959:75). Maintaining the new identity of widow(er) is learned over time, but it rests on the ideals of what society identifies as acceptable bereavement and the scripts that go along with it. For example, common rituals guide the immediate process of burial and receiving of condolences as part of the grieving process.

Common social expectations suggest the achievement of widowhood includes accepting the death of a loved one, recovering from the associated grief, and adapting to life after loss (Kübler-Ross 1969; Bowlby and Parkes 1970; Parkes and Weiss 1983; Worden 2002; Rothaupt and Becker 2007). Whether grief occurs in stages of emotional experience, by accomplishing external tasks, or adapting the self into the status of widow(er), there is pressure to move forward in a timely manner for the sake of mental, emotional, and physical health (Nerken 1993; Marrone 1999; Schaefer and Moos 2003; Rothaupt and Becker 2007). Disenfranchisement may occur when society does not

recognize the relationship (e.g. an ex-partner or nontraditional relationship); deems grief unnecessary (e.g. a pet); assumes the bereaved incapable of grief (e.g. younger person); shuns the circumstances of death (e.g. suicide, HIV/AIDS); or disapproves of the style of grief (e.g. emotional or stoic) (Doka 2002; Green and Grant 2008; Doka and Martin 2010).

Research on Gender and Bereavement

To evaluate depictions of gender and bereavement in film, I utilize research on actual experiences of bereavement in widowhood. The experience of grief in widowhood varies based on a number of factors including personal background, experience, health, age, relationship strength, emotional proclivity, and support system (Sanders 1988; Doughty 2009). The deeply personal and life-changing crisis of losing a significant partner is one situation that can illuminate gender norms and stereotypes. Gender is one of many factors associated with bereavement experience but not enough to legitimize dichotomous stereotypes of widows and widowers.

Some research suggests men and women experience grief differently. Women may experience grief more acutely while men experience grief in waves (Summers, Zisook, Sciolla, Patterson, Atkinson, and the HNRC Group 2004). Guinther, Segal, and Bogaards (2003) found men become less comfortable with emotion while women experience the opposite over time. Others found men are more comfortable with their emotions one year after the death of a spouse while women continue to limit their emotions (Van Baarsen and Groenou 2001).

The conflicting findings may be due to method of research. Lee and DeMaris (2007) evaluated both cross-sectional and longitudinal data. Looking at cross-sectional

data, widowhood appeared more difficult for men than women; in longitudinal data, there was no gender difference or slightly more difficulty for women. Sanders (1988) points to samples as problematic, often low and middle class, volunteer-based, and under representative of men. In any regard, how and when one measures grief can affect the findings, as well as physical, psychological, and sociological factors (Sanders 1988).

The different experiences of bereavement and widowhood may suggest “gender specific psychological underpinnings” exist in how men and women socialize and define a sense of self in general and in committed relationships (Umberson, Wortman, and Kessler 1992; Summers et al. 2004:237). Women may define themselves more in relationship to others. Consequently, the loss of a partner could threaten a female’s self-identity more so than a male. Some women also experienced changes in friendships because married friends often would limit interactions after the death of spouse (Bennett Hughes, and Smith 2005). The tendency for women to act as primary caregivers also means they are more likely to care for others than men (Suitor and Pillemer 2000).

Previous research shows mixed findings on social support based on gender after the death of a spouse. Some studies show widowers are more likely to have a support system in place before and after the death of a spouse (Bennett et al. 2003; Summers et al. 2004; Williams, Baker, Allman and Roseman 2006). Others suggest that women in general have a larger social network and there is little evidence that women are more emotionally sensitive to the quality of their relationships (Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, and Slaten 1996). In some studies, women are found to have more social support (Umberson et al. 1996; Peters and Liefbroer 1997; Thuen, Reime, and Skrautvoll 1997). Others suggest social support is more evenly distributed (Utz, Carr, Nesse, and

Wortman 2002). Attempting a less gendered assessment, Utz et al. (2002) compared widowed to non-widowed persons and found widows and widowers to have higher levels of informal social contact and comparable formal social participation. In an overview of 19 previous widowhood studies, Miller, Smerglia, and Bouchet (2004) found that social support does not significantly impact adjustment.

In at least one way women bear the larger burden of loss as men usually marry older and die younger (Umberson et al. 1992; Bennett et al. 2003). Women experience more loss than men and are less likely to remarry compared to widowers (Umberson et al. 1992; Bennett et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2006). Other losses in a short period of time, like friends or children, can compound grief. Just as women continue the extra care giving role even after the death of their partner, many men miss the role of their female partner, such as house cleaning, laundry, and meal preparation. Studies on which gender fares better in widowhood remain unclear.

Very little research gives insight into unique gendered experiences of bereavement. Fenge and Fannin (2009) argue that bereavement becomes yet another situation in which a homosexual individual may have to come out, minimizing the lost relationship and silencing the individual's grief (Houck 2007; Fenge and Fannin 2009). If one does not come out, the alternative is forced silence. Bereaved but unmarried partners also receive less support, especially those not in heterosexual, married relationships (Robak and Weitzman 1998). Perhaps most important is to note that *within* a single gender there may be differences in the grief process, and limiting the grief experience to two dichotomous genders does not help to understand the complex experiences of bereavement and widowhood (Umberson et al. 1996; Carr 2004).

Media Depictions of Death and Bereavement

With all of the opportunities to grieve that media provides, from simulations of death to real-life cyber memorials and virtual cemeteries, death is a complex theme within media while bereavement remains on the periphery in comparison (Berridge 2001; Gibson 2007). Mainstream movies notoriously depict death without focusing on the grief that follows. Though death is one of the most common thematic events in movies, popular films have fewer routine medical deaths and show less emotional expression associated with death compared to award-winning motion pictures (Schultz and Huet 2001). Overall, scenes of risk, threat, and attack occur more than 12 times as much as routine illness, death, funeral, or burial. Emotions of sorrow in response to death occur for only 10% of those scenes (Schultz and Huet 2001).

Overall, death in film is not only void of the implications of death, but the deaths themselves are atypical. War, terrorism, unusual accidents, and homicide are normal occurrences with little attention given to the emotions associated with loss of a loved one. When reactions are captured on film, they are distorted forms of ambivalence, humor, and relief (Schultz and Huet 2001). Diversity with the inclusion of women, racial, and ethnic characters is almost entirely absent (hooks 1994; Weitz 2010). Often, women are [removed] depicted as a source of subordination and victimization within film as well (Smith, Pieper, Granados and Choveiti 2010; Neuendorf, Gore, Dalessandro, Janstova, and Snyder-Suhy 2010; Welsh 2010).

Little research exists on the topic of bereavement and whether bereavement is depicted as gendered in media. In general, mainstream film continues to produce traditional masculine and feminine characters. Just as with other experiences, in matters

of life and death we negotiate gender. This study sought to analyze mainstream film on the subject of bereavement to evaluate the representation of gender. How are depictions of grief gendered, if at all? How do gender norms affect the grieving process in the loss of romantic, committed love as depicted in movies? How do they compare to the actual experiences of widow(ers) as found by researchers? In film, how do people respond to situations of abnormal grief? How does the individual interact with and respond to expectations of other people, as represented in movies?

Despite past attempts to investigate gender and the grief process, there is still room for further understanding on the topic. Green and Grant (2008) critique grief theory as over-generalized and lacking recognition of its socially-constructed nature. Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies (2002) assert we have a tendency to speak of grief psychologically in America but give less attention to sociological implications of bereavement. Recent content analysis within the study of gender focuses on television, magazines, books, and news (Rudy, Popova, and Linz 2010). This research intends to fill that gap by evaluating the social construction of gender as it pertains to conjugal bereavement in film.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I approached this research with ethnographic content analysis (ECA). ECA allows researchers to analyze depictions of groups, social processes, stereotypes, or themes in various types of media. Qualitative in nature, ECA is a structured but exploratory system of data collection and analysis (Altheide 1996). Rather than verify previous theory through quantitative analysis, ECA openly examines content qualitatively with a goal of verification and discovery (Esterberg 2002). In ECA, theory develops as a result of research instead of as the starting point. The open-ended nature of ECA allows reflection and refinement throughout the data collection process and the opportunity for understanding in-depth nuances of gender representations in the grieving process for widow(er)s (Altheide 1996).

Ethnography assumes a symbolic interactionist perspective in its emphases. ECA focuses on the meaning of events taking place and the situation in which they emerge (Altheide 1996). Research already describes many ways in which gender and the experience of grief are associated. I analyzed *representations* of grief in film to evaluate how messages in the media might be gendered. The goal is not to create theory but to understand how social influences, like media, represent gender in the specific context of grief. IRB approval was not necessary as this project analyzes films without any interaction or direct observation of human subjects. Although this research looks specifically at the representation of gender and widowed bereavement in film, it may give

insight into grief in other contexts as well as the study of gender at large. I also look for consistency with previous research to make these connections. The unit of analysis for this study was movies. The media is a hotbed for the analysis of culture. Movies are a multi-billion dollar industry and these films on bereavement are a part of that culture ranging from \$3.3 to \$293 million in earnings at the box office (mean= \$78.3 million; median= \$47.9 million) (Internet Movie Database 2012). The sample consisted of 21 major motion picture films distributed in the last decade (2002-2011) on the subject of bereavement in the context of widowhood (Table 1). I did not attempt to attain a probability (representative) sample because these films represent the entirety of this specific subject to my knowledge.

Although there are multiple Independent films on the same subject in the last ten years, I did not include them as the focus of this study was on mainstream representations of gender and grief. I included full-length, not short, film to allow for adequate attention to the character's experience. This study focused on the depiction of bereavement of a deceased spouse or committed partner. I excluded movies depicting deaths of children, extended family, or peers (unless they were in addition to the partner's death). I also eliminated movies including the character of Death. The death of a romantic partner is a unique experience that stands apart from other bereavement scenarios.

I first employed the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) to attain movie titles, year of release, and plot summary. This database is one of the most comprehensive, including information on over two million movies. I completed searches with keywords, including "death," "dying," "widow," "widower," "widowhood," "grief," and "bereavement." For each movie listed in the search results, I selected those released in the last 10 years in the

United States. Within each movie's individual page on IMDb, the database also offered suggestions for similar movies. I exhausted all movie titles that IMDb suggested and evaluated each against my criteria.

After finishing the search on IMDb, I completed a broad online search via two different search engines (i.e., Google and Bing) using the same key search terms. Within the Internet search, I found two primary sources of information. First, several bereavement-themed websites listed, among their resources, movie suggestions for viewing. Second, several discussion boards and forums had similar deliberations on the topic. An individual typically posed a question about movies on a subject related to widowhood or bereavement, and others responded with suggestions. I added these movies and then removed duplicates from my sample. The search on IMDb ultimately resulted in 16 movies and the Internet search resulted in four more movies for a total of 20. A colleague informed me of the final movie by word of mouth. The movies in this sample included couples that are married ($n=17$), engaged ($n=3$), and partnered ($n=1$). Twenty relationships were heterosexual and one was same-sex. Focusing on committed romantic relationships as opposed to married couples allowed for more diversity in the sample though still limited.

To access popular depictions of gender active in cultural discourse, the movies in this sample were released in American movie theaters. Movies in this study also focused on life after the death of a loved one. This distinction allowed for the deceased to be alive at the beginning of the movie or in flashbacks, but the primary focus of the plot included the experience of bereavement and widowhood. Coping with the death was a key

component of the storyline, so the bereaved individual was a main character in all 21 movies. I accessed the films through rental or purchase at major retailers.

After an initial review of the literature and older films on the subject, I drafted an initial protocol to use as a guide in evaluating each movie. The categories in the initial protocol included details about each movie (e.g., genre, length of film, box office revenue, major themes) as well as details about characters (e.g., socioeconomic background, age at death, years since death, type of death, etc.). I included open coding to allow for general observations to be noted, analyzed, thematically coded, and refined upon completion of data collection.

I viewed each film a total of three times over seven weeks. I watched each two times and allowed for additional reviewing of specific scenes as needed. After watching each movie twice, I evaluated the open coding of my protocol and several additional patterns emerged (Altheide 1996). I added several new categories to the data collection, resulting in my final protocol. I then watched each movie one additional time to ensure I incorporated these revisions in my data collection. My notes included summaries, observations, and quotations. Observations included the context of the movie at large as well as the context of specific scenes within the movie. I focused not only on the dialogue but also actors, setting, placement of actors, gestures, and other aspects of interaction (Goffman 1979). Upon completion of data collection, I continued coding, ultimately organizing my findings into four primary themes.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Within the films on the subject of conjugal bereavement, I found four patterns about gendered grief. First, characteristics of age, race, gender, and profession suggest a continued preference for young, middle-class, white, and male depictions of characters. Second, film depicted men as strong, often processing their grief within a plotline of thrill and adventure though in reality widowers settle and remarry at higher rates than women. Third, the societal response to a widow(er)'s grief was largely supportive and unassociated with gender, except men were more likely to isolate themselves as a coping mechanism to their grief. Last, women are often depicted as reliant upon other male relationships to cope with the death of a spouse or partner. Though women are more likely to lose a spouse during their lifetime, they receive much less representation in film. Widows past middle-age receive no attention in film on the subject of bereavement while white men are overrepresented at all ages.

I argue that these gendered depictions generally do not reflect previous research on grief and loss. Instead, the patterns shown in representations of bereavement suggest a gendered experience. Furthermore, the portrayal of men and women contribute to a continued dichotomous understanding of gender. Men are represented as youthful, dynamic, strong, stoic, and independent. Women are depicted as emotional and dependent upon men financially, emotionally, psychologically, and physically. By representing the grief process as gendered, mainstream film media contributes to cultural

understandings and expectations of grief that limit the experience of bereavement based upon dichotomous genders. The rite of passage from coupled to widow(er) is gender scripted just as other experiences in the life course. These findings support other research that confirms gendered representations in media. It also contributes to script, schema, and performance theories by demonstrating that gendered norms and scripts exist in the often overlooked rite of passage of death and widowhood.

Demographics

A number of factors, like age, financial security, and sexual orientation define life experiences like grief (Sanders 1988; Doughty 2009). These attributes affect the experience of gender (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Of the 21 films in this study, the depiction of the bereaved was overwhelmingly male, young (if a female), middle-class, white, and heterosexual (Table 1). These findings suggest that film on this particular subject contribute to an ongoing preference for men and hegemonic masculinity within the media at large.

Age

Movies either referenced age directly or gave clues to age based on life milestones and context. For example, recently retiring or having young children indicated older or younger age ranges respectively. Women over the age of 40 were not represented at all in this sample. The lack of older women may speak to several underlying [removed] related issues. Older women notoriously receive less representation in media or are often depicted in a negative light (Bazzini et al. 1997; Markson and Taylor 2000; Signorielli 2004). Older women are also not typically depicted in sexual situations (Tally 2006). All five films with female leads included scenes of sexual or sensual nature. Writers and

producers of film may assume younger female characters to embody more feminine allure for their audience.

In reality, older women are most likely to experience widowhood. In heterosexual relationships they often outlive their spouse. The actual life expectancy rates in The United States are 76.2 years for men and 81.1 years for women (Murphy, Xu, Kochanek, and Division of Vital Statistics 2010). If a woman marries an older man she may be younger at his death, resulting in additional years of life as a widow as compared to a man. Women also remarry less compared to their male counterparts (Umberson et al. 1992; Bennett et al. 2003). Though there typically are more widows and they live for a longer duration, films on the subject of bereavement did not in any way account for older women as leading characters.

Although no women beyond middle-age were represented in this sample, the sample included four widowers depicted at retirement age. Tally (2006) and Weitz (2010) hope that as baby boomers age, the market may grow to represent older individuals in film more often. Unfortunately, this study shows very little representation, even within a subject (spousal bereavement) that more often affects the growing older-aged population. Instead, there continues to be limited roles for actors beyond middle age (Holmlund 2010). Furthermore, as detailed below, the roles older men played relate to traditional masculine stereotypes of adventure, strength, and valor.

Class

Professions also give insight into how films depicted men and women as associated to widowhood. Though two movies (*Catch and Release* and *Jersey Girl*) showed the bereaved partner moving in with family or friends, none of the characters

voiced significant concern over finances after becoming single-income households.

Women were left to unskilled work or continued dependence upon their late spouse. Two women were housewives, each raising children. Two worked in menial jobs. Grey (*Catch and Release*) worked a basic desk job and Holly (*P.S. I Love You*) jumped between five different jobs in the two years before her husband's death. The fifth female lead, Erica (*The Brave One*), held a notable position as a radio talk show host on the sights and sounds of New York City. Interestingly, listeners identified her by her deeper-pitched voice on the radio (played by Jodie Foster). She fit the mold of what Gilpatric (2010) found in action lead roles for women: young and white with an established career.

Men, on the other hand, worked in reputable and professional fields, including professor, syndicated newspaper columnist, author, doctor/dentist, business man, US Marshall, architect, and pastor. Two retired men worked life-long in factories, one as an actuary, and the last as a small business owner of a balloon stand (*Up!*). In the few circumstances where men held lower-grade jobs, the position resulted from their widowed circumstance. Ollie (*Jersey Girl*) became a civil servant only as a result of his wife's unexpected death in childbirth. He previously worked as a media executive in a large New York City company and hoped to one day return to the field. Overall, the sample depicted professionals much more often as men and while lower-level employees were considerably underrepresented or depicted with female leads (Signorielli and Kahlenberg 2001). This agrees with previous research showing men in more determinable jobs and in leadership roles while women are more often financially dependent, young, and in menial positions (Signorielli and Bascue 1999; Glascock 2001; Lauzen and Dozier 2004).

Financial security allowed many characters the luxury of determining their work schedule, if they chose to continue work at all, to make room for the grief process. For example, Tim (*Seven Pounds*) took on the work identity of his civil servant brother in order to make amends for the deaths he caused, including his partner's. His previous career as an aeronautical engineer provided a lavish lifestyle that positioned him with enough financial security to quit work and take on the unpaid persona of an IRS employee. Six did not work and seven quit or took leave with no concern for finances. While money in and of itself is not necessarily gendered, financial security was a gendered plot point in films with female leads. Films in this sample regularly depicted women as financially dependent upon men. In *Things We Lost in The Fire*, Audrey lied about her situation to encourage her late husband's best friend to move in with her:

Jerry: I don't need your charity, Audrey.

Audrey: Who's offering you charity? I'm the one that needs the help here. Really, you know how high my mortgage is? You can move in, get yourself situated, and eventually you can get a job and you can pay me rent.

Audrey was a financially secure housewife due to her husband's success but presented herself as helpless. Her relationship with Jerry was previously rocky as she disapproved of his drug-using lifestyle. By putting up the front of needing his security, he agreed to move in. Paired with other ways (detailed below) that Jerry assisted in her grief process, Audrey presented as dependent upon him. Similarly, Gray (*Catch and Release*) moved in with her fiancée's best friends because she could not afford to pay rent on her own. Erica (*The Brave One*) was the only lead female who supported herself without the security of a man.

Because of the affluence of each widow(er), the representation of bereavement in these films suggests a middle-class dichotomous understanding of gender. The male

continued as the breadwinner, financially stable enough to quit or old enough to retire. The female did not worry with finances due to her late husband's success or because of assistance from other men (whether or not she had legitimate need for assistance).

Sexual Orientation

All but one relationship was heterosexual in this sample. Films about bereavement underrepresented GLBTQ characters compared both to reality and representations of non-heterosexual characters in primetime television (Netzley 2010). George (*A Single Man*) represented a disenfranchised griever in the year 1962 (Doka 2010). His partner of 16 years, Jim, died in an automobile accident. Jim's cousin contacted George because the parents were unwilling to acknowledge him as an important fixture in Jim's life. The service was "just for family," but Jim's cousin "thought that [George] should know." His family refused George the status of partner, roommate, or even friend. They denied him public recognition of his loss both in that moment of finding out and during the entire process of mourning.

Throughout the film, eight months after Jim's death, others noted that George demeanor as "sad," somber, and "unwell." Even his closest female friend did not understand his relationship to Jim. Charley referred to his relationship as a "substitute for something else," that if he "weren't such a goddamn perv we could have all been happy." George could not even present himself as a widow. When he did try to take on the role, to attend the funeral or share with his best friend, his grief was tied to his sexual identity in ways that other lead characters in this study did not have to address. Living in secluded bereavement, he spent the day preparing to commit suicide while neighbors, students, and friends did not recognize his pain. Only one character confronted his sadness and helped

to prevent George's suicide. Kenny, a student, presented himself as interested in George intellectually, emotionally, and sexually. Kenny helped bring about a moment of "absolute clarity" for George, "when for a few brief seconds, silence [drowned] out the noise, and [he could] feel... It's as though all things [came] into existence." Kenny understood his pain, even though he did not know the source, and was open to George's sexuality. George's grief was legitimate only with Kenny.

The qualities of sexual orientation, class, and age affected the experience of grief and gender in film. The sexual orientation of the character George inhibited his experience of grief in ways that mirror the reality of disenfranchised grief (Doka 2002). By focusing on financially secure widows, most of the main characters grieved without concern of how grief could impact work or income. The films in this sample regularly portrayed widows as dependent upon men for financial security. Women were depicted less often in film as main characters, not at all over middle-age. Representation in film contradicted reality where women are more likely to be widowed and more likely to be older. The movies in this sample contribute to a larger pattern of underrepresentation of women in lead roles, especially older women, in mainstream film.

Adventurous Men

A common storyline in the films (57%) involved an adventurous, thrilling, or heroic aspect of the bereaved spouse. Ten were male (47% of all the films, 62.5% of the films with male leads) and two were female (9.5% of all the films, 40% of the films with female leads). Three of the men's films involved going on a road trip, six fell into action or thriller genres, and one qualified as drama with the lead man dying a local hero.

All three road-trip films involve retired men. Warren (*About Schmidt*) traveled on a long vacation in the RV he and his wife purchased just before her death. Frank (*Everybody's Fine*), against doctor's advice, traveled by train and plane to visit each of his four children. Carl (*Up!*) attached balloons to his home to transport it near Paradise Falls, fulfilling a promise he made to his wife years before. In each of these films, as well as *Gran Torino* which also depicted a retired widower, the main characters were older but also capable of adventurous or heroic qualities. *About Schmidt* and *Everybody's Fine* fall within drama and comedy genres, with little action involved. Still, their willingness to quickly decide on cross-country journeys and follow through suggests masculine spirits of adventure and autonomy.

Fitting with more classically masculine ideals, Carl and Walt both showed that men as vigorous and strong at any age. In *Up!*, Carl walked (with a cane) across a forest and plateau with his home attached to his back for miles, later proving himself victorious against the villain in an airship battle while also saving other characters involved. Walt was sick, coughing up blood, throughout *Gran Torino* but also used swagger and ammunition to challenge the gangs in his neighborhood, ultimately defeating them through his own heroic death. When gang members stumbled upon his lawn he protected his property without backing down:

I blow a hole in your face and then I go in the house... and I sleep like a baby.
You can count on that. We used to stack fucks like you five feet high in Korea...
use ya for sandbags.

He served as a mentor and father-figure to teenage neighbors and received gifts from the neighbors for his role as protector. Walt was gruff, racist, sexist, and ageist throughout the film. Whether the film was to be a commentary on or challenge to the mythic

American hero, ultimately the movie presented a heroic character, further justifying the traditional paradigm of masculinity (Schrock and Padavic 2007).

Dragonfly, Inception, Law Abiding Citizen, Signs, Shutter Island, and White

Noise all depicted men as strong, intelligent, strategic, handsome, and brave. The death of spouse spurred the plot on to show that men, at any age, get adventure. Clyde (*Law Abiding Citizen*) set out to make a statement to the justice system after the release of the man who raped and murdered his family.

Bray: Look, spies are a dime a dozen. I'm a spy. Clyde is a brain. He's a think tank-type guy. His specialty was low-impact kinetic operations.

Nick (Prosecutor): That's a hell of a fancy way to say that he kills people.

Bray: We kill people. He figured out how to do it without ever being in the same room. It was his gift, and he was the best.... What I'm sayin' is, just assume that this guy can hear and see everything that you're doing.

Nick: No. We got him locked away, maximum security.

Bray: If he's in jail, it's because he wants to be in jail. He's a born tactician. Every move that he makes, it means something. That cellmate that he killed, what, you think that was random? No. That's a pawn being moved off the board. If I were you, I'd be lookin' for the next piece. Anybody who had anything to do with that case, he's gonna be comin' after you.

Nick: So what are you sayin'? You sayin' we can't stop him?

Bray: Walk into his cell, and put a bullet in his head. Aside from that, no, you can't stop him. If Clyde wants you dead, you're dead.

Clyde used his strategic intelligence and stoic demeanor to systematically challenge and break down the justice system in Philadelphia. Confident and capable, he almost pulled off his entire plan. He showed hints of emotion rarely, like keeping his daughter's bracelet, but argued his actions were not about emotional vengeance but rather a non-emotive critique of the justice system. When asked if his wife and daughter would approve of his actions, -he logically responded that his "wife and daughter can't feel anything. They're dead." The film depicted him as stoic in his grieving. All films in this sample depicted both men and women in emotional catharsis, processing, and grieving,

most moving on from the death of a partner. The difference is that movies under this theme involve mostly men that fit idealized masculine stereotypes. Additionally, male leads are more likely to be involved in action film over any other. Essentially, not only do gender stereotypes exist, but men are also expected to fit into them.

Women, on the other hand, were killed off or absent before they could even become widows in old age or be depicted in film. Two females starred in lead roles as widows in action or thriller genres but were still depicted in ways that support gender norms. Erica (*The Brave One*) played a woman with a grudge, killing several criminals after the brutal murder of her fiancé. She had a vendetta for the three men responsible, ultimately killing them. The movie certainly showed Erica in a powerful role with a strong disposition. Part of the portrayal included physical features of a short haircut and baggy clothing with a lean athletic figure and deeper female voice. Though the film portrayed a female lead, her emotional and physical traits were those commonly assumed to be masculine.

The second film with a female lead told the story of Linda (*Premonition*) who wakes each day of the week her husband dies, in non-chronological order. Linda began confused but then plotted out the week on paper to foresee how she could prevent her husband's death. Her attempts were frantic and unsuccessful. The last day of the chronological week, her mother and best friend placed her in psychiatric ward against her will. The difference between *Premonition* and another psychological thriller with a male lead, *Shutter Island* (Teddy), was in the depiction of each character's psychiatric distress. Teddy was shown as a leader, confident and intelligent. Although he ultimately remained institutionalized while Linda found psychological stability, he was represented

as clear-headed, unafraid, and aggressive throughout the film. Linda played the role of a semi-depressed housewife, scrambled to understand what day it was, and worried at times if she was a bad mother. These films depicted traditional gender stereotypes even in the context of complicated grief.

Social Support

Previous research shows unclear findings on social support after the death of a spouse (Miller et al. 2004). Within films on the subject of bereavement, women were more often depicted within social networks while men were more diverse in their social situation. Five movies showed men with family and friend networks. The four films with retired widowers depicted the death of spouse as an opportunity to grow relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. The remaining seven widower-focused films portrayed the men as isolated or with one friend. This corroborates with the mixed findings in research on the actual experience of widowers.

Widow(er)s all received sympathetic, encouraging, and considerate social support overall. At times friends encouraged them to take more time than needed. Friend Fritz persuaded Gray (*Catch and Release*) to call in sick though she didn't voice any need to do so: "Tragic widow, right?... If you can't blow off work now, then when can you?" Family and friends generally recognized the challenges of bereavement and gently encouraged the widow(er) to move forward. After spending days in her home without tidying up or showering, Holly's mother and friends confronted her (*P.S. I Love You*):

Friend: What's that smell?

Holly: It's me, all right?

Friend (2): Hey, hey, hey. Don't be like that.

Holly: Like what?

Friend (2): Like the only lonely widow in Gotham City.

Holly: I'm just... exhausted.

Mother: You know, if you want us to leave, that's fine. But you do know that at some point, this all has to stop.

Friends and family regularly offered support to meet physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of the bereaved. Even when the lead character became severely isolated, family, friends, and neighbors continued to reach out to the bereaved. The support was not always in the best interest of the widower, but friends and family tried to help. Even though Charlie (*Reign Over Me*) shut out most people in his life, they continued to care about him from a distance. His in-laws eventually sought to temporarily institutionalize him in order to provide him more intense psychological help. In defense of Charlie's grief, an acquaintance observed, "I don't know how they can't see that he's just got a broken heart. It's so broken, his poor heart." Charlie isolated himself from those who loved him most, but they still looked out for him. If depicted as isolated, the main character did so on his or her own, not because friends or family distanced themselves. Men were more often represented as isolated, but otherwise social support was available to all characters.

None of the widow(er)s distanced themselves from the deceased. Levels of attachment varied, but gender differences were not notable in representations of continued bonds (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996). Speaking to his in-laws, Charlie expressed how his wife and daughters were still a part of his life, five years after their deaths:

I don't need to talk about her or look at pictures... 'cause the truth is, a lot of times, I see her... on the street. I walk down the street, I see her in someone else's face... clearer than any of the pictures you carry with you. I get that you're in pain, but you got each other. You got each other! And I'm the one who's gotta see her and the girls all the time. Everywhere I go! I even see the dog. That's how fucked up I still am! I look at a German shepherd; I see our goddamn poodle.

Charlie was depicted as psychiatrically hindered by his grief, but his awareness of his late family was not abnormal. Most movies discussed memories, had flashbacks, or included dreams of the deceased. Other movies included voiceovers, often as if talking to the deceased or speaking to the deceased while alone. In these situations, the spouse acted as a routine part of everyday life or a social support while the bereaved struggled with loss. After reading the many letters her late husband left behind, Holly (*P.S. I Love You*) wrote and spoke to him, “I don’t know how you did it. You brought me back from the dead.” These continued bonds helped the bereaved both to stay connected and move forward. The continued relationship as a social support was not clearly gendered in the films, reflective of research on the subject of continued bonds in reality (Klass et al. 1996).

A common scene in one-quarter of the films involved a moment looking in the mirror while alone as if confronting the isolated nature of widowed experience. George (*A Single Man*) stated in a voiceover that “Looking back at me in the mirror is not so much a face as the expression of a predicament.” In *The Brave One*, Erica stepped into a bathroom after committing a vengeful murder and told herself, “Welcome back.” In voiceovers, she speaks about leaving behind her former self: “She is gone. This thing, this stranger, is all you are now.” More than isolating one’s self from others, films depicted the bereaved characters as isolating their own pre-widowed self. Two looked in the mirror before considering taking medication to help with symptoms of acute grief. Neither took the medicine. These moments of clarity may be depictions of the shift in social identity from married or partnered to widow(er) (Stroebe and Schut 1999; Bennett et al. 2005). They are moments of acceptance, present in depictions of both men and women.

Sometimes the death of a partner spurred the widow(er) into chaos. Among others, Teddy (*Shutter Island*) lived in a world of paranoia and delusions, Cobb (*Inception*) had to let go of his wife's memory deep within his dreams in order to survive, Charlie (*Reign Over Me*) battled psychiatric complicated grief, and Tim (*Seven Pounds*) took on his brother's professional identity in order to make amends for the deaths he caused. Those with limited support systems were depicted as more likely to isolate themselves with negative consequences on their life experience. In these films, isolation was more likely to occur with men. This reflects some research of gendered experience in real life (Umberson et al. 1996; Peters and Liefbroer 1997; Thuen, Reime, and Skrautvoll 1997) but contradicts others (Bennett et al. 2003; Summers et al. 2004; Williams, Baker, Allman and Roseman 2006).

Women's Dependence on Men

If men were more likely to be depicted as isolated, women were more likely to be depicted as dependent. Though widows tended to have their own social networks of support, the man's best friend played a significant role in three of the five films. In two films (*Catch and Release*; *P.S. I Love You*), the widow eventually initiated sex with the late husband's best friend, and both movies end foreshadowing that the widow pursued a relationship with him. *Things We Lost in the Fire* involved a distinct sexual tension between Audrey and her late husband's best friend. She approached Jerry to help with her insomnia, "I need to sleep. I was wondering if you might be able to help me." He joined her in the bed she shared with her husband just days before, mimicking her husband's routine of wrapping his leg over her and rubbing her ear. Other scenes involved her glancing toward the bathroom as he showered and coming close together but moving

away before a kiss occurred. Jerry also took on a father-like role for her children, teaching her son to swim. It is not that women were sexualized so much as sex was just one way they played a subordinate or dependent role to men. Acting almost as a replacement to their partners, these men provided the emotional and physical support the women previously received from their partners.

The remaining two films with female leads included flashback scenes of the women being sexually intimate with their partners. The necessity of a man held true in all of the films depicting widows as the remaining two female-focused films showed a reliance on a male figure. In *Premonition*, the wife longed for her relationship with her husband to become stronger, closer, and more intimate as it was during courtship. *The Brave One* did not depict a romantic figure, but the male detective builds a friendship with Erica that ultimately saved her life in the end and allowed for her to finally get the vengeance she sought since her fiancée's violent death. The one film portraying a homosexual relationship (*A Single Man*) depicted George in numerous sexually tense scenes with Kenny, including stolen gazes, one man disrobing in front of the other, skinny dipping in the ocean, and suggestive language. Of the sixteen films with male leads, only one includes the widow having sex (*Seven Pounds*).

This difference in movies that include sex scenes may partly relate to the genre of each film. Most films with male leads were action-oriented. All movies with sexual content were related to the genre of drama. Genre is related to gender as noted above in that men are more likely to be depicted in characters that are strong, adventurous, and non-reliant on others. Females were more often represented in films that focused on relationships. Although in actuality men are much more likely to re-partner after the

death of a spouse, the films did not mirror that (Umberson et al. 1992; Bennett et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2006). In film, women need men, but men do not necessarily need women.

Movies with widowers often employed females as secondary characters. Eight films portrayed these women in a generally positive light. In six films, the woman was depicted negatively as: a drunken divorcee, detective's wife and daughter in need of protection, unstable therapy patient, depressed and psychotic late wife, or a timid widow. *Up!* and *Signs* had no adult females playing significant supporting characters. Overall, when men have the lead in these films, women are optional and often negatively portrayed. For women, men are a defining part of moving on. Moving on has with it the connotation of moving on into another relationship dependent upon a man.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Movies do not necessarily reflect actual experience, but they contribute to the culture in which they are part. Likewise, their depictions of gender influence the larger socialization of individuals at all stages of the life course. We do not learn about gender only as a child (West and Zimmerman 1987). The ongoing process of socialization occurs throughout all of adulthood, including death and bereavement. Some grief, like that associated with the loss of a partner, occurs rarely (or never) in a person's lifespan. These films put a voice to grief in a way we may not typically see. While cultivation research focuses largely on the impact of violence in the media, there is some evidence that viewing television shows on the subject of death influences one's perspective on the subject (Schiappa et al. 2003).

Research also shows media as a saturated environment to evaluate gender norms (Goffman 1979; Fouts and Burggraf 2000; Smith et al. 2010; Wallis 2011). The 21 films in this study also demonstrate that media conveys a gendered experience of grief. Older women were completely omitted from film on the subject of widowhood, particularly troubling as they are most likely to be widowed. Women in general were not adequately represented or portrayed as reliant upon other men in their bereavement process. White, middle-class men were most often depicted with the specific genre of conjugal bereavement in film. Mainstream film overrepresented men in action film, further supporting the ideal prototyped male as strong, stoic, and adventurous. In terms of

social support, the bereaved experienced continued support from family and friends. Men were more likely to isolate themselves as a way to avoid grief in spite of social support around them.

There are several significant limitations to this research. Methodologically, it is limited by subject, genre, period, and collection. The loss of a spouse or partner is a significant and unique experience in the life course. Other types of loss are also unique, important, and relevant to gender research. For example, depictions of parents and the loss of a child can also give insight into gender. Focusing on mainstream media allowed me to analyze cultural norms, but including independent and short films or television shows would allow for a broader understanding of both bereavement in the mainstream and periphery of societal norms and expectations. Broadening the scope of this research beyond ten years would also allow the opportunity to look at trends over time within the genre.

Last, analyzing depictions of gender in film does not prove causation. What this study does suggest and support is a pattern in how films on bereavement portray grief and gender. “However trivial some of these little gains and losses may appear to be, by summing them all up across all the social situations in which they occur, one can see that their total effect is enormous... these expressions considerably constitute the hierarchy; they are the shadow and the substance” (Goffman 1979, p. 6). This particular study brings together gender, grief and loss, and the media and supports the theory that our daily actions, in things big and small, culminate in our gendered experience (Bandura 2002; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, and Shanahan 2002; Smith and Granados 2009).

This content analysis stands with many others to demonstrate the presence of gendered representations in media. Within sociology, it contributes to areas of gender, social learning, media effects, and death and dying. Researchers and other professionals who work with grief and loss, social work, and psychology can also benefit from knowing the content of media on this subject. Resources like these films can be utilized to assist others in their bereavement process (Niemic and Schulenberg 2011), but we must be aware of how these films represent grief and gender to best serve those in mourning.

Table 1. Film Demographics.									
Movie Title¹	Release Date¹	Genre[*]	Relationship Status	Deceased's Gender	Widow's Gender	Widow's Race/Ethnicity	Age at death	Age of widow	Time Elapsed
A Single Man	2009	D	Committed	M	M	White	29-39	45-55	8 months
About Schmidt	2002	C	Married	F	M	White	65+	66	Immediate
Catch and Release	2006	C/D/R	Engaged	M	F	White	25-35	22-30	Immediate
Dan in Real Life	2007	C/D/R	Married	F	M	White	35-40	40-45	4 years
Dragonfly	2002	D/M	Married	F	M	White	30-40	30-40	Immediate
Everybody's Fine	2009	Ad/D	Married	F	M	White	60	65+	8 months
Gran Torino	2008	D	Married	F	M	White	65+	65+	Immediate
Inception	2010	Act/Ad/T	Married	F	M	White	25-35	30-40	1-24 months
Jersey Girl	2004	C/D/R	Married	F	M	White	25-30	25-35	Immediate; 7 years
Law Abiding Citizen	2009	D/T	Married	F	M	White	30-40	30-40	Immediate; 10 years
Love Happens	2009	D/R	Married	F	M	White	25-35	30-40	3 years
Premonition	2007	D/M	Married	M	F	White	30-40	30-40	Immediate
PS I Love You	2007	D/R	Married	M	F	White	30	32-38	Immediate
Reign Over Me	2007	D	Married	F	M	White	30-40	30-40	5 years
Seven Pounds	2008	D	Engaged	F	M	African American	25-35	25-35	1 year
Shutter Island	2010	D/M/T	Married	F	M	White	30-40	30-40	2 years
Signs	2002	D/M/S	Married	F	M	White	35-40	35-45	6-12 months
The Brave One	2007	D/T	Engaged	M	F	White	25-35	25-35	Immediate
Things We Lost/Fire	2007	D	Married	M	F	African American	30-40	25-35	Immediate
Up	2009	Anim/Ad/C	Married	F	M	White	65+	65+	Immediate
White Noise	2005	D/M/T	Married	F	M	White	30-40	35-45	Immediate
	¹ Source: IMDb 2012								
	[*] Genre Abbreviations: Action (Act); Adventure (Ad); Animation (Anim); Comedy (C); Drama (D); Mystery (M); Romance (R); Sci-Fi (S); Thriller (T)								

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