

Life transition and symbolic consumption: a gender perspective

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Abstracts

A field of research in marketing highlights that during life transitions, consumption practices are parts of the identity reconstruction. Our paper will discuss the symbolism attached to the use of social support and personal services during a critical life transition: the loss of a spouse. The results of an exploratory study highlight that personal services and social support participate to the identity reconstruction following the death. However, a gap exists between effective consumption and representations of personal services. To understand this gap, we propose a gender interpretation. In such a way, it appears that the symbolism of personal services and social support threatens identity.

Key words: social support - personal services – symbolic consumption - gender - elderly

INTRODUCTION

A recurrent theme in the marketing literature focuses on the role of consumption practices during life transition, thus considering that consumption is part of the identity reconstruction (Belk, 1988; Andreasen, 1984; Schouten, 1991). If the role of products has been extensively studied (Mc Alexander, Schouten and Roberts, 1992), it is not the case for services. However, few researches tend to emphasize that services play a role during life transitions in terms of stress management or social learning (Goodwin and Gentry, 1997). This role could be particularly important during critical life transitions such as the death of a loved one. In that research context, our article focuses on an uninvestigated field of research in the French marketing literature: the symbolism attached to the use of social support and personal services following the death of a spouse for mature widows. First, we present the backgrounds of our reflections and the research question, and secondly we move to highlights our methodology. Thirdly, we expose our analysis and finally we will discuss them and emphasize the managerial implications of our research.

BACKGROUNDS AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The death of a spouse is considered as the major risk factor for the occurrence of loneliness (Luanaigh and Lawlor, 2008). This fact explains why older adults are overrepresented in the segment of socially isolated adults (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2007). Loneliness is considered as a subjective experience and “a state of sensing a discrepancy between the desired amount of companionship or emotional support and that which is available in the person’s environment” (Blazer, 2002). It has been associated with some mental and physical health problems: an increasing risk of suicide, depression or self-harm (Golden, Conroy et Bruce 2009), hypertension, poor sleep and abnormal stress responses (Luanaigh et Lawlor 2008). These findings suggest that loneliness and isolation are important challenges for widows, especially at old age. Jointly, prevention and treatment of loneliness become an important priority in the rapidly growing aging population (Pettigrew, 2007). Social support may constitute an appropriate strategy to cope with loneliness and isolation. Defined as an interaction process, social support could exert a powerful effect on mental health. Social support is a “broad concept that includes structural characteristics of an individual’s social network as well as functional relationships among group members” (Fernandez-Balesteros, 2002). Informal social support comes from family, friends or neighborhood. Formal social support comes from external services (at home or not) delivered by professionals (i.e.

personal services). Researches on social support tend to focus on the first source of support. Whatever it comes from, social support is helpful especially during critical life transitions because it give people assistance, information, emotional support and then contributes positively to well-being in time of stress (Greenglass, Fiskensbaum, Eaton, 2006).

Research questions

Because of the number of years living together and the importance of conjugal links for older people (Ribes, 2000), the death of a spouse is a particular event that threatens seriously the mental and physical health of widows. In our research, we decide to study bereavement by focusing on the loneliness experience. Researchers demonstrate that loneliness and isolation are associated with poor health and well-being (Grenade et Boldy 2008). To cope with the loss, people could search for social support in that it is helpful during period of intense stress. Those considerations raise two major questions. First, despite the amount of research on social support, none have been conducted either on formal social support or on personal services. Secondly, whether the public policy, gerontologists, commercial firms, efforts are concentrated on care (Arfeux-Vaucher et Dorange 2003). Anyway, social support is broader than care, in that it covers a broader spectrum of services and ensures different functions. Beyond the instrumental dimension (i.e. maid), social support and especially home services provide information, psychological assistance, social links (Alarie 1998). All of this is certainly central to help widows to cope with bereavement. It is precisely the scope of our research: what are the meanings of social support for widows following the death of their spouse? To answer this question, we identify two research questions. Firstly, we aim to understand what does it means “being widow at old age”. Secondly, we aim to highlights what are the meanings of formal social support (i.e. personal services delivered by professional). Thus, we considered that consumption attitudes and behavior must be understood in their context. In our research the meanings of the life stage “widowhood” (first question) will help us to understand the meanings associated to formal social support consumption (second question).

METHOD

The challenge of our research is to identify the sense that widows give to the grief experience and the meanings they attribute to social support consumption during this experience. We need “to see things similarly to the way the people being studied see them and to know the questions, problems and data that are meaningful” (Hudson Anderson et Ozanne 1998). Our

research is also based on a qualitative method because we need to describe and understand the sense people give to their attitudes and behavior (Badot, et al. 2010). In the same time, because our research theme is considered as a sensitive topic (Hill, 1995), qualitative method is most appropriate and match our ethics principles. We define four criteria to constitute our sample: age (between 60 and 80 years old), gender (female), marital status (widowhood) and time passed since the death of the spouse¹. Our sample includes 24 widows aged between 58 and 81 years old who lost their spouse more than one and less than four years ago. Our data have been collected through in depth interviews. We analyze them through content analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Following our research goals, firstly we present the meanings of the life stage “solitary survivor”; secondly we analyze the meanings attached to social support.

First research question: what does it mean “being widow at old age”?

The theoretical backgrounds highlights that loneliness is an experience shared by widows following the death of their spouse. In our sample, all interviewees express this feeling. Nonetheless, the sense attached to this experience differs. In this article, we decide to focus on a new interpretation which is anchored in the “Gender Studies”. This approach considers that gender is a social construction and determines power relationship between male and female (Bereni, et al. 2008).

Data analysis highlights that oppositions is the way by which respondents explain their experience: “with” opposes “without”, “cold” opposes “hot”, “weak” opposes “strong”, “death” opposes “life” (table 1).

Table 1 – The oppositions which explains the life stage

	Verbatim or key words
With <i>vs</i> without	« nothing » (Mme S) « useless » (Mme H, Mme I) « no family » (Mme D) « no husband » (Mme K, Mme T, Mme R) «no credibility » (Mme H)
Hot <i>vs</i> cold	Mme U « There are some women, really, I don’t know, they are cold but they feel better lonely ». Mme L « When you are alone, it’s different, it’s different, you know, thus, suddenly it’s colder ».

¹ We follow an ethical protocol in which we decide to adopt this rule: because in the first year of bereavement mental health is particularly painful (according some statistics 40% of interviewed are very anxious during this first year); our in-depth interview will take place after this critical period (Neimeyer, Prigerson et Davies 2002).

Strong vs weak	Mme W : « You know when you're are two, it's so..., I said, I'm talking about me, what I felt, my support, my arm is gone, it was a protection ».
Life vs death	Mme U : « I was alive with my husband »

If the end of the 70's is considered a key period and the departure for sexual and gender revolution, our respondents were born before this time. They were socialized and received education in time when female had specific duties and a define role: she needed to get married, and so depended on her husband and she had to take care of their family. The female is at home caring for children (Bard, 2001). Thus, respondents grew up in times where gender roles were well separated, different characteristics defines female and male separately. Therefore, the death of their spouse initiated a difficult period. The comparison between those who are lonely and those who are in couple is the way by which they explain it. Thus, loneliness conflicts with social rules: "It's not easy, imagine a couple, I invite it, while I'm in the kitchen... they stayed together and they feel uncomfortable... instead when you are a couple, one of us stayed with them systematically". (Mm K). Loneliness is perceived as an abnormality: « At the beginning, it's difficult to see others with their husband" (Mme T). This opposition of lonely people vs couples is not just a question of *one* against *two*. The problem is that a couple includes a female and a male. A lonely female threatens couples because she's lonely. In the same time, she is placed in a non egalitarian relationship because, according to gender social roles, male is dominant and female is dominated. Thus, a lonely female is "impoverished" (Mme H, Mme S), "inferior" (Mme D). A lonely female could not go out alone or go to the movies (Mme F). It is difficult to go abroad, to make decisions or succeed (Mme F, Mme H, Mme S, Mme K, Mme R). Gender social roles are at the hearth of such feelings. The death of their husband dives our respondents in a stressful social position where they are dominated, feel fragile and in a hostile world: "You know, you are weakened somewhere and you feel lonely to fight against everyone who is more evil" (Mme S).

How could we interpret such data? What is the "unspoken premise" (Becker 2002, 249)? Such a premise will allow us to understand widowhood at old age and loneliness related to it. Data analysis highlights that oppositions explain the experience of widowhood. However, oppositions are not neutral but results from a hierarchy. "Thus, the upper is superior to down, full is superior to empty, hard is superior to slack, the boldness is superior to passivity, creation to repetition. Those oppositions are extremely strong and they allow us to distinguish male from female; superiority is always attributed to male and inferiority to female" (Héritier 2002, 127). The later explains why "with" is better than "without", "hot" is

better than “cold”, “life” is better than “death”, and “strong” is better than “weak. The unspoken premise roots in the “differential valency of gender” (Héritier 2002): male is socially and culturally dominant; female is inferior and dominated. In such a context, we easily understand why widowers benefited from a socially positive image instead of widows. Bereavement is gender classified: widows threaten society while widowers are coveted (Fauré 2004, 143). Certainly, widowers are “with” because it is socially and culturally anchored in male gender; whatever widows are “without” because female is defined relatively to male and do not *exist* independently. A widow is then inferior in twofold: she is a female and she is without a male. Loneliness then defined bereavement for widows; it appears as an ontological dimension of the experience.

Second research question: the meanings attached to social support consumption

We have previously elicited that the “differential valency of gender” (Héritier, 2002) helps us to understand the experience of widowhood for old female. How this analysis helps us to understand formal social support consumption behavior?

Personal services define activities which help people in everyday life and thus participated to well-being². For professional, the meanings of “personal services” are clear. The targets of such services are the family, mature people and disable and services are delivered at home. The French policy circumscribes precisely personal services by establishing a list of activities. This formal and legal definition of the economic sector results from the belief that personal services could be a source of employment. To support the growth of these activities, the legislation related to personal services encourages consumption by proposing tax cut on incomes for consumers. Such a legal environment explains why for the professional, personal services are well defined and identified. What is the situation for consumers? How do they understand these activities and what are the meanings they attached to them? To answer this question, we propose to confront two data: firstly consumption behavior of personal services by widows; secondly the representations of personal services for the same group of people. This parallel will allows us to elicit the meanings attached to such services.

1° Representations of personal services

² Selon L’Agence Nationale des Services à la Personne, [http://www.servicesalapersonne.gouv.fr/tous-les-services-\(1399\).cml](http://www.servicesalapersonne.gouv.fr/tous-les-services-(1399).cml)

Four groups were identified following the data analysis.

Group 1- Dependency In this group (18 respondents), the target of personal services is an aged person which is ill and disable. The term “personal” explains this link. At the same time, the type of services is definitely specific in that it refers to the functional side of personal services. Those services mean help because people have needs: porting food, cleaning household, carer, physiotherapists, and nurses. This association is logical: a disable person need functional help for everyday life. In a marketing point of view it is interesting to note that home care (physiotherapist or nurses) are not part of the legal list of personal services. A shift exists: on the one hand, professional have a clear vision of these activities, on the other hand consumers do have a clear vision too; but both do not match together.

Group 2- Help and rescue. Four respondents consider that the target of personal services is a mourner. People need to be listened to (Mme U), need support and relationships (Mme Y) as well as help (Mme F, Mme O). However, this vision does not mean that they intend to consume personal services, except for one of them.

Group 3- Functional help. In that group, the representation of personal services matches the legal definition. Only one respondent (Mme I) is part of this group and she highlights the commercial nature of these services. We must question the weight of this group. Regarding the criteria which define our sample, Mme I is not different from other respondents. Indeed, she belongs to high social class which could be an appropriate criterion to compare the groups. But, four other respondents belong to high social class. Three of them considers that personal services are for aged disable people (group 1), one of them classified personal services in group 2.

Group 4- No knowledge. One respondent is part of this later group: Mme G. For her, personal services do not mean anything. Again, we must question the weight of this group. The social class as well as rural membership could explain why personal services do not mean anything for her. Anyway, three other respondents belong to rural class: Mme O, Mme N and Mme B. In the same vein, age is not relevant. If Mme B is younger, (65 years old) Mme O and Mme N are 79 years old. Mme O considers that personal services provide help and rescue (group n°2), for Mme N and Mme B, personal services are for disable people (group n°1).

2° Consumption behavior of personal services

In our ample, nine respondents have used personal services³. Widows consume primarily household and gardening services.

Regarding **household services** (i.e. cleaning, ironing) widows highlight the positive impact on their well-being. If the functional help of those services is underlined, household allow respondents to maintain social ties and encourage them in their everyday life. The presence of a housekeeper invites widows “to do” and they could have relationship. In marketing terms, this threefold function (functional, normative and emotional) of household services could be an opportunity for professional in order to differentiate their activities. Otherwise, despite this positive experience of personal services consumption, widows are reluctant towards this type of services. The price is the first barrier: for Mme I it is “outrageous” while Mme Z emphasizes that it is “quite expensive” and that she does not know what the base price is. The public policy is well adapted to alleviate these perceptions in that it proposes tax cuts⁴. The invasion in the private environment is a second brake to use. For instance, Mme Z must “give her keys” to a “trustworthy person”. Otherwise, these twofold brakes appear as *objective* reasons to not use personal services. Previous analysis which root the female widowhood in the gender, offer an additional interpretation. It helps us to understand why it is so difficult for our respondents to use household services. Mme O does not have to use a housekeeper, she “must” use this service. She underlines that she “was assisted” by the housekeeper and then she kept her hands on her private space. For Mme Y, housekeeper could be divided in two different groups: the “good ones and the bad ones”. In the first group, housekeeper shares the ability to execute their job according the respondents instructions. For Mme E, the use of household services means slacking off and she denies this behavior. Mme I never get bored because she does not have a housekeeper. In her mind, household is a duty anchored in her identity. If Mme W enjoys the presence of her housekeeper because it encourages her, in her mind she must take part of household emphasize that she “could do”. Following the interpretation we propose previously, it appears that housekeeper raises brakes for widows because she conflicts with the female gender and associates duties. Our respondents have been socialized in times where household is part of the female social identity. They could not conceive to dispatch this activity, even if it pays.

³ The consumption of personal services may be prior to the death of the spouse. Because, our research goal is to understand the meanings attached to personal services, the time of consumption (before or after the death) is not significant.

⁴ For french consumers, personal services consumption allows them to reduce income taxes (“Plan de Cohésion Sociale” 2005 dit “Plan Borloo”).

But it is more expressible to argue that personal services hurt the private sphere while the attributes of female gender are threatened.

Regarding **gardening** services, and unlike household, the use is continuous. This type of services fills the instrumental gap and takes in charge activities performed by the husband. The meanings attached to the outsourcing of gardening are less symbolic because gardening – which is “outdoor” is socially related to male, when domestic activities – indoor – are socially related to female. In marketing terms, it implies that it is necessary to segment precisely personal services. Those services are not a package and for consumers each of them shares a different meaning which require a different marketing approach. When Mme Y talked about gardening, she highlighted that by using this service her children do not become “slaves”. In her mind she considers that services inside the kinship is assimilated to a powerful relationship⁵. The slaving relationship that she mentioned is going in both directions: her children could be her slaves but she could be a slave too because she depends on them. As mentioned previously, her years of socialization place “the mother” as a key role in the identity of our respondents. At the same time, the values attached to independency in our postmodern society explain the brakes to receive help from children or friends and neighbors. This view means that if informal social support (from friend, family) enslave, formal social support may preserve freedom. This constitutes an interesting way to promote these services. Anyway, we identified different brakes to use. Only one respondent views the outsourcing of gardening as a relief. Most of widows take in charge gardening previously performed by husband; thus it becomes a leisure activity. This means that informal and formal social support could be both used. At the same time, we note that the use of gardening services is not a free choice and thus it could influence post-use satisfaction. That is exactly where marketing actions are important and need to match the target needs.

Discussion

The parallel between the uses of personal services and what means these activities for widows allow us to draw a more precise picture of attitudes toward them. If the sector is well identified for professional, only one respondent share this knowledge. Surprisingly, other widows who used personal services know the law attached to personal services and they benefit from the device (Mme U, Mme W, Mme L and Mme R). But for them, personal

⁵ According the definition of « slave » in the french dictionary « l'Académie Française » : « personne qui n'a pas de condition libre, qui appartient à un maître qui exerce sur elle un pouvoir absolu ».

services are for disable people or people who “need”. The vision of personal services does not match the uses. How could we interpret this mismatch? On the one hand, personal services appear as a strategy to cope with the death of a spouse in that has positive impact on well-being. On the other hand, for our respondents, personal services are not considered as coping strategies. The mismatch between uses and meanings of personal services impact directly attitudes towards them. Without doubt, twenty two respondents do not intend to consume personal services arguing they have no need, even if they are alone because widows. One respondent intends to consume these services because they are useful and paying. This later feature is essential. The cognitive dimension of attitude could be understood regarding the context of mourning. Following the academic, it is important to study the problem of substitutability / complementarity of personal services. But beforehand, it is essential to resolve the problem of knowledge that our data suggest. To understand this problem, the gender approach proposes in our research sheds an innovative and interesting light. This helps us to understand why it is difficult for mature widows to use personal services. The meanings attached to services root in the social construction of gender and servitude. At the end, the affective dimension of attitude could be drastic. Respondents deny personal services because these activities are associated with a specific and depreciate image: lonely and weak women. Logically, they do not intend to consume them even if they do! The symbolic consumption of personal services is associated with loneliness. The commercial nature of services constitutes an interesting asset to promote them but it does not remove the unspoken premise rooted in the social construction of gender. Marketing actions could well be implemented to raise this brake to use.

These considerations and results leave us to the managerial implications of our research. First of all, public authorities are concerned. Our analysis highlight that personal services are known but this knowledge does not match the “legal” definition. What is involved is a misunderstanding instead of an absence of knowledge. Attitudes toward personal services are negative because the meanings associated to them roots in the social construction of gender. Nevertheless tax cuts on incomes associated to personal services are known and used. Then it appears necessary that public authorities be questioned the adequacy of the term “personal services” for the mature market. Especially since mature people are recognized as the most supporting segment to promote growth of personal services. Secondly, our research highlights the necessity to take into account the reluctance of widows to use personal services. The first brake highlights by academics refers to the term “service” which potentially means slave.

Respondents emphasize that they “could do” and/or that the outsourcing of household or gardening is more a strained need than a free choice. The second brake has emerged from our data and refers to the social construction of female gender. It implies that personal services do not constitute a whole and homogenous sector. These services hurt the meanings of the family (“le fait familial” as Kaufman said) (Kaufmann 1995) and hurts the female gender. Personal services must then be segmented according to those referring to male gender and those referring to female gender. Furthermore, the “differential valency of gender” (Héritier, 2002) means that it is necessary to take into account the hierarchy rooted in social gender. As female, widows are without a male and they are without male attributes. When widows do have to interact with the market, these meanings of female gender emerged.

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