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# **Life Came to a Full Stop: The Experiences of Widowed Fathers**

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# Life Came to a Full Stop<sup>1</sup>: The Experiences of Widowed Fathers

## Abstract

The present study investigated how the death of the mother affected four Danish families. In-depth interviews were undertaken with both children (N=7, 7-19 years) and fathers (N=4, average age: 46 years) within the same families. The results presented in this article focus on the experiences of the fathers. Thematic Analyses as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) resulted in three overall themes: Coping with Loss, Transitions, and Mismatch between Experienced Needs and Provided Help. The results bear witness to a group of bereaved individuals experiencing heavy demands on their time and mental resources whilst trying to cope with their own grief and that of their children simultaneously. This is especially the case for the three men with younger children. Implications for practice are highlighted, such as a need for focusing on the individual and not offering a *one-size-fits-all* approach to bereavement support.

## Keywords

widowed fathers, male bereavement, coping with grief, untimely spousal loss, professionalization of bereavement

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgement: The title is inspired by a comment made by one of the study participants. When talking about the death of his wife, he said: '[at that time] with the children and all, it was full steam ahead in a way, right? [When she died] it was really a ... (sighs deeply) ... yeah ... full stop'.

In his article 'I am no longer the man I was: Reflections on becoming a widower, Robert Howell, a widower as well as a sociologist, explores how losing his wife has changed him forever (2013). Apart from feelings of 'loss, despair, anger, and deep soul pain', Howell describes how he asked himself existential questions pertaining to his life; life as it had been as a married man - and life as it had become in his new situation as someone whose wife had died (2013). In the aftermath, Howell finds himself in what might be characterized as an identity crisis, asking:

*'What did the relationship with my wife mean? Where were we when she died and where am I now? I was once a husband, but who am I now? What is this strange new identity, widower?'* (Howell, 2013, p. 4).

Howell's approach to spousal bereavement is intriguing. Not only does he describe what is highly recognizable for others with a similar type of experience (Haase & Johnston, 2012; Lowe & McClement, 2010-2011; Neimeyer, 2006; Silverman & Thomson, 2018). He also applies his background in sociology to provide a thorough analysis of how the experience altered his life (Howell, 2013). One of the things that frightened him the most was the realization he was becoming a man that his deceased wife had never known (Howell, 2013). At the time of publishing, Howell was one of only a few males who had put their personal experiences of spousal loss into words in the scientific domain (Howell, 2013; Yopp, Park, Edwards, Deal, & Rosenstein, 2015). Research on possible gender differences in ways of grieving (Doka & Martin, 1998, 2001, 2010) stress the importance of men voicing their experiences of bereavement.

According to some of the leading researchers in the field, the Western world has had a tendency to favor one particular way of grieving as the 'right' way of coping with bereavement (Doka & Martin, 1998, 2001, 2010). Doka and Martin have coined this approach as "intuitive

grieving” (2010). Intuitive grief is characterized by intense feelings that are expressed and often shared with others (Doka & Martin, 2010). While intuitive grievers are likely to experience waves of affect, Doka and Martin have identified another distinct way of dealing with bereavement, the so-called “instrumental grieving” (2010). As opposed to intuitive grievers, instrumental grievers often experience feelings as less intense and they appear to be more reluctant to speak about their feelings (Doka & Martin, 1998, 2010). In the latter instance, grief is generally processed cognitively and the person frequently engages in problem-solving activities in relation to the loss (Doka & Martin, 1998, 2010). According to Doka and Martin, patterns of grief fall along a continuum with blended versions of the two, with most people leaning towards one of the poles (2010). Of particular interest to the present study, men show a propensity for the instrumental grieving pattern (Doka & Martin, 1998, 2010).

The above challenges the traditional notion of men being at a disadvantage, compared to women, when it comes to expressing and coping with grief (Doka & Martin, 1998; Keohane & Richardson, 2018; Silverman & Thomson, 2018). Rather than not dealing with issues of grieving, the salient point might be that men in general have a different way of experiencing and expressing grief altogether. This is of utmost importance as the way in which the surrounding society understands grief and expressions of grieving have a profound impact on a variety of aspects. Among other things, it affects how the individual griever is perceived by others (Bandini, 2015; Kofod, 2015), what kind of behavior is considered acceptable and for how long after a loss (Bandini, 2015; Harris, 2010), as well as the types of help and support offered by society to bereaved individuals (Doka & Martin, 2010). Furthermore, it is likely to have an impact on the bereaved individual’s perception of his or her own grief reactions and ‘progress’, i.e. what kind of grief reactions to expect over time and whether or not they are within the normal range of behavior in the given society (Kofod, 2015; Harris, 2010).

Research on families who lose a parent has shown that this particular group of bereaved individuals might be especially vulnerable (Aamotsmo, T. & Bugge, K.E., 2013; Cerel, Fristad, Verducci, Weller, & Weller, 2006; Haine, Ayers, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2008; Werner-Lin & Biank, 2012-2013). The death of a co-parent places high demands on the surviving parent. In addition to coping with his or her own grief, the surviving adult will have to adjust to life as a sole parent and support the grieving child or children at the same time (Burgess, 1995; McClatchey, 2018; Saldinger, Porterfield, & Cain, 2004; Werner-Lin & Biank, 2012-2013; Worden, 1996; Yopp et al., 2015). Studies suggest that this might be especially challenging when the father is the surviving parent due to elements such as differences in parenting style (Boerner & Silverman, 2001; Saldinger et al., 2004; Worden, 1996) and the change in family roles following the death (Boerner & Silverman, 2001). Despite this fact, studies on widowed fathers with dependent-age children are scarce (McClatchey, 2018; Yopp & Rosenstein, 2012; Yopp et al., 2015).

Early research addressing the special circumstances of widowed fathers showed a tendency among the widowers to re-marry (Bandini & Thompson Jr, 2013-2014), get assistance with domestic tasks and child rearing (Bandini & Thompson Jr, 2013-2014; Burgess, 1988; O'Neill & Mendelsohn, 2001), and lose themselves in work (Bandini & Thompson Jr, 2013-2014; Worden, 1996). While these men were struggling with adjusting to their new role as single parents (Burgess, 1988, 1995; Worden, 1996), they appeared to be offered only limited guidance and support (Burgess, 1988, 1995). A recent study highlighted the continued need for more focus on this particular group of bereaved individuals (Yopp et al., 2015). In an online survey of widowed fathers (N=259), participants disclosed very high rates of distress with 65% meeting clinically significant levels of depression (Yopp et al., 2015). Especially noteworthy was the fact that no associations were found between elapsed time since the loss and level of distress (Yopp et al., 2015).

With the above considerations as the point of departure, the purpose of this article is to examine how Danish widowers experience and cope with the transition from family men to widowed fathers with sole responsibility for their children. The aim of this paper is to explore how these men negotiate having to support their grieving children at the same time as dealing with their own grief and in particular, whether their grieving is in line with the instrumental grieving as described by Doka and Martin (1998, 2010). In relation to their coping efforts, the men's perceptions of the help and support received following the loss becomes crucial. This article will thus also investigate whether an alleged societal focus on one particular way of grieving might be reflected in a lack of adequate offers of support and help for these men post-loss.

## **Method**

### **Design**

This study was the first part of a mixed methods research project on parentally bereaved families using an exploratory sequential design; i.e. the results from the qualitative part of the study were used to inform the quantitative part (Creswell, 2009 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).

The method chosen for this particular part was the qualitative research interview (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015) with an offset in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2011). Whereas the qualitative research interview provides a unique way of getting access to the interviewee's experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015), grounded theory in the interpretation of Charmaz and Bryant acknowledges the way in which data is created or constructed in a collaboration between the researcher and researched (Charmaz, 2011). The present study used elements from grounded theory such as theoretical sampling where tentative categories from initial analyses were tested by further data collection (Charmaz, 2011; Glaser

& Strauss, 2012). The approach was thus inductive but with a movement ‘back and forth between data gathering and analysis’ (Charmaz, 2011, p. 166).

### **Research Questions and Interview-guide**

The research questions consisted of an overarching question as well as questions addressing the fathers and children respectively (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). For the purposes of the present article, the research question was as follows:

What are the experiences of men who are faced with raising their dependent-age children on their own following the death of their partner?

The questions in the interview-guide were based on previous research in the area of spousal loss (e.g. Aamotsmo & Bugge, 2013; Glazer, Clark, Thomas, & Haxton, 2010; Howell, 2013; Haase & Johnston, 2012; Yopp et al., 2015), methodological literature on interviewing (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Deatricks, Faan, & Ledlie, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2003), and extensive knowledge of the population (Berger, 2015; Christoffersen, 2016, Silverman, 2000). In order to tap into the experiences of the individual man, demographic questions at the beginning of the interview were followed by an open-ended question: ‘What is it like being on your own after losing your partner?’ The remaining questions evolved around the themes of the parenting role, social support, the child’s reactions to the loss, the relationship between the father and the child, loss of spouse and identity, and posttraumatic growth. Finally, the fathers were asked whether the support for bereaved families was adequate or if they had any suggestions for improvements. The interviews were conducted in Danish.

## **Recruitment**

Widowed fathers and their children were recruited from a closed, online mutual support network for bereaved spouses with children living at home in the period from May 2017-February 2018. The group did not involve any kind of counselling, but consisted of voluntary contributions with big variations in activity over time. The inclusion criteria for the present study were (a) the couple were married or co-habiting at the time of death, (b) they had at least one child at the age of seven or above, and (c) the child lived in the home at the time of death. The author was a member of the online support group due to her own personal circumstances as a widow with dependent-age children. This was mentioned briefly in the posted notice. The participants were recruited from the whole of Denmark, and the families had the option of deciding where they would prefer that the interviews took place.

Very few males responded to the notice, which was posted three times. At the time of the first posting, the online group consisted of just over 350 families, 60 of whom were families with a father as the surviving parent. A total of 9 fathers came forward. Two of these did not reply to suggestions of an actual time for the interviews, one did not use the suggested channels for communication resulting in a breach of the requested anonymity and in two families the children had been too young at the time of the loss. As a result, a total of four families participated in the study.

## **Participants**

The four fathers all chose to be interviewed in their homes mostly due to convenience and logistics. They lived in various parts of Denmark and their financial situation varied considerably as well as the ramifications of the death. For some, the loss of the spouse had thus resulted in further changes such as moving from the family home, change of schools or job-

related changes. None of the families were known to the author beforehand. For information about the four families, see Table 1.

Without being asked specifically, the fathers stated their reasons for wanting to participate in the study was a way of helping others, a wish to support science and to help shed light on problematic issues following spousal loss in midlife.

Table 1

*Family Information*

Measure	Description
The fathers' age	Early 40s-mid 50s. Average age: 46 years
Number of children	A total of 9 children, 7 of which are interviewed for the study <sup>1, 2</sup>
Gender of children	5 boys and 4 girls
Age of children	5 to 21 years
Length of relationship	9 to 25 years. Average length: 17 years
Time since the loss	1-2 years. Average time: 16 months
Illness prior to death	In 3 of the 4 families
Length of illness	A few months to several years
Partner's age at the time of death	Mid 30s to mid 50s. Average age: 44 years

*Note.*<sup>1</sup> Due to the rather small community of widowed fathers in the specific online support group, the exact number, gender and age of children in the individual families will not be reported here, as it might compromise the anonymity of the participants.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the children did not participate directly in the study due to age-related constraints.

## **Analysis**

The interviews, which were audio recorded, lasted between 33-103 minutes with an average length of 58 minutes. Verbatim transcriptions by the author including field notes resulted in a total of 142 transcribed pages (double spaced) which form the basis of the present analysis. The analytical strategy used for analyzing the data was thematic analysis as set out in Braun and Clarke (2006). Their recommended 6 steps were followed strictly including checking all transcriptions back against the recordings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Parts of the interviews were translated into English by the author. Continuous feedback was received on the data analysis from qualitative researcher colleagues.

The analysis aimed to provide a rich description of the data set, as this is particularly well suited for areas that are under-researched (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Results**

The analysis of the transcribed interviews resulted in three overall themes: 1) Coping with Loss, 2) Transitions, and 3) Mismatch between Experienced Needs and Provided Help. The three themes will be described in the following.

### **Coping with Loss**

As could be seen in Table 1, illness had preceded the death in three of the four families. The data showed that juggling an ill wife and the responsibilities of being a father had been quite taxing, and even though one of them knew his wife's prognosis was not promising, death still came as a shock to him:

*'[Her death was] incredibly final and a bit hard to accept. [...] It takes some time before you understand the finality of it. I remember there was a phase when I had to say: Okay, now I just start seeing how permanent this is. I simply couldn't, right at the start.'*

One man, whose wife died suddenly, expressed similar difficulties in coming to terms with her death. He described being in a state of numbness and incredulity in the days following the loss and not capable of taking anything in. Regardless of the manner of death, all four participants had had a hard time adjusting to their new life circumstances. They had been forced to find a new way of being a family with only one parent. Although there are similarities between the four families, one family particularly stands out. The children in this family were older (young adults), which had left the father with a lot of time to himself:

*'I found that you got frustrated with all the spare time you had that you did not know how to use, because you would normally spend it with your partner. The partner just wasn't there - and there you were. What on earth were you going to do then? I found that very frustrating.'*

This experience of surplus time propelled the father into meeting new people. He actively sought out other bereaved spouses on several occasions and found solace in exchanging stories. His interest in hiking provided another platform for socializing:

*[He suddenly realized:] 'Oh my! There are other people who are alone. So you begin to realize: Okay, you could move on, even though you were on your own, but you would have to do something for it to happen. They [other people] are not coming into your living room [to find you].'*

The above was in stark contrast to the situation faced by the remaining three fathers who experienced heavy demands on their time and mental resources. When asked how they managed to attend to their own grief at the same time as that of their children one said that

there simply was no time for that and another one that he was probably just postponing dealing with it. Having a full-time job and being a lone dad resulted in this comment from a father:

*'Well, I find that I have become a kind of 'practical device' and then I am lonely. I mean lonely on adult contact. The children are here all the time, but I am completely lonely without adult contact and that is extremely difficult. [...] So, I'm such a lonely, practical thing or device.. That's what I have been reduced to.'*

Two of the men looked in vain for narratives of other widowers with dependent-age children when trying to come to terms with their new life circumstances. One did eventually come across a text that helped him immensely in coping with feelings of guilt and regret in relation to his wife's illness and death. In the beginning, he found some of his memories extremely disturbing. He wished he had been able to go back in time in order to change some of the decisions regarding his wife's treatment and be able to say things he never got around to while she was still alive:

*'The last stretch of time [before her death] and the final course of events haunted me a lot in the beginning. I also slept poorly for a long time ... I read that that is quite normal [...]. I was actually glad to read that, because I found it very difficult, but it does help a little, when you read that, well, that it is okay. That it is something everyone encounters. Because I found it was a heavy burden at the time.'*

The mutual support of and communication with other bereaved spouses are described as almost life-saving whether it comes in the form of reading about other men's experiences, communicating online or meeting in person. The connections with others in a similar situation serve both as a way of normalizing grief reactions as well as a way of monitoring one's own progress over time. Two of the men mentioned the importance of being able to help newcomers

in a group and several of the men talked of the role of social comparison, here in the words of one of them:

*[..] to me it puts things into [perspective] ... by showing possible future scenarios. There are some who lost [their spouse] longer ago than I did, who find it very hard even getting out of bed in the morning.'*

Attending support groups was a conscious choice of seeking out others who understood what it was like being a widower with dependent-age children. For two of the fathers, however, it was also experienced as a necessity as family and friends were either few or had vanished following the death. While the social support of a group was experienced as very helpful, two of the fathers mentioned what they perceived as a possible downside to bereavement networks. In their view, the actual atmosphere of an online support group could be dispiriting at times; by writing at length about grief and sharing mainly negative experiences online, bereaved individuals might aggravate their situation instead of coping adaptively.

As most of these men preferred to work their way out of personal problems, they wished they were capable of encouraging others to do the same instead of presumably just talking or writing about their concerns. One of the fathers pointed out that this might reflect gender differences in coping with bereavement:

*'I have done something actively, and maybe that is because I am a male? I believe there is quite a difference between the genders [when it comes to coping with grief]. When you look at an [online] support group, for instance, it is as if some of them expect someone to do something for them, and that those surrounding them can see their pain. Well, they can't, and maybe they don't want to either ... but ... if they would like some help, they will have to do something themselves. You have a responsibility, because you can't just be offended, because other people don't notice. But it's like, you know, sometimes the difference between men and women.'*

This last statement suggests possible differences between the gender as proposed by Doka and Martin (1998, 2001, 2010). Generally, the four men in the present study had a very active approach to coping with bereavement. They had all sought out ways to help their children and themselves following the death of their spouse, as well as tried to improve their situation in different ways. However, the data also suggests ways of coping with bereavement more in agreement with the intuitive style, such seeking out the support of others.

Overall, the men in the present study have had a hard time adjusting to their new life circumstances. The three men with younger children reported being under a lot of strain and found it particularly challenging having to deal with their own grief, due to a lack of time and mental resources. Several of the study participants also mentioned loneliness as a prominent concern.

## **Transitions**

The interviews with the fathers revealed different ways in which these men were in a process of change. They all described a transition from before the death and up until the present as a shift in consciousness and way of life. Their narratives very much evolved around a ‘before’ and ‘after’ the loss, which is highlighted in this father’s statement:

*‘Well ... there is a kind of line in the sand: there was then, and there is now. You have to create something new.’*

Apart from missing their wives and the life they shared, these bereaved men had had to make major adjustments to their lives. One area in which this became quite apparent was in relation to parental role and responsibilities. Whereas they used to share the responsibilities and decision-making regarding their children with their partner before her death, these men had now all become sole parents. Most of them found this quite challenging and all were conscious

of having to stay healthy so that their children would not become orphans, as illustrated by the following quote:

*'[...] I am aware that I really have to look after myself, because I have to be there for them. It would almost be a worst-case scenario if something serious happened to me. [Then] they just would not have any [parents]'*

The loss of their spouse not only led to changes in the parental role and responsibilities but, for some men, also resulted in soul-searching and changes in personal identity in agreement with the experiences of Robert Howell (2013), as recounted at the beginning of this paper. Their close encounter with death also brought about thoughts on existential issues in relation to their own mortality as well as considerations concerning what they would like to do with the rest of their lives. This latter issue particularly evolved around forming new romantic relationships, which will be dealt with in the sections below.

The experienced changes in identity were not only the results of the loss itself but also the circumstances following the death, i.e. work related and interpersonal issues. While one father worked extremely hard due to financial problems, two of the fathers were grateful for having had the possibility of working less hours post loss. However, for one of them working part time had involved a change of jobs, which had been a challenge in itself:

*'[...] to me it was a very big change, because part of my identity was tied up in my work. I really enjoyed my work, but it was also very busy and did not fit with being a lone parent at all. So, it has been a really big change just to let go of that job and then ... well, now I am primarily there for the children, and that has been a big change.'*

Most of the men were still in the process of adapting to the changes. While they remained affected by their loss, they were also open to what might happen in the future. Two of them described being somewhere in between the old world and the new, resembling the liminal phase

as coined by van Gennep (1960). In alignment with previous research (Taylor & Robinson, 2016), three of the men in the present study disclosed a feeling of not belonging anywhere. The death of their spouse had resulted in them no longer feeling the same affinity with their married friends, but at the same time, they did not feel single either. This places the bereaved individual in a kind of ‘social vacuum’.

The men referred to time as not healing but at least as making things a bit easier to cope with. Here in the words of one of them:

*‘In the beginning it was very confusing ... so [...] after about a year, I can feel that ... now I think as much ahead as I think back, and I can feel that this is getting more and more so, and I can also feel that: Okay, things are changing and it is becoming easier over time.’*

Some of the fathers described changes in the way they related to other people following the loss. They noticed themselves as paying more attention to other people’s feelings and being more emotional, which is in line with another recent study on widowers (Silverman & Thomson, 2018). For most of the men in the present study, the death of their spouse had meant a change in their priorities in life. Two of them mentioned how precious life is and how sudden it can be over. This acknowledgement had led to less focus on work and materialistic things and more focus on other people. On recounting how his attitude to life had changed, one of the fathers mentioned how he would get a bit annoyed at people complaining about apparently minor obstacles and how he had made a conscious choice of not wasting time himself. Furthermore, he feels more courageous now:

*‘I can see that maybe my life has taken a different course from the one it would have done if I had been with my wife. Well, you can say that you have to live while you can, because you found out that life, [...], all of a sudden, it was gone. So, it is probably in this way that I find I have changed. Well, I don’t know if you could say that I have got a more positive outlook on*

*life, become a more positive person. It does sound strange, but ... I don't know, what do you think – is it strange?'*

A prominent concern for the future as recounted by these men was whether to commit oneself to a new partner. When asked about, whether they were in a new romantic relationship, or if they could imagine being so in the future, all four fathers answered in the affirmative. For three of them, it remained to be seen and two were a bit concerned how it would work out with the children. Furthermore, having parental responsibilities full time made it difficult to date new women but most of all, these three men did not have the mental energy for dating. However, they would like a female presence in their lives at some point, both for the sake of their children but mostly because they missed family life as they knew it before. When considering the future, one father contemplated the pros and cons of meeting someone:

*'[You ask yourself:] Do you want to be on your own or would you like to find someone new? How do you find a new one? Or do you even dare finding one? Because if you find a new one and find love again, it also means running the risk of losing again and would you be able cope with that one more time?'*

One of the fathers stressed the fact that a potential new partner would have to accept that his deceased wife still played a role in their family life and in particular in the lives of his children. They would continue to keep photos of their mother on the walls and talk about her in order for the children not to forget her.

The data bear witness to a variety of changes following the loss of a spouse in midlife. Changes were thus experienced not only in relation to parental role and responsibilities, but also in relation to work, identity, and attitude towards life and other people. While the study participants described being in a kind of liminal phase, three of the men disclosed a feeling of

not belonging anywhere. The help and support these widowed fathers received in order to negotiate these changes will be addressed in the following section.

### **Mismatch between Experienced Needs and Provided Help**

One of the purposes of this article was to examine how the men had experienced the offers of help and support they might have received following the loss of their wife. Overall, there is no doubt that these families had been in quite a vulnerable situation following the death of the mother and to some extent, some of them still were. Despite this fact, the help offered to these four families from the Danish society appeared rather erratic. The support seemed to be dependent upon factors such as geographical area, cause of death and religious affiliation. One of the men had thus been offered a place in a bereavement support group at his local church but had found it impossible to get access to bereavement support groups for his children due to locality.

In most instances, the help for the bereaved men and their children had been arranged on the fathers' own initiative. This is far from ideal especially viewed in the light of the comments made by some of these men regarding being in a haze and finding it difficult to reach out for help. One man's description epitomizes this impossible situation:

*'Sometimes picking up the phone and calling someone can be really difficult in that situation. Today, I would not mind doing it, [...] but it was also a year ago and you have learnt a lot in that year. But in the beginning, it was a very unpleasant thing: [He would say to himself:] 'Now you have to pull yourself together and make that call! Because nothing happens if you don't make the call yourself.'*

Three of the men would have liked the council to have been a bit proactive in the present situation. Without being asked specifically about this, they independently suggested that they

would have felt reassured if someone had checked in on their family to see if they were coping adaptively. That way, they would have had a kind of safety net and not run the risk of falling through, as voiced by one of the men:

*'[...] it would have been nice if someone had knocked on the door and asked: Is everything okay here? Is something the matter, or are you doing alright? I would probably have said: 'No, I can manage', but it would have been nice if someone had checked. Somebody else out there in a similar situation might easily have crashed.'*

Another man suggested that on such a visit the family might have been provided with information on how the council would be able to help the family in the present situation. A similar wish for more information on options, practical help and guidance was generally voiced among these men.

Several of the men recounted stories of often well-meaning but inappropriate or misguided offers of help. They had thus been referred to counsellors who had no prior knowledge of the target group and bereavement support groups where the facilitators had not taken the age and gender of the participants into account or even the type of loss. During his wife's terminal illness, one of the men was thus referred to a counsellor who did not know how to react to a young family losing the mother and who was visibly uncomfortable, while another man found himself in a support group with women from the age of 70 and upwards.

In some instances, the men had received good advice and help, e.g. from a very sympathetic vicar or helpful psychologist. Several of the men also highlighted flexibility at work as a major contributing factor in making the situation less stressful. However, the men had generally experienced a lack of follow-up or interest in how they were coping over time. An example of this was a man who turned down his general practitioner's suggestion of seeing a psychologist

straight after his wife's death. More than a year later, this man had not been asked again how he was coping despite attending the surgery on a regular basis with his children.

There appears to be a schism between on the one hand an apparent lack of focus on how these families are doing especially over time and on the other hand, a kind of normative perception of what one ought to do following the loss of a co-parent. The men were often met with expectations of seeking professional help for the family, i.e. of the children attending bereavement support groups and of the adults receiving help from psychologists. This could be seen as a confirmation of society favoring one prevailing way of understanding grief and its 'cure', i.e. the necessity of talking about the loss, which is in line with the intuitive way of coping with grief as set forth by Doka and Martin (1998, 2001, 2010). However, it might also be interpreted as a sign of an increasing professionalization of bereavement (e.g. Granek, 2010; Silverman 2014), a point that will be raised in the discussion section of this article.

Not only were the men in the present study expected to be using professionals to deal with the loss, other people also seemed to be questioning the men's decisions if they decided against this. One of the fathers ended up calling a hotline just to be sure:

*'[...] I remember calling a cancer hotline. They have got a kind of crisis line [...] you can call, [some kind of] counselling, because everybody said to me: 'You need to see a psychologist too!' But I just did not feel a need to do that. So, I called them and asked whether that could be true? (he laughs). Was there something wrong with me not feeling the need for that? The counsellor said that she did not think so. [...] So, I kind of left it at that.'*

Overall, the men in the present study requested more information and support for bereaved families following the loss of their spouse. Three of them mentioned how taxing it was, under the circumstances, having to seek out sources of help themselves. In particular, they would have liked reassurance that they were coping adaptively as a family. While some of the men

had received some offers of help from professionals, it is especially noteworthy that quite often these offers were not targeted at their specific situation. This concerned both age, gender and type of loss, resulting in a mismatch between the experienced needs and offers of help.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this article was to examine how Danish widowers experience and cope with the transition from family men to widowed fathers. As anticipated, the men found it quite challenging supporting their grieving children and dealing with their own grief at the same time. The data bear witness to a group of bereaved individuals who were both struggling to come to terms with the untimely death of their spouses as well as putting the needs of their children first, a fact that has similarly been documented in previous studies on this population (McClatchey, 2018; Worden, 1996; Yopp et al., 2015). Although it was perceived as a necessity, the men in the present study expressed concerns that prioritizing in this way might come at a price, i.e. that their own grief might surface at a later point in time.

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that these men had taken a very active approach in trying to cope with their new life circumstances. In several ways, their coping efforts resembled the instrumental grieving as described by Doka and Martin (1998; 2010). A focus had thus been on cognition; the fathers contemplated their situation – and especially how they might improve it. This resulted in problem-solving activities whereby these men were trying to manage their situation.

However, all of the men in this study had also reached out to others for help and support for both themselves and their children, which is more in line with the intuitive grieving style (Doka & Martin, 1998, 2010) and contrary to other findings on widowers with dependent-age children (Saldinger et al., 2004). Although it might not necessarily have been a sharing of deep emotions

(Doka & Martin, 1998, 2010), one of the fathers found it extremely helpful to exchange stories with others in a similar kind of situation and another two had participated in bereavement support groups. The fourth widower sought advice in connection with practical and financial issues. This leaves a mixed picture, but with an overall use of coping strategies in agreement with the instrumental approach. However, from the data it is not possible to conclude whether this predominantly instrumental grieving is a result of the study participants being male or rather a consequence of the necessity of having to take care of their grieving children. Furthermore, the propensity for sharing their stories might be a characteristic of these particular widowers, i.e. a selection bias, as these four men have all chosen to come forward for the study to do exactly that.

One of the great strengths of the model proposed by Doka and Martin is the focus on grieving as more than the expression of emotions or a lack thereof (1998, 2010). By presenting their propositions of a continuum of grief patterns they contribute to a legitimization of different ways of grieving. This is of particular relevance to the present study, as it normalizes the reactions expressed by the widowers and might equally explain possible differences of grieving experienced within individual families (Doka & Martin, 2010). A forthcoming article on the experiences of the children in the four Danish families of this study will address the challenges of possible differences in ways of coping with bereavement between family members (present author).

It appears that there is no right way of grieving the loss of a spouse (Klass & Steffen, 2018). Nonetheless, the surrounding society might have expectations to the contrary. From the present data, it seems that a lack of emotional expression of grief is being frowned upon. Similarly, the men had been met with expectations of seeking professional help. The latter issue corresponds with an ongoing debate of an increasing professionalization of society (e.g. Silverman, 2014). While the help of professionals might be necessary at times, Silverman advocates for

promoting adaptive capacities in the individual with the support of his or her surroundings. She furthermore stresses that this requires ‘considering the stress as appropriate and normal under the circumstances’ (2014, p. 294). In this context, a possible downside to the professionalization of grief could be a reluctance from others to come forward as they might believe that something ‘special’ is required in order to be able to help (Silverman, 2014), or nobody is supporting the grieving individual as they assume it is somebody else’s responsibility.

Indeed, the issue of responsibility seems relevant in relation to the experiences of the bereaved fathers in the present study. The support received by these families appeared rather erratic, and to a large extent the help had been initiated by the fathers themselves. While it had been challenging for some of them finding appropriate support they also stressed the fact that it is hard reaching out for help when newly bereaved. In those cases where professional support had been offered, the men often found themselves in situations where the help was not aimed at their particular situation as widowed fathers, resulting in a mismatch between experienced needs and offers of help. The men had several suggestions for how to improve the support for parentally bereaved families, which will be addressed in the concluding section of this paper.

The analysis of the present data also revealed temporal issues in the bereavement experiences with a clear dichotomy between life before and after the death. The fathers experienced transitions in different areas and provided descriptions reminiscent of the liminal phase in anthropological literature (van Gennep, 1960), an association also found in another recent study on widowers (Silverman & Thomson, 2018). Finding oneself in a kind of no man’s land encouraged the bereaved individuals to seek out others in a similar kind of situation or to form new communities with like-minded individuals (Silverman, 2014; Turner, 1969). The invention of the internet has made this easier with an array of online bereavement support and discussion forums (Colón, 2004). In relation to transitions, bereavement support groups might

serve a particular purpose of helping with the negotiation of changes (Silverman, 2004, 2014), even though some of the men in the present study highlighted a necessity of striking a balance between sharing grief experiences and not keeping each other at a low point.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article focused on some of the challenges faced by midlife widowers with children living at home. As anticipated, the men found it particularly challenging dealing with their own grief at the same time as supporting their grieving children. From the interviews with the three men with younger children, it does indeed seem that coping with the various ramifications of the death of a spouse might come at the expense of coping with one's own grief. This is in line with previous research on widowed fathers (Yopp et al., 2015). Furthermore, the present study highlighted a lack of adequate offers of help for these parentally bereaved families. Some of the men seemed to be struggling with a lack of recognition of their individual ways of grieving and often experienced a mismatch between their enquiries of support and the help offered. The need for focusing on the individual and not offering a *one-size-fits-all* approach to bereavement support have similarly been stressed by other, previous studies on widowers (e.g. Doka & Martin, 2010; Silverman & Thomson, 2018).

## **Limitations**

Very few males came forward for the present study. One reason for this might be the request for interviewing their bereaved children. Several fathers thus asked for specifics about the child interviews, e.g. what topics would be discussed, the planned length of the interview, etc. While the data is thus not representative for Danish widowed fathers as such, the interviews provided in-depth knowledge on the lived experiences of four Danish widowers with children living at

home. In contrast to another recent study (McClatchey, 2018), these men felt left to their own devices to a great extent as newly widowed fathers. Whether this is the case for Danish midlife widowers in general, including widowers who are not members of an online support group (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2003), remains to be investigated.

The author's personal experiences of untimely spousal loss have informed the study (Silverman, 2000) and provided invaluable insights into as well as access to the study population (Berger, 2015). However, an 'insider perspective' also necessitates considerations regarding how one's own experiences might affect the research process. In order to counteract possible bias several measures were applied. In the phase of data collection, an openness was imperative, i.e. an increased sensitivity towards what was of importance to the individual interviewee (Kvale, 1996). Furthermore, continuous feedback was received from qualitative researcher colleagues in regards to research questions, interview guides, and data analyses.

### **Implications for practice**

The men in the present study had several suggestions as to what might have alleviated their situation following the death of their wives. Firstly, they would have liked a kind of 'family check-up' to ensure that they were coping adaptively. Three of the men thus suggested meeting up with a social worker or someone else with a knowledge of grieving families in the immediate aftermath following the death of a parent. On such a visit, the men would have liked to receive general information on what kind of help was available for parentally bereaved families as well as information on bibliographical material on men in a similar kind of situation. Secondly, the men requested possibilities of networking with other widowers with dependent-age children. Thirdly, one of the men envisioned the family's general practitioner as the key figure in ensuring the long-term well-being of bereaved families. Finally, three of the men called for

impartial advice regarding legal and financial issues following spousal death. In this matter, one of the fathers suggested a central entity employing specialists within the area of probate as well as a webpage with information on what to remember and whom to contact following a death in the family.

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