HOW TO BE A WIDOW: PERFORMING IDENTITY
IN GRIEF NARRATIVES OF AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
in The Graduate School
of The Ohio State University

By
Nancy McDonald-Kenworthy, B. S., M. A.
Educational Policy and Leadership

*******

The Ohio State University
2012

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Patricia Lather, Co-Advisor
Dr. Amy Shuman, Co-Advisor
Dr. Richard Voithofer, Committee Member
Abstract: “How to be a widow: Performing Identity in Grief Narratives of an Online Community”

Through analysis of a qualitative online ethnography in an Internet text-based website message board database called “WidowNet” (http://www.widownet.org/wnbb3), I studied online text conversations of adults who lost their life partners to death. This online autoethnographical research investigates how and why online widows/widowers perform their changed identity status after spousal death, and what the educational implications of an online self-help network are. This online ethnography project implements textual analysis of a registered Internet community of practice where members write to each other in the format of an asynchronous, text-based message forum. In 1993, a widower, who still owns and administers the database as his avocation, founded this non-profit online group now consisting of over 4,000 members. These online community members are registered with only one exclusive qualification: they lost a life partner to death. As a widowed “insider” myself, I analyzed the online conversations to see how this type of narrative developed meaning to the widowed who are constructing their new identities as widows/ers. Further, I determined how this particular online community functions as an informal learning community for the members. After I analyzed the WN narratives, I conducted follow-up member checks via instant messaging, email, or Internet chat rooms, and face-to-face group participant observations and follow-up focus group face-to-face interviews in get-togethers occurred in various locations around the US, as well.
Dedication

The ones I love, despite their deaths: To my Gram, Adelia Keogh, who gave me stories, attention, devotion, and the love of reading folklore when I was a child. Gram guided me to that and other books when she introduced me to the central city library. Gram would be cheering loudest for this my latest project. I also dedicate this work to my first husband, Jim Christoff, who was the father of and hero to our three beloved children, Jean, Michael and Jeffrey; Jim showed me the love of garden, being close to the earth, of being one in a community, of steadfastness, continuity and loyalty. I also dedicate this work to Noreen Murphy Christoff, my dearest, oldest friend and close sister-in-law. Noreen and I shared books together every day of our childhood lives, and grew to be family members in our adulthood. Her intelligence, kindness and goodness was always a model for me even though my shortcomings failed her. Noreen’s mother-in-law, and mine, Barbara Christoff, gave me the story of Ruth and Naomi that lived in our own time. She gladly took me to be with her people. Finally, this work is dedicated to Allan Kenworthy, who in his passing is the inspiration for this project, who is a soul mate, and who is forever in my heart. Thanks for constructing our lives together, however too short it was, and thanks for still guiding me in the construction of this new identity. Your spirit is strong.
Acknowledgements

I honor the late Professor Suzanne Damarin, a mentor who gave me deeper thought to this project, and who dubbed my favorite nickname, the *graduate student emerita*. We spent many summer afternoons in Mozart’s patio, where she pointed me to ideas of feminism, technology and community of practice. She left us far too soon. I also thank Dr. Patti Lather for welcoming me back into this scholastic place, working with me on this project from the start, and guiding me to focus. To Dr. Amy Shuman I thank for a title, insights and encouragement that have urged me to think in creative ways, bringing me to this point where I never thought I could. I also thank Dr. Rick Voithofer for guiding me in the scholarship of technology, and for innovative understandings and invaluable exchanges that are far beyond this quick mention, and this long project.

To my fellow participants, the WidowNetters, all of you, and you know who you are now, for allowing me to share your stories, opening your hearts to this project, and pushing me to get it done. It is your work that makes it. I am only the messenger.

I also thank my fellow dissertation writers, Fawn, especially, for her ongoing special above-and-beyond editing tips and great conversation; I thank Sara, Debra and Sharon, too, who went through this with me, and exchanged more than they’ll ever know.

Lastly, I thank my new partner, Bill Keating, who has had the patience to wait while this project was formed and reformed, thanks for his sharp-eyed skills editing this
seemingly endless writing into clean prose, and who has had the empathy and awareness of being a fellow widow to have given me feedback to clarify my uncertain and ambiguous thinking about what we both have experienced.

A dieu, Allan

In the beginning of this project, I talk of endings… With Derrida’s influence, in this “work of mourning,” I must address a most important person, without whose influence I would not have reached this level of courage so as to write this dissertation. I name you, in grief, Allan. My adieu here, Allan, whom I never say goodbye, because you are always in my heart, my soul, my spirit. Levinas has taught me a-Dieu. No material silence from you will keep me away from thoughts of you or away from your spirit. Where words fail me, my sorrow will last as long as I live. I sing with you, as we did before, in our beginning, and at your end… “like a red, red rose.” Burns helped me believe what you sang—that you will “come again, though it were 10,000 miles.” There are no goodbyes…. Grief does not end, but only metamorphoses… and with grace, into another with more comfort and solace. So my solace is that I still have your love, and I still love you; our spirit still lives. This project has given me the hope that my loss is not complete, that your love still exists. To quote T. S. Elliot, a song that we sang together, “And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from….” The last thing you said to me as I was leaving the room, was “just call me if you need anything…” You are at my back.
Vita

1979………………………B. S.  Education, Concentrations in English & Music,
                   The Ohio State University

1982………………………M. A.  Philosophy of Education
                   The Ohio State University

1980s……………………Teacher, Elementary & High Schools, Los Angeles United School
                   District

1991-94…………………..Instructor, Lecturer, English & Women’s Studies,
                   The Ohio State University, Lima Campus

1994-2003…………………Technical Writer, Project Manager, Telecommunications Industry

2003-current………………English Instructor, Columbus State Community College

Publications

"Prize the Doubt: Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum," from Los Angeles Unified School

"Reasoning or Evidence: What Does One Possess?" From Proceedings of Ohio Valley

Fields Of Study

Education and Folklore
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication ............................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................... iv

_A dieu, Allan_ ........................................................................................................................ v

Vita .......................................................................................................................................... vi

Table of Figures ....................................................................................................................... xiv

List of Tables .......................................................................................................................... xv

**Chapter 1  Online Autoethnography: An Introduction** ....................................................... 1

Navigation Issues: Some Preliminary Vocabulary ................................................................. 16

Past is prologue: My Story ..................................................................................................... 18

How Do We Understand This Grief? Backstory: This Particular WNer ......................... 21

From Member to Participant-Researcher: Fast Forward to Problem Statement ............ 30

Research Questions: Grief Narrative and Identity .............................................................. 33

Contextual Background: Some Thick Descriptions Of My Field And Folk ................... 34

Widow Net (WN) Website Message Board ........................................................................ 35

Mr. G: Widower, Founder and Administrator of WN ....................................................... 41

WN Restrictions ................................................................................................................. 43

Limits of the Research .......................................................................................................... 44

WN Board Categories of All Types ..................................................................................... 45
**Description of WN Members: "Newcomers"** ........................................................................................................... 46

**Description: WN "OldTimers"** ................................................................................................................................. 48

**Venturing into GTGs** ............................................................................................................................................... 49

**The Winds of Change** ........................................................................................................................................... 50

**Summary and Further Chapters** ............................................................................................................................. 51

**Conclusion** .............................................................................................................................................................. 53

**Chapter 2 Writing Out Grief: Literature Review** .................................................................................................. 55

**Introduction: Overview** ......................................................................................................................................... 55

Some Ontological Sources and Foucauldian Resistances......................................................................................... 58

Derrida, Mourning and The Work............................................................................................................................... 60

**An Autoethnographic Perspective of Grief and Widowhood** .............................................................................. 62

* A Priori Vocabulary for “Widow” “Grief” “Mourning” “Bereavement” ................................................................. 62

Dominant Grief Theories............................................................................................................................................ 64

Troubling Dominant Theories with Postmodern Bonds........................................................................................... 73

Continuing Bonds........................................................................................................................................................ 73

**Grief’s Overlapping Identity** ................................................................................................................................. 78

Widow as Identity-Kit in Grief.................................................................................................................................... 78

Marginalization in Widowhood.................................................................................................................................. 78

Performing Identity in Widowhood............................................................................................................................ 80

**Theories of Identity in, Identity Out of the Internet** .............................................................................................. 83

Internet Research and Identity...................................................................................................................................... 84

Our Online Community: How we are folk.................................................................................................................. 92
Identity Shaken in Grief

Widowed Identity as Stigma

Online Community of Practice: How the Folk Learn to be Widows

Research Gaps

Conclusion

Chapter 3 Tales of Grief Exposing Identity: Methodology

Introduction: Design Plan

Paradigmatic Research in Narrative

Underlying Epistemological Assumptions

Narrative Analysis as Method

The Telling of Storytelling: Research Design & Rationale

Research Timeline

Description of the Overall Paradigm for Data Collection

Research Site and Sample: Grief Discourse Constructs Widowhood

Sampling with Collaborative Witnesses (Participants)

Guiding Questions for Data Collection Methods

Methods of Narrative Analysis

1. Themes and Patterns in Conventional Qualitative Methods

2. Labovian Analysis of the Misha Section: Shapes and Functions of Narrative

3: Using Literary Analysis Metonymy for One Common WN Thread Called "I left his Beer in the Fridge"

Analysis: Reflexive Journal as a Broader Prism of Interpretation

ix
Journaling as Revision ................................................................. 145
Journal Entry: Insider Issues .......................................................... 149
Journal Entry: Ethical Power Relations .......................................... 151
Journal Entry: Triangulating Ethics, Power and Insiderness ............. 154
Member Checks for Validity ............................................................. 156

Conclusion ......................................................................................... 159

Chapter 4 Performing Widowhood in WidowNet: Narrative Analysis .... 160

Introduction: Triangulated Interpretations ........................................ 160

1) Qualitative Analysis as Ethnographic Investigation ...................... 162

Initial Ideas: Name and Place of Ethnographic Site, and Why? .......... 162

The “Whys” of Us .............................................................................. 169

WidowNet as a Community of Practice (CoP) .................................. 174

Beginning Identity Practice ............................................................... 175

Trajectory: One WNet, a Community of Practice ............................. 180

Remedying Craziness in Grief .......................................................... 182

Experiencing Grief in a CoP .............................................................. 185

What is Spousal Grief? ................................................................. 189

Grief as a Situated Condition .......................................................... 190

Grief is a Monster, Mostly ............................................................. 192

Learning How to be a Widow: CoP Performing Identities ................. 194

Performing Identity, Reconstructing Lives in Widowhood ............... 197

Widow Shopping .............................................................................. 208
The Ideology of the DGIs (who “don’t get it”) .......................................................... 213

Other DGI Stories in WN ............................................................................................... 220

2) Labovian Analysis of Misha’s Story: How to be a Widow” ........................................ 227

Labovian Evaluations in Misha’s Story ......................................................................... 232

Conclusion to the Labovian Analysis: ........................................................................... 234

Reproduction of Misha’s Tale ......................................................................................... 234

Labovian Analysis of Misha’s Story: Spreadsheet in Enumerated Clauses .............. 240

Pie Graph of Misha’s Narrative ...................................................................................... 253

Conclusions of Misha’s Narrative .................................................................................. 254

3) Objects of Desire: Trivia and Not Letting Go... Metonymy is also Souvenir .......... 255

Left His Beer in the Fridge... ......................................................................................... 256

Reflexivity: Meta-thinking the Journal Entries of an Autoethnographer .............. 262

Positioning is Hard ........................................................................................................ 262

Deconstructing the Disconstruction: Journal Entry .................................................... 263

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 265

Chapter 5 Conclusions of this Study ............................................................................. 267

Introduction: The End is the Beginning ....................................................................... 267

Get it Done Already......................................................................................................... 268

Member Checks: We are talking about Us. MetaTalk about WN. .......................... 270

Member Check: Cleveland: Jan 2009 ........................................................................ 271

Member Check: St. Louis Nov 2010 ............................................................................ 273

Member Check: St. Louis: Mar 2011 ........................................................................... 274
Final Member Check: Lexington, April 2011 ................................................................. 278
Disconfirming Evidence ........................................................................................................ 283

New Understandings From Research .............................................................................. 285
Music in the Round: Revisiting Research Questions ....................................................... 285
Answering My Questions .................................................................................................... 288
Relearning about Learning: the Metaprinciples of Education ........................................... 291
Methodological Conclusions ............................................................................................... 294

Implications from my Research: Some Advice for the Non-widowed ....................... 297

Implications for Further Research .................................................................................. 302
Just a Final Peek into More Forums in WN ...................................................................... 303
Encore: On to the Book ....................................................................................................... 311

Coda: Benjminian Widow-Angel of Chaos ...................................................................... 313
Angelus Novus” .................................................................................................................... 313
Dal Segno Al Coda... ......................................................................................................... 315

Appendix A: Other Websites Related to Grief ................................................................. 317
Post WN Online Communities and More ....................................................................... 317
Other Websites Related to Grief ....................................................................................... 318

Appendix B: Links to Resources for Further Internet Research ................................. 321

Appendix C: Krebs Social Graph of Online Community ............................................... 322

Appendix D: Glossary of Digital Terms ......................................................................... 324
Appendix E: Definitions of Acronyms in WN ................................................................. 325
References.................................................................................................................. 327
Table of Figures

Figure 1. WN Website Hierarchy of Discussion Board Structure. __________________________ 37

Figure 2. WN Forum Index – Partial View (more exist but are not visible here). ___________ 38

Figure 3. WN Discussion Board Thread (Conversation) Partial. ___________________________ 40

Figure 4. Angelus Novus ___________________________________________________________ 313

Figure 5. Krebs’ Social Membership Points Graph________________________________________ 322

Figure 6. Krebs’ Graph of Core Members of an Online Community

(Cited with permission of owner.) ________________________________ 323
List of Tables

Table 1 Labovian Example of Misha’s Narrative Categories .................................................. 239

Table 2: Labovian Analysis of Misha’s Narrative .................................................................. 240

Table 3: Language of offline and online language synonyms .............................................. 324
Chapter 1

Online Autoethnography: An Introduction

The main interest in life and work is to become
someone else that you were not in the beginning.

–Michel Foucault

There come moments when, as mourning demands [deuil oblige], one feels
obliged to declare one’s debts. We feel it our duty to say what we owe to friends.

–Jacques Derrida

Allan, my husband, died at a Pacific Ocean beach suddenly one afternoon, the
summer of 2001, while I had jaunted off to visit a friend in the Valley. When I was
preparing to leave our hotel, he told me to call him if I needed anything. That was the
last thing I ever heard him say to me. I came back to the beach a few hours later to find
him missing. After asking the lifeguard about him, she verified his name, then bid me
wait for the police to come see me. They drove me a mile away, to Santa Monica
hospital, where a doctor told me that Allan died—a heart attack in Venice Beach, CA.
My first reaction was when my knees buckled. Bones melted and muscles gave way.
That was the beginning of my devastating and life-changing loss. This loss created such
a void that I have been searching for a sense of meaning ever since. One early
consequence of my search was finding an online community of widow/ers called
WidowNet, where I found a group of people who were experiencing this same loss of partnership, the same sense of void, loss and meaninglessness; this was one group of people to whom I could relate. I soon became a member, of which I still am to this day, 10 years later.

This dissertation project is a major and ongoing consequence of my search. After a few years’ quest for some sense of this void called widowhood, I began to write a book about it, and wanted it to be based on research. I also wanted to finish something that I started 25 years ago. From those urges, I approached an old acquaintance, a certain client that I had previously known, who was also a professor, to say that I wanted to study some more so that I could put this potential book in a more proper framework, a scholastic one, one worthy of the pain, effort, work and even despair of meaning for which I struggled. Thus, this dissertation has become an auto-ethnographical study of not merely my own spousal grief, but the ways that our communal grief can be expressed, felt and understood. This has happened through an Internet, text-based message board, a website which is an online community of people who also have lost their life partners to death. I am focusing on this online community in order to understand more about grief, specifically spousal grief, as it is experienced in WidowNet (members shorten it to “WN”) where all the participants have lost a spouse or an intimate life partner to death. Here in Chapter 1, I shall introduce this website message board, describe some of its elements and some of the typical WNers, including the owner-administrator, Mr. G., and show why I have chosen this as a topic of my dissertation. This will also show how people have been able to find online sites with a small modicum of technical expertise to
find a platform that incorporates the tools to let the ordinary users find an easy online method of communication to be able to stay in touch constantly, 24x7. Over the years, this online communication has become a culture in its own right. We have found the online world of WidowNet where it is “just us” as our place-less-ness, yet at the very same time is our situation in which to settle. Perhaps this Internet “place” where we “go,” we are in this metaphorical world that is understood only in the more traditional world of roads, and travel, “get going” etc., and in the new “place” of the Internet, we use the old familiar metaphors to figure out how we navigate into these cyberworlds. Our transitional object, the computer, is the tool for us to transport ourselves into a world that we can understand, we can think about, we can even imagine when we start using metaphors like “place” and all those tools that fit into that category, we are quite comfortable in those metaphors.

How do our minds seem to travel from sitting alone at home in our pjs, staring at a computer screen, reading and typing mere text with our fingers on our keyboard, writing to others, while we cognitively slip into another kind of metaphorical territory where we willingly suspend our disbelief (Winnicott, 1971; Jacobsen, 1982) and emotionally seem to find ourselves in a room full of congenial friends in cyberspace? English literature scholar, Norman Holland (2003) claimed that Samuel Coleridge in 1798 invented the phrase “willing suspension of disbelief” to refer to what happens to us when we are engrossed in a movie or reading a novel. Holland analyzed this phenomenon we all have had. When we are using an object, a toy, a book, or in this case, the Internet, “we no longer perceive our bodies… our environment… we no longer judge
probability or reality-test. We respond emotionally to the fiction as though it were real” (p. 1). When we WNers are “in” our online community, reading posts, writing answers, or our own stories, we are feeling near: crying over someone who told their story with crucial elements similar to our own, or laughing at a dark “inside” joke that another widowed person posted from maybe 10,000 miles away. A more prevalent feeling, however, makes us sense that we’re acting in a community and talking to friends, feeling and believing that this community is real, and close, at least emotionally. We feel its sense of community. In this communicative process, the pjs disappear, as the text itself does in the course of intent reading: without consciousness of the mental transitions, we are in the cyberworld of the Internet, and finding companions across the globe at the touch of the keyboard in front of us. It is this paradox that we accept when we focus from the present objects to the use of those objects when Winnicott (1971) argues that “the paradox involved in the use is that ‘a phenomenon that is universal… [that] cannot in fact be outside the range of those whose concern is the magic of imaginative and creative living’ ” (p. xi).

Who is a widow? What is this category? Is it an essential category? Always a woman? Only the married? Everyone knows who a widow is: a woman who had a husband who is dead. Three major, essential and crucial concepts are central points of the “grand narrative.” The word ‘widow’ evokes a clear cultural understanding of what this word means. After all, it has deep roots, etymologically. The etymology of ‘widow’ carries the idea of void, from the Latin, *vidduus*, meaning emptiness. Obviously connected to death, which is certain, the widow is one of commonalities and universals
we have, yet death is something many people avoid talking about, or thinking about. Death can be even something to fear (Neimeyer, 1999). Culture is situated and constructed to dictate the behaviors of widowed (Hall, 1980). People have expectations about the widow: she is sad and we do not want to talk to her about her husband because we might make her sadder. If she grieves too loudly, or too long, she is morbid. She is alone, so we don’t want her to be with us couples. She needs to move on, and she needs to forget about all that sadness and negativity. She needs to think positively (Fredrickson, et al, 2001). She might need advice about her finances, since she is all alone now, and most likely poorer. As she is a widow, she has lower social as well as economic status than she had before, and she certainly is not wearing colored clothing (Lopata, 1996). Time was she wore black (or white in certain cultures), and that blackness or whiteness in her apparel was a clear association with widowhood (or “widow’s weeds”1). Bright colors are considered inappropriate for widows, and even today, widows are negatively judged for wearing bright clothes.2 Some customs have even held that (Hindu) widows would be immolated at their husband’s funeral pyre.

Such are stereotypes of widowhood, including some more or less ritualized customs and practices in the process of acculturation. These cultural beliefs are known

1 The etymology of ‘weeds’ comes from the Old English, ‘waeds,’ meaning garments.

2 On Feb, 13, 2011, Janet Maslin, The New York Times book reviewer, while reviewing Joyce Carol Oates’ new memoir of her recent widowhood, judged Oates’ choice of clothing in her widowhood and the fact that Oates did not mention her new marriage in her memoir.
through the “repeated acts… that congeal over time to produce the appearance of
substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1990, p. 45) both in the dominant medical
and allied health fields as well as in the vernacular. As Butler argues about the social
construction of gender, I see the parallels in widowhood, when I understand her to say
that these acts are “within a regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the
appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 45). I question these cultural
beliefs, customs and expectations. Through my own experience as a widow, and my
connection to my online community WidowNet, I have realized how impoverished the
view of widowhood, grief, loss and constructing new identities is. Stroebe & Stroebe
(1993) defined related terms that are acceptable in today’s times: “Bereavement is the
objective situation of having lost someone significant; grief is the emotional response to
one’s loss; and mourning denotes the actions and manner of expressing grief, which often
reflects the mourning practices of one’s culture” (p. 5). Lopata (1996), noted social
scientist who focused the substance of her research on widows, has expanded these
notions of widowhood by adding the cultural significance of grieving and mourning,
because “this culture forms a foundation for the strength of emotional response to the
death of others” (p. 96). These arguments assume that since cultures differ, behaviors
within these differing cultures are different too. But cultural norms are strong, and we
“behave,” and are conflicted when we are “supposed” to feel according to these norms
(Walter, 2003). If we express the pain beyond the norm, then we widows are told we are
“morbid,” and that is not acceptable in ordinary company.
My purpose is to examine certain of these cultural beliefs that appear to be contrary to the lived experience as told by widows. “It is hard to disrupt old lines of thought,” as Stuart Hall (1980, p. 57) argues, hard to suppress the emotionality embedded in grief and loss, in search of identity, and hard to “leave it in the unreal, neutralized mode of existence which is that of theoretical ‘theses’ or epistemological essays” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 1). Nevertheless, it must be done. According to Derrida (1996), “[o]ne cannot hold a discourse on the ‘work of mourning’ without taking part in it, without announcing or partaking in [se faire part de] death, and first of all in one's own death.” One might argue that mourning is left unanswered (Derrida, 2001); yet, I shall attempt to answer it.

It’s the rare griever who escapes the frantic urge to cry out in a world that seems deaf to the overpowering waves — of fear, sorrow, anger, guilt, suicidal hopelessness, numbness — that break after the death of someone deeply loved. Only the similarly bereft seem able even to begin to hear. (Hulbert, 2011)

Ann Hulbert writes a review of Joyce Carol Oates’ new memoir about her recent widowed experience, and Hulbert’s eloquent quote mirrors some reasons why widows google3 “widow” and look for someone who has had the same experience to talk to about

3 “Google” has become a common term lately in the Internet era where the Google company has the most popular search engine. It has come from a proper noun to a common verb. Thus when we use it to search for information on the ‘net, we “google.”
this inexplicable event. Over 4,000 widows have, and found an Internet website called “
WidowNet,” (WN) which contains a message board intended exclusively “for and by widows and widowers” (WidowNet website homepage).

We do make friends in this interactive text from the computer, and much more than that. We’re in what Turkle (1995) calls the “digital era,” where we “talk” to each other through many technological means: via typed text enveloped in digital telecommunications that are most commonly known via the computer, as the Internet; we use our voices during “real time” or “texting” (new verb) asynchronously via the computer or the cell phone; we can “Skype” (a computer-to-computer tool, and now cell-to-cell where one can communicate using text, video and audio connections); we create “instant messaging” in any of those tools (cell phone, computer or tablets such as iPad) by “texting.” We use various kinds of social networking (by now, in 2011, Facebook is the most popular, with Google+ contending). People are communicating in online communities of all sorts in the 21st postmodern (Lyotard, 1991) century.

Community has traditionally been construed in the three-dimensional (3D) way where neighbors live down the street from other neighbors, as a knowledge circle with the most familiar in greatest proximity. However, folklorists have determined that community may be alternatively conceptualized “as the locus of culture and as the focus

______________________________

4 Often in this “young” literature of Internet research, people use terms such as “virtual” for what happens on the Internet vs “real” for what happens in the world not the Internet. I would rather choose to say “online” for “virtual” and “three-dimensional” or “face-to-face” for “real.” I argue that “real” is real whether communicating on the Internet, telephone, letter-writing or standing in the same room.
of identity” (Noyes, 1995, p. 452). WN, as a community that is online, has as its togetherness not by physical boundaries, but because of at least one significant commonality as a factor (Noyes, 1995; Hymes, 1996; Glassie, 2006). Dundes argues that a group has at least one significant thing in common. In the case of the WNers’ online community, this commonality is strong and powerful: we all have lost a life partner to death, and we cannot understand this experience when it first happens. Some might argue that death is something that many people have in common, but in this case, the WN community is based on the commonality of not having another community that serves the purpose of communicating with fellow spousal grievers who are working through their grieving experience. In WN, we are discovering that, while we are “alone together”5 (Turkle, 2010) in what we as members call “a club that no one wants to belong” (common WN expression) to share our stories of our vulnerability. Glassie (2006) argues that community, “through repeated contact and communication… build[s] national consistency” (p. 148). The online community at WN has this repeated contact and communication on a 24x7 basis. Moreover, this community is based on the commonality of those who have not found a community that serves the purpose of bereaved spouses helping the bereaved spouses work through the grieving experience as they might wish.

I am using a folklorist’s perspective in this study because I think that even though this online community seems like the antithesis of a folklorist’s field, this inquiry carries

5 I accidentally found Turkle’s new book titled the same as the phrase I thought of independently. of my study of online community, I cite it nevertheless because she has said, “the book is about human vulnerabilities and the affordances of technology” (in a video speech 26 Jan 2011).
an acquaintance with folkloristic affinities. What is folklore anyway? There is no one answer to this large and complex idea of what folklore is. Folklore traditionally has been commonly associated with fairytales, oral history, proverbs, popular beliefs, music and other performances that reflect the traditions of cultures or subcultures. Folkloristics is about the study of folklore, and was not considered an academic field of study until William Thoms coined the term ‘folklore’ in the 1840s (Axelrod, 2000). Both anthropologists and literature scholars contribute to various aspects of folklore, working as folklorists in and out of Academe. According to the American Folklore Society, “though folklore connects people to their past, it is a central part of life in the present, and is at the heart of all cultures—including our own—throughout the world” (AFS Website “About”)

In my case, my WN group does not share a “sense of its own identity” as the Folklore Society would think of folklore. Instead, this group of widowed folk has a culturally given identity, but is questioning that and trying to construct a new one, when the old one as a part of a couple was shattered. However, this instance may not be an oral tradition, but it shares many of the features of that orality. This group shares informal conversation via the Internet. People in this group tell tales of their lives before and after the death of their life partner, not in formal writing, but more in a manner of typing rather than speaking in the conversations. Sometimes folklore is attributed to cultural beliefs that do not pertain to the dominant belief structures, and that issue too, is relevant in my project.
The particular focus of my dissertation is this Internet text-based technological tool called an Internet “message board.” Beyond its technical specifications, this text-based message board is also thought of as a cyberplace where people hold conversations in the shape of post messages, and in turn make and remain friends; These have become known as “online communities” (Rheingold 1993; Turkle, 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1996; Jones, 1998b; Baym, 2000; Hine, 2000, 2005). Benedikt (2000) defines cyberspace to be “a word that gives a name to a new stage, a new and irresistible development in the elaboration of human culture and business under the sign of technology” (p. 29). In this project, I rely on online ethnographer Baym’s (2000) argument for “…the types of communicative practices through which online places come to feel like communities and give us grounded ways in which to think about the much theorized but under-examined phenomenon of online community” (Baym, 2000, p. 2). These are the technologies that are lacing throughout our lives more and more each day, and allowing our lives, though far apart in physical miles, to have a sense of togetherness, even though we sit alone in front of our own computers. The Pew Internet Project, a part of the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, began in 1999, when they found “that many of the debates about the impact of the Internet lacked reliable data.” However, by now in 2011, Director of Pew Internet and American Life Project, Lee Rainie (2011) argues that 79% of English speaking American adults use the Internet. And as far back as nearly 10 years ago, “some 84% of Internet users have at one time or another contacted an online group” (Horrigan, 2001).
Further, by 2011, this is not an isolated phenomenon or a tool only for the technically savvy or the elite. The use of Internet has grown ubiquitously in a relatively short time over the history of communications. According to Pew research (2010), in an age range from 18-75 and older, 85% of all adults use cell phones; 59% of all adults use desktop computers; 52% of all adults use laptops; and more specifically, 66% of people between 35 and 65 use these computers. 70% of those living in households earning less than $75,000 and nearly 95% of Americans who live in households earning $75,000 or more a year use the internet at least occasionally” (Jansen, 2010). The age gap in computer use is narrowing, as well. According to Pew Internet and American Life Project reports, “Computer use among Americans 65 and older has doubled in the past 10 years, while Internet usage among that age group has more than tripled” (Madden, 2010). In fact, Rainie (2011) reports:

The Internet is now deeply embedded in group and organizational life in America… . 75% of all American adults are active in some kind of voluntary group or organization and internet users are more likely than others to be active: 80% of internet users participate in groups, compared with 56% of non-internet users. Moreover, social media users are even more likely to be active: 82% of social network users and 85% of Twitter users are group participants.

Although Internet research began as early as the Internet itself did, much of the anthropological literature on Internet research related to the culture of online communities proliferated from the 1990s, (Turkle, 1995; Jones, 1998a,b,c; 1999; Hine, 2000, 2005; Baym, 2000). In the mid 90s, Parks & Floyd (1996), scholars of computer-
mediated communication, cited the claim that “in 1994, there were over 5,000 discussion
groups,” but today in 2011 countless discussion groups abound. Face book,\(^6\) founded in
2004, is the leading social network, where what started as students in one college getting
in touch with their colleagues, quickly spread the concept to other colleges, and then from
college to the world at large. Facebook, by now, carries over 500 million subscribers
connected to each other through friends and families.

Another PEW researcher (McCance, 2001), showed that 85% of Internet users
“connect with online communities that reflect their hobbies, professions, passions and
beliefs.”

Currently, Internet use is growing by leaps and bounds and at lightening speed
(vs. the traditional academic route), and has a broad board of users across spectrums. I
have found that the widows in WN are a cross-section of America, since the
overwhelming majority is from there, but there are also English-speaking people from
around the world in WN. Pew Research Center has found online communication groups
are ubiquitous by now (2010-11). In America, the youngest generation contains the most
users: 86% (Madden, 2010). Moreover, huge gains in use by older adults have abounded.
Seniors too are becoming avid Internet users. According to a Pew Internet research
study, “computer use among Americans 65 and older has doubled in the past 10 years,
while Internet usage among that age group has more than tripled (Madden, 2010). Social

\(^6\) Facebook has its own facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/facebook?sk=info Wikipedia
has more current information about Facebook at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook. Statistics about
Facebook can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics
networking use among internet users ages 50 and older nearly doubled—from 22% in April 2009 to 42% in May 2010. Within one year between 2009 and 10, “social networking use among Internet users ages 50-64 grew by 88%--from 25% to 47%. Further, according to other Pew statistics, “the Internet is now deeply embedded in group and organizational life in America…. Seventy-five percent of all American adults are active in some kind of voluntary group or organization and Internet users are more likely than others to be active: 80% … participate in groups, compared with 56% of non-internet users” (Pew, Jan 18, 2011).

Researchers at Pew, however, stressed that “it is important to note that… about a fifth… say that lack of access to the Internet is a hindrance”7 (Pew). Rainie (2011) also found, in another survey, “75% of all Americans (internet users and non-users alike) said that by now, the Internet has had a major impact on the ability of groups to communicate with members.

My study focuses on just one particular online community in “cyberspace” and its transformative powers where new identities are being constructed. The particular location in cyberspace which I am studying (http://widownet.org/wnbb3), called “WidowNet,” is an asynchronous text-based site of conversational narratives that the

7 Results in this report come from phone interviews by Princeton Survey Research Associates from Nov-Dec 2010 among a sample of over 2,300 adults 18 and over.
widows and widowers practice their inclusion by participation.\(^8\) Described often by WNers as “a club that no one wants to belong to,”\(^9\) it includes both “newcomers and oldtimers.” In what Bourdieu (1991), or Wenger (1998) would call a “community of practice” (CoP), WidowNet members tell each other their tales and read each other’s stories of their experiences with the death of their most intimate life partners, and of their changed lives afterward. The community of practice is joined because of a common purpose, and members “develop their own practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories and histories” (Wenger, 1998, p. 6). In the social theory of CoP, participants learn from each other “specific ways of engaging with the world” (p. 13), and develop a new “social formation of the person, the cultural interpretation of the body and the creation and use of markers of membership such as rites of passage and social categories” (p. 13). I argue that WN fits these descriptions of a community of practice. I am one of these members of the WN community of practice, and as my identities shift and change, blend and conflict, I am now an “insider” researcher (Naples, 2003) of the same online community.

\[^8\] For the sake of privacy and ethics, all names of WN members are changed to pseudonyms here, even though many WN “names” have already been changed to pseudonyms when they joined WN, for the sake of protecting their identities from Internet theft, and other privacy issues.

\[^9\] This phrase is repeated very often as a response that old-timer WNers use to welcome a new member who introduces himself or herself to the community. This repetition is a standard form in oral poems, as in Homer’s work, for example. It has become a ritualistic welcome.
Navigation Issues: Some Preliminary Vocabulary

To enhance legibility and to uncover ways to navigate along the WN website that I often thought of as a “town with many buildings,” let me first add some terminology about the WN website itself, before I show some figures that represent the WN site. In Mr. G’s, the website administrator’s terms, the complex of structure and the enormous amount of contents of WN are organized and categorized in certain ways that WN members can navigate easily. It is more than just the changing sizes of headers, the ways books are organized; it is much like laying out the street plans of a civil engineer. Mr. G says, “a board = WidowNetBB3 as a whole” (WN, 26 Feb 2011). In other words, Mr. G’s example explicates the structure of the site where the part of the WidowNet site that is called a “Board,” is short for Bulletin Board, the metaphorical term used for this particular type of software on Internet sites. It functions to facilitate text-to-text messages to the members who use it, and develop conversations from it. This Board is located at “WidowNet.org/wnbb3,” where it corresponds to its URL address. The Board contains a hierarchy of tools within it that categorize various kinds of conversations. To demonstrate, a Forum is one of many fora (Forums) that are on the Board, and is the second-level order within the Board hierarchy. The Forum is a particular category which is named, differentiated and regulated by Mr. G., and sometimes done so with the suggestions of various members. At the third level order, within the Forums, are Groups, a more specific way to differentiate subject matter according to certain criteria. Finally the smallest category of discussions, which fits into a particular Group is a Thread, or some heading with a topic chosen and posted initially by a WN member, who is waiting
for replies from other WN members. Replies to a thread are made within that particular thread. For example, within the WN Board, there are 10 Forums. Within the “New Arrivals and General Discussions” Forum, Groups exist, where the “General Discussions 2011” Group as well as earlier, historical General Discussion Groups are organized chronologically. Within the General Discussions 2011 Group, there are 275 Threads (ordered by topics of discussion) so far. Twenty-five of these 275 threads are separated on each web page within this group. The pages of a single Thread are added by the addition of the 15th reply, and are ended by no one’s posting anymore to that particular Thread. Each Thread topic is identified and linked in many ways by a member who starts a discussion topic. Shown on the screen are the dates of its origin, the name of the member who originated it, the number of replies, the number of views that are not necessarily replies, and the name and date of the last post of that particular Thread. Thus, these are the organization of ideas within the WidowNet site. The figures later in this chapter show what the categories of the message board look like.

10 Sometimes in a thread, replies in the conversation get off-topic, which is then called “thread drift.”

11 One gets the idea of the enormous number of lurkers in proportion to the number of active members. One Thread topic, for example has 11 posts, vs. 214 views.
Past is prologue: My Story

Well, every one can master a grief but [s]he that has it.

Shakespeare, “Much Ado about Nothing”

I am deepening and broadening my path in this nearly ten-year grief journey with my fellow widows and widowers who converse in this online community called “WidowNet” (aka “WN”). As an apprentice autoethnographer, I am at an epistemological, and ethical crossroads, because I am yet again reforming my identity, both offline, and online, from becoming a widow who is trying to understand what that means, and from being just another usual member of my online community—to a point where I began apprehensively traveling in a more complex direction, when I decided to seriously study my own community in this work. Before I began this dissertation research, I was thrown from having been a comfortably married business woman to being confronted with the chaos of sudden widowhood in 2001, where soon, I found the online community called WidowNet. I have subsequently pitched myself into new directions after my husband Allan’s death: I shifted priorities, changed careers, and after delving

12 For the purposes of this study, I am bending the gender determinations embedded in the meanings of widow and widower, and use the term “widow” to mean both male and female, whether in a legalized marriage or a life commitment to a partner who has died.

13 This particular online community of practice is located at http://www.widownet.org/wnbb3 and is called “WidowNet.” It is nicknamed “WN” and members are calling themselves “WNers.”
into this current project, I am constructing my new identities yet again. Not only have I returned to graduate school, but I have also moved from being a member of an online group of widowed people where we painfully question our new identities, to having become an “insider” apprentice at anthropology, this time toward a feminist, poststructuralist interpretation in a dissertation project (Britzman, 1991; Richardson, 1997a; Spivak, 1988; Butler, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Shuman, 2005; Lather, 2007). By this poststructural epistemological perspective, I aim to disrupt the positivist theories of grief and loss, which entails my troubling the dominant notions of widowhood. When I informed my fellow members of my shift in status, of moving from active member to researcher about our community, I was in a frightful state, but I soon found that I had little to fear. My fellow members are happy that I am pursuing this project, and are hoping that what I have to say might help change culture’s norms about widowhood. I am treading close to many fine lines here: telling the stories about death, about pain, about coping, and about reliving, stories that are such emotionally “charged” issues that in this study I must keep a constant awareness of the fine line between the non-academic sentimentality and institutional protections of privacy. Thus with an ethical awareness of my changing relations with my fellow online members, I am constructing and performing yet another identity, as researcher of my own online community (Butler, 1990).

With this feminist, autoethnographic perspective (Hayano, 1979; Richardson, 1997a; Ellis & Bochner, 2003), “connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 1999, p. 209), my writing provides me with the possibility to study this community from the inside out. As Patton (2002) suggests, I too ask, “how does my own
experience of this culture connect with and offer insights about this culture?” (p. 84). I do not wish to focus this work “solo” in this composition, but would rather be as a member of a choir. As well, I have constructed my identity not all by myself, not through some essence of “me” but rather constructing all the time, as a mom, a teacher, a sister, a friend, a student, as well as a widow: I am always “becoming” (Butler, 1999), multiple and diverse, and always through my relationships with others, both online and offline.

Thus I have chosen to use an autoethnographical perspective as the impetus that brought me to this point in the process of studying my social interaction in the WN community, how all of us interact, and how we all have grown as a result. Within the postmodern digital world of the 21st century, not only are the lines of community blurred in the world of the Internet, but the lines of “I” the researcher and “we” the researched are blurred as well, as the researcher affects the researched (Kuhn, 1970).

In my project, I am relying on several epistemic “lenses” to gain cultural perspectives, through a folkloristic narrative analysis of my community. Early on, the ethnographer would move to exotic far-away places to study her “folk” in their vernacular (e.g., Mead, 1949; Geertz, 1973; Rosaldo, 1988, 1989/93). However in this poststructural online ethnography, many of the traditional boundaries of community geography are paradoxical and broken away in the Internet world. Dundes (1989) argues that a folklorist can view the community not as much as its physical boundaries, but as “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor” (p. 2). The one common factor in this particular online community of my study is the death of a partner.
I use a Foucauldian lens (1980; 1988) in order to inspect the power relations between widows themselves, telling each other their stories of their social interaction with the non-widowed and their “thousand tiny resistances” to the dominant theories of grief. Because of the shaken notions of identity that comes to widowhood, I am relying on Judith Butler’s performativity theory (1990) of the socially reconstructed gender. With these perspectives, I can look at the text of the WNers’ narratives and explain the ways that widows perform their identities by calling upon J. L. Austin’s speech act theory (1975) as an epistemological scaffold.

While using narrative analysis as my method (Burke, 1941; Labov, 1972; Toolan, 1991; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Sacks, 1971/1992; Stewart, 1993/2007; Ochs & Capps, 1996, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Goss & Klass, 2005; Reissman, 2008), I am looking at the things that the members of the community say to each other, and consequently looking for the meanings the storytellers are making for themselves in those stories told to each other. With this folkloristic concept in mind, I am conducting an online auto-ethnography (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995, 2005; Baym, 2000; Hine, 2000), where I too am participating in these stories we tell each other. This storytelling also melds a sense of community and constructs a sense of identity in this boundary-less, non-geographical cyberplace.

**How Do We Understand This Grief? Backstory: This Particular WNer**

Before I delve too deeply into the problem statement of this dissertation, as an autoethnographer, I am compelled to put my backstory in this project by describing a bit
of my tale about my membership in WN, where I began to construct my identity as a WNer.

Sometime in July of 2001, I returned to work, maybe about three weeks after Allan died, at the age of 58, three months after he had retired from teaching. His death was sudden: it resulted from a heart attack on the sands of Venice Beach, soaking wet from a great swim, while I was off to The Valley visiting an old friend. I came back to the beach later, watched it from the roof patio of the small hotel where we stayed, and looked both from there and down at the beach, but could not find him; inexplicably, I asked the lifeguard where he was… She asked me his name, and when I gave it, she asked me to wait, while she summoned the police. When they arrived, they took me to Santa Monica, and a nearby hospital where, as I stood in the hallway, farther down the hall, seemingly like a tunnel, there the doctor told me that Allan was found dead on arrival. I was shocked; none of the forebodings made me imagine or realize that he was dead. It took the blunt remark to slam me into reality. That was the third day of our vacation in Southern California where we had come for his brother’s wedding. We missed the wedding, of course, though I encouraged them to continue with their plans—and I flew back after a few endless days of waiting for an autopsy, and a quick visit with some of his other family members when we gathered at a local mortuary in California.

When I returned to Ohio, and after coping again in another funeral home a few doors away from home, my neighbors became my funeral directors. Then came more rituals of standing for hours beside his coffin, and meeting the mourners, more family, his students, his fellow faculty, our fellow choir members, our friends, all that had gathered
to mourn with me and say goodbye to him. After some time, I found myself sitting back at the house for the wake, accepting the visiting family and friends who brought food. We filled the screened porch that sunny summer week, talking, crying, and laughing when we played games and shared stories about Allan, much like an Irish wake of old. Then I managed to complete the memorial services at church and waited until the end of the rituals before my knees buckled, and I moaned into the arms of one of my ministers. Soon, the family left to their own homes, the friends went away, and our house was large, silent, and empty. I subsequently faced the hard practicalities of dealing with probate issues, changing bank accounts, re-titling the car, carrying out the trash myself, all the cold-hearted “business” of death consequences. The car didn’t drive to the garage, and he didn’t come home from a golf outing. He wasn’t in the garden while I sat in the living room, alone. His dirty clothes didn’t pile up in the usual spot. I looked around for his presence, his voice, but I caught myself, realizing that he wasn’t there. But the awful realization would come over me in visceral electric waves, then, and I could not stand being alone and idle in our huge empty house full of rooms that were filled with the empty reminders of Allan’s presence; his shoes sat in the closet; his shirts still hung on the hangers; that other car sat idle and empty in the garage. There was too much food leftover from well-meaning friends, and I couldn’t eat it all by myself. I couldn’t even sleep in our bed yet, so I would “crash” fitfully on the rec room futon sofa. Each morning at waking, I would have a few seconds that seemed normal… and then I remembered it—all over again, each and every morning. He was dead. I was empty. I was fearful! What was that? It seemed I had nothing to fear. I was not afraid when I was
alone before Allan. But there it was. Every morning when I first awakened, fear at the back of my stomach confronted me, pounding me against my spine. Someone gave me a memoir C. S. Lewis wrote about his own widowhood, and his first line was, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid.” (Lewis, 1961). That was it. A gut-wrenching fear-like sensation, and it seemed for no reason, yet there it was. I was oddly comforted by someone else who had had this same experience, when I read his book. Every morning came another day without Allan. Pain.

And as the days came and went, I felt surrounded by all those empty rooms. I was not dealing with that shock very well, so I returned to my office where at least there were other people, and I might find something useful to do.

At that time, I was a technical writer and project manager for an Intranet (i.e., a website that was firewalled for company intercommunication only) in a large web hosting telecommunications corporation. However, in front of my computer, my mind was in chaos; my thoughts wandered; I had little ability to concentrate. I was very fortunate, however, in that my manager, Tom, was kindly sympathetic: after his daily visit in my office in the mornings to ask me how I was—he truly asked me how I was, and not just the simple greeting—Tom left me alone to close the door. So at times when I was supposed to be documenting technical work on the web, I “surfed” aimlessly… I was searching for … something … je ne sais quoi. One day, I typed "widow" in the website Google’s search engine (i.e., I “googled”). On the Google results page I stumbled onto a website, http://www.widownet.org which was at the top of the list. I then "entered" the WN text-based message website, spent time figuring out this “place,” and within the first
month of my widowhood, I began to immerse myself by reading this website, finding stories of widowed people, men and women, gay and straight, who were telling each other their stories about the same kind of “knife inside” that I was feeling but could not express. I explored WN, all of its Forums, but mostly where people were telling the stories of a pain that I was so newly experiencing. I registered, but did not say anything at first. I was what Krebs (2008) labeled as a “lurker” as the readers are called on the Internet. Krebs, in his analysis of social networks, shows how “relations build and flow between people, groups, organizations and … other connected information/knowledge entities” (Krebs, website citation; see Appendix C). I joined this social network, and I found I would start my daily web use by logging on to WN, exploring the front page links that explained how and when this site began, and then gravitated over and over again to the message board, and read over and over again, the stories of the many members who are exclusively widows and widowers. There it was: a place where everyone who posted and responded to each other was widowed, including the guy who built the site, and maintained it. No one else was there but widows—all widows. I was amazed.

In those early days I had a difficult time trying to focus on work, and I had no idea what to think or how to think, much less what to do either at work or home. I could not summon enough concentration to read a novel, but I could read the widows’ conversations, telling each other their tales of what was going on with their altered lives, telling me they too couldn’t concentrate at work! They too often slept on their couch or left the dirty dishes. They too were asking what this thing called grief was. The WNers were showing me that what we were going through was not “crazy” after all, or else they
would say how it was “our own crazy,” our “new normal” and we had a right to have it. I also read stories of the people who WNers dub the “DGIs,” or the people who “don’t get it.” The DGIs had told us how they “know how you feel” when we know full well that no one else could know how this feels until they experience it themselves. We didn’t. We could not even begin to imagine the depth of this life-changing experience, or understand it when we were first bereaved; it compares to nothing experienced before. So I watched and read with unfailing interest, and often felt that “aha” sense.

Yet I was not quite ready to say anything myself. I felt shy, for some reason. I felt that I needed to get to know them better, even though I recognized their feelings, and I understood their stories. I was only on the verge of beginning this new identity, where, as Wenger (1998) depicts it, “a layering of events of participation… by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other” (p. 151). Then, after a month or so of reading (i.e., “lurking”), I felt daring enough to respond to someone, even though I was shy… scared. But I was preparing to say something to someone else who was going through this same unbelievable, unimaginable, unexplainable, unthinkable experience. I felt the urge to say, “That’s what this is!” I discovered others who had been there longer could understand it or had gone through this too. Thus I constructed an Internet nickname myself, “Athena” from my old freelance editing business, “Athena’s Pen…” and began my membership with WidowNet, and fellowship in an online community who was practicing widowhood (Wenger, 1998, 2001); I began, with some trepidation, by responding to someone else who said something to which I could relate. It was that “oh yeah! me too!” factor which happens often in WN. That “me too”
discovery factor in WN is enough to nudge that feeling of fear and desperation in spousal grief. The “me too” type of “second stories” that Harvey Sacks (1992/1972) characterized is throughout the WN message board. Once I felt like I was ready to speak, i.e, type in my words, and felt more comfortable putting in something or other of my own thoughts, I felt I had become a WNer, and I too began to learn how to be a widow. I was engaging in the practice of widows talking to widows about what widows do and think and feel. My participation was shaping my way of being, a lived experience in the online widowed world. I finally felt I could venture to explore my own story of pain and loss as well. WN became my lunch activity, my activity between projects at work, and when I came home to my own computer in a silent, empty house, I went back to the WN website and talked to a fellow WNer. Today, after nearly ten years and 4,000 of my own posts in WN, barely a day has gone by without my stopping at WN and looking to see who was saying something or what was being said. I even began with huge (but needless) trepidation to embark on what the WNers call the “GTGs” or the get-togethers that we have informally, and face-to-face, across the nation, and sometimes around the world. Now, after more than 20 or so of the GTGs that I have attended, I have even integrated them into my research, with real and lasting friends that I have made through WN, and “willing collaborators” (Soyini Madison, 2005) into this dissertation project as well.

After eight years into my widowhood, I had explored new social relationships, in other online communications, one of which is a popular and successful one, called “Match.com.” One person in particular caught my fancy. Bill and I first met each other online, communicated for a while via emails filtered through the online company, then
after I felt I could trust him enough, I was willing to meet face-to-face in a coffee shop one morning, close to home. We met and were both quite interested in what each other had to say. We told each other stories, explored our relationship, and after awhile, fell in love. We have recently married; Bill is also widowed, and he is constructing these new identities with me.

I also share this shifting identity with fellow WNers who too have re-coupled in yet another Forum that Mr. G, the founder, has created. In the past years, as WN grew, Mr. G has added new sections and Forums such as “Relationships” and “Re-coupled Widow/ers” where there is a separate “space” to discuss the complex issues that arise as families are re-identified, and re-blended.

So now, after these many years, I have moved my subject positions in WN from “cyber-neighbor” to researcher, yet the two are co-existing and blending in this online mix. I am investigating this complexity of the “spoiled identity” of widowhood (Goffman, 1990), not only in WN but in this project as well, and I am grateful to my fellow WNers for their eager and willing participation in my study.

This gratitude to my fellow WNers leads me to an awareness that many ethical considerations exist in this project. I have posted to this WidowNet community, saying all sorts of things as any ordinary active member of a community would, until I realized that what I am curious about has evolved into an academic study. I now hesitate before my postings, and I consider what I post, as I am constantly aware of my altered role as a participant-researcher. Thus the ethical element of this project involves the regret that is transforming my identities—yet I still follow this new direction. So, here from my early
widow online nickname “Athena” which has blended as I became an “old timer” to “Ath/Nancy” (I have also been given several humorous nicknames in WN jest) to the later researcher “Nancy,” who is about to be both exposed and the exposer, my identities are shifting and evolving, my motives to speak are changing, and even my curiosity is changing directions. At one level, the identity that was here before this study is asking, “who am I?” in my early widowhood; now the question, “what have I done?” is nagging me as I am transforming, myself. Now my questions are those that guide this study, and I hope that this will yield some possible answers. I am not innocent here, however, and yet, the WNers themselves have said, in widowhood, “we have lost our innocence.”

When I recently (winter, 2011) garnered some WN statistics while researching for this project, I was surprised to find that out of the approximately 4,100 other members of WN worldwide, where members from over 25 nations have registered, I am the fourth "top poster" (writing more responses, that is), though I did not plan to be, nor was I paying attention to a statistic like this. As a member, I just wanted to tell a story or to ask for some advice. I cannot remember my earliest posts, nor can I go back to the archives beyond late 2004, and find them in the database, because in 2004 the message board was hacked, and its security was breached, thus Mr. G had to rebuild it and keep the old records aside for future rebuild. The website message board was rebuilt with new, updated software, though all of us who had been members before that were required to re-register to this refurbished "site," in another server that is more secure. Thus, the archived conversations that we can see now are dated back only to late 2004, and beginning 2005, rather than to the very earliest record from 1993 when WidowNet
message boards began. However, Mr. G promises us that the archives will return when he has time. More important, the WN site still works, newcomers keep coming, and many old-timers continue to hang out. Moreover, in the interaction that we have had as widows, and as WNers in a community of practice, we have become friends and have learned from each other and from what we have said to others.

From Member to Participant-Researcher:

Fast Forward to Problem Statement

Thus having been thrown into widowhood myself, and having found others like myself who want to find meaning while telling their stories, I have moved from WN member to WN researcher. This experience of spousal grief is one that we have never before experienced, and not compared to any other kind of death in our lives. This experience puts into question almost every aspect of our lives and our living experiences, our expectations of life. As I, the WNers came to this site not at first to find answers, but to search for something that we could not articulate, to see if there are others who have had this experience, too.

Now, as I have moved into this research, I am working with a heightened reflexivity and awareness in my situated search for greater understanding (Ellis & Bochner, 2003), though always "situated, partial and perspectival" (Haraway, 1988). In my studies, I first and foremost consider the embedded ethical issues of being an "insider" in this autoethnography (Hayano, 1979; Deck, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Richardson, 1997, Richardson & Lockridge, 1998; Ellis & Bochner, 1999; Denzin,
When I announced my change in status to my fellow WNers, I changed identities, from member widow to researcher of members, the discourse of WN, the power dynamics with other members has been reconstructed with our shifts in subject positions (Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1990). Thus as I have constructed a seeming “hybrid” identity, I keep a constant awareness of having a heightened sensitivity and ethical responsibility that what I say will have an impact on my fellow members, I am humble in this privileged position.

When those who emerge from lurking, or just reading, to active participation in WidowNet, sooner or later the new widows WNers who are “newcomers”) in the online community inevitably ask, “who am I now” and “am I crazy?” and in response the WNers who have been there for awhile (aka the WN “oldtimers”), often respond, “you are not crazy; this is normal.” This is what spousal grief is. That is the beginning of the conversations, the kinds that Goffman (1971) would characterize as “remedial interchanges” in WN. Thus the widows by virtue of the stories they tell each other, perform their identities as widows, at first a hated word, but after awhile, a burnished badge as a symbol of the ring of fire in spousal grief, and learn from each other’s telling of the experience. The WN cyberspace is a logical position to explore how it is not only my own quest, but how our collective conversations of widows’ grief that may be beneficial to all. In this project, I attempt to analyze these identity performances (Goffman, 1971, 1990; Butler, 1990, 2003, 2004a) not as in a play but as discourse in the way Austin (1962, 1975) describes how we do things by virtue of our uttering them. I also think of identity performance in the Goffman (1971) sense in which our social
construction of identities has to do with the things we do to give a particular impression of ourselves to others, as well as those ideas and assumptions that are constructed by others as to whom we are. Moreover, while we frame ourselves into certain contexts, based in the various social situations we are in (Goffman, 1971), there are conflicting ideas about these frames, and sometimes these ideas are “remedied” in reconstructed situations. I argue that WN can function as a “remedy interchange” in our conversations to reconstitute our ideas of grief, widowhood and the attending “craziness” feelings about our grief.

I do this with an attempt to disrupt the dominant notions of grief via an explanation of the traditional theories and competing postmodern theories explained in Chapter 2, in order to analyze the everyday conversations of the widows who tell their stories about grief in ways that are not in correspondence with Freudian notions. One of the problems with Freud’s theory, according to the WNers, is that he presumes an authority they say he cannot claim. In accordance with this position, I am not claiming the authority to provide a conclusive definition of grief. Instead, using Derrida’s notions of deconstruction (1977), I first describe how the widows on WidowNet reject Freudian grief theory, and I attempt to demonstrate some of the problems in Freud’s work. I first will make an attempt to critique the definition of grief according to Freud; second, I would not attempt to assume an authority that cannot be possessed. Neither Freud nor I would be able to come up with a conclusive definition of grief.

My problem statement is thus: how can these retellings of emotionally painful personal experiences go further than the individual to offer a collective, shared account of
As Shuman (2005) argues, “…stories stray beyond the personal and are therefore subject to challenges of entitlement” (p. 4). However, sometimes people do recognize the validity of stories, and individual stories can “become allegories representing a collective position.” Shuman continues, [when we] “investigate the allegorical as a place where people recognize themselves in each other’s stories” (p. 4), a shared understanding is possible. Shuman describes this shared understanding as a promise, not a guarantee; it is an endeavor that contains ethics challenges not to exploit others in the appropriation of their stories. I hope that my analysis of our communal stories that are performing and transforming identities e.g., (Butler, 1990, 2004b, 2005) can account for the ways the widows’ personal stories fulfill this “promise” as Shuman (2005) calls it, “both by allowing us to see our own, seemingly unexplainable, experiences in other people’s stories and by helping us to understand the otherwise unfathomable experience of others” (p. 149). Problematic though it may be, I shall explore these concepts of grief, of story, and of performing our changing identities in this project with the conceptual tools of my dissertation project.

**Research Questions: Grief Narrative and Identity**

My research questions and consequently my literature review focus on four factors involving: 1) online community, 2) identity, 3) grief theory and 4) narrative analysis. First, who are the widows online and how do they find and stay in a website message board for widowed persons? Moreover, how are WNers revealing, performing and negotiating their ongoing identities in exploring the stories about their experience of
widowhood online? Also, in their conversations with each other, how do widow/ers respond to each other, and find ways to work with and through (and maybe against) both the institutional powers of psychology, and the popular cultural beliefs of the non-widowed, that “don’t get it” (acronymed in WN as “DGIs”)? Further, how does that help them perform, construct and find meaning to their new identities? This community was not organized in order to produce any particular desired outcomes; nevertheless what do these outcomes indicate regarding situated learning? How does a narrative illuminate questions of meaning, identity and spousal grief?

**Contextual Background: Some Thick Descriptions Of My Field And Folk**

> Shattered beings are best represented by bits and pieces

--Rilke

As a prologue to this autoethnographic dissertation, I use a “thick description” of the WidowNet community, a term Geertz (1973) referred to when he used Gilbert Ryle’s concept. I portray some of WN’s typical members and their common trajectories. First, I describe the WN website itself, in its logical and “GUI” (i.e., graphical user interface, or the way it “looks”—pronounced “gooey”) framework, by mapping its graphical shape and metaphorical space, the organization of its arbitrary categories, and “boards” (also called Forums), the metaphorical categories where ordinary conversations are performed more or less loosely according to topic—see figures below). Following that, I describe the owner-administrator, widower Mr. G, who founded it in 1995; after that, I describe a profile of a new WNer, followed by a profile of one that has been in the WN community
for several years. I have already provided a description of myself as a long-time member and common poster of WN. The following will outline these descriptions.

**Widow Net (WN) Website Message Board**

Originally, in 1993, WN was in the throes of the early 90s technology, which started as a “listserver,” or a network server that would maintain an email distribution list where the individual messages would be forwarded to everyone who was registered in that group. Today, WN has technologically evolved into a particular kind of Internet network PHP\(^\text{14}\) server software called "Simple Machines Forums," (aka SMF) which consists of a database (think of it as an underground “tunnel”) with an interface (think of it as the surface streets) which the end-user sees and thinks of as a website cyberspace. WN is located at [http://www.widownet.org/wnbb3](http://www.widownet.org/wnbb3), though this site for the Message Board is only a part of the entire WN website. Prior to the current and most up-to-date database message board, which is used most often, Mr. G formed the initial portion of the site (thought of as the “home page”) ([www.widownet.org](http://www.widownet.org)), where the message board is just a part (though most important part) of the entire site. The homepage is full of hyperlinks that lead the reader to other internal webpages full of various kinds of information about the website, and hyperlinks that lead the reader to articles on other websites about widowhood on the web. However, the most important of the links on the WN homepage is to the "message board," (the /wnbb3 portion of the website address).

\(^{14}\) “PHP” is an acronym for “hypertext preprocessor,” an HTML programming language built for Internet sites, for example.
Mr. G has posted several other kinds of links on the homepage, but the message board is the section that the widows use almost entirely.

The message board section of WN starts with a list of various Forums categorized by Mr. G. Anyone can read the WN home page, or the message board list, or even read into the “general discussion board.” However, only the logged in members can write into the message boards, i.e., have conversations with other widows, and can have various privileges to the entire set of messages, where outsiders (i.e., those who have not registered as members) have less access. The only writable Forum for non-members in the message boards is the one titled “Questions from Non-Widowed Persons.” When a user moves to the message board, s/he would see a page with a title called "Forum index" which from the reader's point of view, (the GUI), one can see a list of Forum categories in an indexical hierarchy which is set on top as the Forum name (WidowNet), then the category name then the board name, and finally topic subject (also called a "thread"). From the threads, the messages begin with one member starting a thread, naming it, and then other members respond with replies whenever they read it and choose to reply. This will continue until no one else chooses to say something about that topic. Figure 1 below shows a partial explanation of the logical (and visual) structure of the actual WN website:
Currently there are a total of 49 Forums on the message board, some "read-only" due to their archival nature and sometimes because of the limited capacity of that particular spot on the database server. (See the Forum list in figure 2.) Some of the Forums are arbitrarily organized by capacity, some by subject matter, and some chronologically. Thus when a new year starts, the owner/administrator "closes" the Forum to read-only, while a new usable Forum of the same category is also created for the following year. Only the administrator can build new Forums, but he does so when

Figure 1. WN Website Hierarchy of Discussion Board Structure.
he determines that perhaps related topics could be grouped together in one way or another, or by recommendation of various members’ ideas. Those Forum topics and categories are his decisions alone as the founder, owner and administrator privilege.

Figure 2. WN Forum Index – Partial View (more exist but are not visible here).

Each of those category headings (which are also hyperlinks) contains a list of topic headings (not shown in this figure). A WN member could choose to click into the General Discussion Forum, for example, and the result would be a list of topics from which to choose. A user could respond to a topic already started by clicking on a link, or a user could start a topic of one’s own by naming it and starting a conversation. Users also
can choose to do nothing else but read other’s conversations; these are called ‘lurkers,’
and much of their actions are “hidden.” Other peripheral information is scattered across
the site, for example, parts of information about the users with links to their “profiles”
(the information about themselves that can be known to others). Other data that is
scattered tells the user what the dates of the posts are, whether they are read-only, or how
many people have participated in a given conversation. One particular feature is a
“quote” button where a user could address another member’s (or members’) particular
statement(s) and respond directly to that particular piece of the dialogue. This recounts
just a few of the myriad details that are interspersed throughout this website.

The vertical scroll bar to the right of any screen indicates that the list is longer
than can be seen on the user’s screen and can be seen by scrolling farther down. When
one clicks on one of the topic headings (commonly called “threads” or “boards”), one can
see a topic title at the top, and below that, a list of conversations, identified by the
posters’ names, the dates they posted, whether their posts could be edited (or not), and
other details, as well as the chronological order of the posts, as seen in figure 3 below:
Figure 3. WN Discussion Board Thread (Conversation) Partial.

The topic threads have postings (conversations) that contain “pages” limited to 15 posters' entries before a new page automatically begins, and there is a link with a page number (of numbers) at the bottom (and/or top) that tells the reader if there is more than one page of postings and what page the reader is “on.” The users can choose to begin a new topic (thread) or respond to existing topics in most any of the board categories, or just read them and not respond at all. In fact, the statistics that are on the topic pages will tell the reader how many “views” occurred (the number of people do not correspond to the number of views, since one person can click and view as many times as s/he would wish). Moreover, the ratio of views to posts is a large spread (Krebs, 2010).
When "inside" a topic (or when one clicks to the topic title link), the WN member (and in some sections anyone on the web who "gets" to that URL) can see the topic title in large print (the header). To the left, the author's name and what information about that author which s/he has provided is viewable, the number of posts the author has created so far at that time, along with links to the author's profile and email if provided. To the right, the time of the post is listed, and then the author's words appear, followed by a "sig" (signature) if the author has created one. The WNer can choose to read any or all of the boards, though some (e.g., the men's board) are discouraged from posting due to the category set up by the administrator. A WN user can choose to read only, or to post a reply by clicking on a “reply” button at the bottom of the posted conversation. A new "window" will appear and an empty text box is ready for the user’s text input.

From this descriptive outline of the WN structure, in the dissertation I shall expand on the description of the structure and content of WN, and then I shall continue with some quantitative data about the logistics and statistics, as well as the demographics of WN posts and posters.

Mr. G: Widower, Founder and Administrator of WN

It is well known to the WN community and beyond that Mr. G lives in Colorado, and created the website after his first wife died around 1993 when he was 37 years old. As he himself has described, in his "FAQ" page regarding the origins of this website, Mr. G explains that after his search for online connections to other widow/ers, that he could not find one, thus he created his own in September 1995, and started it with the
technology of that time, calling it the "widow" bulletin board emailing list. As the technologies of the Internet have changed and evolved, he developed the WN web pages to create and post information of interest to the readers. Since that time, over five thousand people, from five continents, have registered as members of the WN website and several million web page requests have been logged. Many other web sites have been created during the years, which address death, grief, recovery, etc from various perspectives, but WidowNet is the first. (See Appendix A, which will contain a list of various websites that are related to grief and widowhood.)

Mr. G has since remarried (their announcement along with photo is on the website), but as a side job and a labor of commitment, is actively and continually maintaining and conversing with others in the website that has been in existence in its several forms since 1995. He has been a relatively "hands off" Administrator, and an occasional contributor to conversations. He claims he does not have time to police the site’s contents, however there are times when Mr. G has been a reluctant arbiter of disputes and as a last resort has deleted thread topics, though quite infrequently now. The WN site has gone through several iterations, different servers, some major hacking (in 2004), still some of the oldest archives (from 1995 to 2004) are yet to be reinstated, but here it is, nevertheless. In 2004, because of the Internet hacking, all of us who wanted to continue had to re-register and Mr. G built a new database site, so it appears on the record, though not so in reality, that many of us are registered for the first time in 2004, despite having been members far longer than that. In his latest iteration of the software (version 3 early spring 2010), Mr. G has added features that allow for more information
about the members, including more information on the profiles, such as “DOD” (date of death) and cause of death, so for those members who are willing to share this information, it is visible to the others.

Mr. G started and has administered this website with his own time and expenses. He has never charged anyone a fee for membership, nor have there been any advertisements on the website. After the 2004 computer hacking and its attending damages to the database, some people have offered to donate to the WidowNet cause, in order that Mr. G could pay for more capacity for the servers. Donations have been collected at various face-to-face “get-togethers” (GTGs) in places across the country where some WNers have chosen to meet, and at a few memorial offerings at the deaths of some long-time members of WN.

**WN Restrictions**

As administrator of the database, Mr. G determined that the restrictions are first and foremost, the membership requirements (via an honor system). Members are those who have lost a life partner to death. Many of the boards (the general discussion board, precisely), but not all, are open to the public for read-only use, unless they are members who can post in conversations as well. In order to post, one would register as a widow and put some or all of profile information in registration. Much information about the registering member is not required but can be made available if one chooses.
Limits of the Research

One limit of my own research has to do with the limits in the WidowNet website itself. The site began its existence in 1993, when Mr. G. was looking for a site, found none and so created one himself. Due to the technologies of that time, the site consisted of a bulletin board list service, or a “listserv” where members all received emails, and responded to everyone on the list. As software developed and the Internet grew, the website versions would change (today it is version 3 of a phpBB, or a particular type of bulletin board (BB) software). Because of the damage, the data from the site was (and still is) no longer assessable to the WN members. Mr. G. started a new site (with the same domain name) under another server, and all of us who were existing members of that time re-registered. Some of the functions in the new site allow more accurate information regarding the members’ demographics (i.e., adding details to a member’s profile which make it more visible to the members) was added. For example, the spousal “COD” (cause of death) and “DOD” (date of death) have been added, and so, for each member who posts, that data of his or her membership can be visible if the member so chooses to add in her/his profile data. Again, though, this information is purely voluntary, so not all members have chosen to display their information, not all members have offered their own email addresses, and not all members have been willing to put all the information available in their profiles. Readers might call upon inductive reasoning, too, to discover more details about a member’s profile. As in the three-dimensional level of “body language,” where we induce categorizing people by their signs, so to in the digital world, where there is not a complete docket of information regarding its members.
Thus I cannot give an accurate account for the length of “old timer” WNers who may have joined before 2004, but I can induce data for some of them by the fact that I have interacted with them as long as I was there and by the fact that some of the profiles present the date of death of their spouse. Some have mentioned that they had found WidowNet 2 or 3 years after their widowhood started, but the overwhelming majority found this site early in their widowhood. These factors were considered and bounded in my choice of data for my research.

**WN Board Categories of All Types**

Secondarily, just a few of the board categories (conventionally called “boards”) which Mr. G as administrator determined are suggested to be limited to posting members who are women only, or men only, or to those who have been widows more than one year, or five years. These boards are not restricted as hard and fast rules with consequences, but more of “netiquette” (suggestion). Thus any of the members are able to read the various boards, though it is recommended that they do not post messages into that particular board. Other arbitrary topic categories, determined by names of boards, are segmented by subject categories such as religious (or non-) affiliation, sexual orientation, or age-based, or time-based: e.g., "BB"–beyond bereavement–after one year, or after five years, the "seasoned" boards. There are also boards for widowed parents, or for non-parents, for widows who are thinking about (and having) new relationships, for
those who have “ambivalent grief,” or some boards for those who are bartering goods or trading practical and technical information. Some boards are more light-hearted than others, some are separated into those interested in political issues. There is also a board for the “SOS” or survivors of suicide. However, for the newly widowed who first find WN, the "general board" is the largest and most used board, and the one where the earliest, most painful conversations of widowhood occur. Some of the WN statistics shown on the site indicate the total list of members, their profiles (variable, due to choice in revealing information), dates of their entrance to WN, and the number of posts that they have made to WN boards. I shall explain more about these factors in my dissertation.

Description of WN Members: "Newcomers"

WNers who are new to the site (currently approximately 3-6 new members have signed in a day, and over 4,000 members are listed totally worldwide) generally find the "general board" first and stay there for a time. The "newcomer" is usually a fairly new

15 Ambivalent grief is a term often used to describe those who have had troubled relationships with their partner before the partner died, yet grief ensues after the partner is deceased.

16 Despite the 2004 hacking and damage, there still is plenty of data for the sifting: Mr. G himself has said, (from the website data) "Since [1995], tens of thousands of people, from all continents, have participated in the email Forum and several million web page requests are received each month.” Mr. G has also provided many statistics and topic starters, including some already noted patterns of discussion.
widow/er who found the website, and this is not hard in the cyber world of googling.

Today if one would google "widow," after Wikipedia as the first entry, the third entry on the list is the WidowNet site. The newcomer finds WidowNet, explores for a while ("lurks") and reads before s/he begins entering posts. And when someone starts to post, s/he usually starts in the "general board" where the freshest pain is expressed. A typical first entry from a new WN member is this entry from someone I call "Monx":

I have been reading this Forum for 3 weeks now and this is my first post. Today is 1 month since my heart, soul and mind left me. It occurred to me that I am a baby, just one month old, not knowing what to make of this new world I am in - but knowing I hate it. This journey of growing up in widowhood takes one small step at a time, baby steps because I am so unsteady. Learning as I go, how to fit in to this world and what my purpose for being in it.

Many of the newcomers’ conversations are about recollections of their past lives, or the retelling of the painful death, its aftermath and all its aspects, or asking if s/he were crazy with these new feelings and asking advice with new experiences. But mostly, the newcomers usually stay in the "general" board where the ones that focus mainly on grief, occur. The stories that the newcomers bring up over and over throughout the years have included “firsts after he died”; “grief monster”; “six month mark”; “the things I can’t let go”; “the blahs”; “can’t stop crying”; to name just a few of the thread starters. I pay more close attention to this when I analyze these repeated stories of the newcomers in Chapter 4.
Description: WN "OldTimers"

Some active WN members have been widow/ers over 5 or 10 or 15 years, though they are fewer in number. One "oldtimer," Mar responded to the newcomer Monx on the general board, very soon after Monx's initial post, and said this:

I am sorry that you had to join us here, but this is a great place to be if you qualify. There will always be an ear, and everyone GETS IT. Read, post, vent and cry.. It all helps, and one day, in the future, you will realize it gets easier, you go a few seconds, then minutes, then hours without thinking about your spouse and the loss. It gets better and being here really helps that happen.

Many but not all of the “old timer” WNers go back to the general board, one especially has described to me how she wants to “pay it forward” (WN, 2005). She believes that for the world of good that she found in WN in her early days of her widowhood, she thought that the least she could do is to go back and give hope and advice to the newcomers who agonize over their grief.

Further, when the psychic pain has lessened, the typical WNER who has been regularly interacting in the community recognizes names and personalities, and has built online friendships (Baym, 2000). The widow after a year or so of telling stories about her or his pain does eventually find other topics of conversation throughout WN, and carries on other kinds of conversations that are beyond the freshest, most painful of the grief conversations posted in the general board. One of the next-most used categories of Forums that the “old timers” use is called “beyond bereavement” (BB) and that board might carry topics of conversations about religions, about politics, or even dark “insider” humor about widowhood. Some might go to the handypersons' board to ask for or advise others on how-tos (people learning how to cook; or learning how to pay bills, fix an
appliance or run a business left behind). Some venture to post on the boards about new relationships, about parenthood without partners. "Seasoned” WNers go to that board when they are marking their five-year “saddiversary” (term invented by WNers) and still talk about how grief has changed or still exists. They tell the sad stories about discovering how much longer than expected the experience of widowhood pain lasts in the "BB” boards. No matter the time and distance from the death of their spouse, the widows in WN will constantly lace their stories with even the tiniest thread of grief, whether it is in smiles or tears. I shall be "thicker" in my ethnographic descriptions of these and other aspects of WidowNet, its Forums, conversations and its members in Chapter 4.

**Venturing into GTGs**

One of the major aspects of WN has been the opportunity to connect these online friends in a three-dimensional world beyond the computer and the writing of messages. When I had explored WN after a few months, I wandered across the WN site to read one of the Forums, called the “Get togethers” or GTGs, where people are constantly making arrangements to gather casually to meet for a lunch, an evening, or a weekend of activities. All over the US and various other parts of the world (though mainly the US), the groups of widows who’d first met and connected online and became 3-D friends would plan of or tell stories afterwards about their “get togethers” in those face-to-face situations. By October of 2001, a few months into my widowhood, I read the plans that were in the works for a weekend Chicago GTG; times and places were considered, and the list of who would be there was posted, as well. I mulled it over, knew there was
nothing else that I was interested in doing, and so I ventured, first, to tell the fellow WNers that I would join, then, actually get in the car and go to Chicago to meet with a small group who said they would get together at the Navy Pier. All the while on the way, I was thinking that this was a crazy idea my meeting a group of strangers. I was scared, but something compelled me, and by the time I was walking to the pier from my hotel, each step seemed to be heavy on my feet, yet I walked forward toward the lake. But the minute I arrived at the Navy Pier seeing a small group of men and women who came to me with smiles, telling me who they were, telling each other their WN names and their real names too, I just knew this was okay, and we could talk at the table about this chaos of grief that we shared. What a relief it seemed to be. A new dimension was added.

Since then I have traveled to GTGs in Kansas City, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne, Los Angeles, Santa Fe, Cleveland, Lexington, and other parts of the country to meet face to face the people whom I had been sharing ideas with online for a number of years. I even hosted a GTG myself here in Columbus where people came from across the state, and one even as far as Texas. Further, as explained more deeply in Chapter 4, I recently asked fellow WNers to have a group discussion face-to-face in a GTG for a member check on the validity of my project.

**The Winds of Change**

In the fall of 2005, I posted a new thread to the WN board to tell my cyberfriends that I was going to return to graduate study, and finish some writing that I had started earlier. Even though my explanation (and my plan) was vague, and at that point I had not
(yet) considered thinking about WN as a part of my research plan, I received support from the responses of fellow WNers. Now with this project, I have told them the specifics, of making that move from being a member to being an autoethnographer. Armed with IRB approval and proposal clearance, I have posted this news to the WN website, my community to ask them permission for this research. I have performed another identity, never to go back to being just a member. A tinge of regret lingers and makes me hesitate to have chosen this. This divergence in my identities is splitting once again in front of me and with similar trepidation that I felt on my way to the first face-to-face GTG in Chicago, I am carrying still another level of emotional and ethical concern, while I am about to turn into a new path, re-situating my subject position and constructing yet another identity with the knowledge that I have only a partial and perspectival knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Nevertheless, my fellow members, at least all of those who have responded to my announcements, have cheered me on, and have had nothing but good wishes for this project. Many of the members of my community of practice – well, at least their reactions – will be a part of the following chapters in this dissertation

**Summary and Further Chapters**

Here in Chapter 1, I have introduced this dissertation project by opening up my autoethnography with a short version of my background as a widow. I have also introduced some preliminary concepts regarding Internet research, then some short descriptions of various elements of the online community, WidowNet, both from a
technical perspective and a narrative of typical members, including myself. This chapter describes the website of WidowNet’s message board, some screen shots of the message boards, their structure, and a “snapshot” of a conversation in the website. It also explains in brief the various kinds of members in WidowNet, both “newcomers” and “oldtimers,” including the owner/administrator, Mr. G.

Chapter 2 contains a review from a variety of literature that will enlighten my project. Since this project contains the questions of identity in widowhood, I first focus on how social construction figures into identity. Because the centerfold of the place, i.e., WidowNet’s only criterion is widowhood, I am informed by traditional theories of grief, whereby I shall also “trouble” that with more postmodern ideas on grief and loss. Further, because WidowNet’s location is a non-location of the Internet, I am also being informed by Internet research literature, specifically online communities. Chapter 2 also is a focus on the literature regarding communities of practice, since I see WidowNet in that perspective, and how WN is a source of informal learning.

Chapter 3 includes the research design, and contains an explanation and literature review of my methodology, which includes three different forms of narrative analysis. I will focus on the literature concerning autoethnography and theories of narrative in discussing these various forms. This will include a discussion in the three separate sections that deserve a review of the literature: 1) a section explaining the ways of using a conventional qualitative analysis; 2) a structured sociolinguistic Labovian analysis and a

---

17 There are other elements of the entire website, as well, though I am not focusing on them in this project. The message board is the main but not the only part of the site.
review of its literature; and 3) a discussion of a particular type of semiotic analysis of a specific WN conversation that is laced with a figure of speech called metonymy.

Chapter 4 shows the findings of my data from three different forms of analysis discussed in Chapter 3. There I show how the WNers become welcomed members of a community, and how they learn to be widows from each other in a community of practice. I also show how one widow whom I call “Misha” performs her identity in an elaborate narrative of her own. Third, I analyze a particular conversation where the WNers use metonymy to express their longing after a life now gone.

Chapter 5 comprises implications of my research along with conclusions and a discussion of my theorizing, along with suggestions for future learning. Since the data contained in WN extends far beyond the limits of this dissertation, I chose to make necessary cuts and set up boundaries for analysis, though there are many other topics of discussion that warrant future research and mention.

**Conclusion**

As Derrida (2001), in his *Work of Mourning*, put it so eloquently when he wrote of the death of his friends (in this case, Lyotard), death is nearly an unspeakable topic. Yet he speaks, to say,

I feel at such a loss, unable to find public words for what is happening to us, for that has left speechless all those who had the good fortune to come near this great thinker—whose absence will remain for me, I am certain, forever unthinkable: the unthinkable itself, in the depths of tears (p. 215).
People do not want to think about death, and talking about it calls up a silence of a kind. However, in spite of the difficulties of speaking of death, and listening to it, I attempt to explain some of those silences, and some of those attempts to explain work only to each of the other mourners, because it seems to us that the rest of the world does not want to hear. The following chapter provides a review of the literatures that assists me to work through the unspeakable and untangle the intertwining webs of widowhood and its identities.
Chapter 2
Writing Out Grief: Literature Review

Introduction: Overview

“But now — I am not a writer now. I am not anything now. Legally I am a ‘widow’ — that is the box I must check. But beyond that — I am not sure that I exist.”—Joyce Carol Oates, 2011

Other than the loss of a child, the loss of a spouse has been considered to be the most stressful of losses (Sanders, 1983; Attig, 1996). Spousal loss is certainly complex and misunderstood. As a result of this, the widowed have experienced pain of every kind: physical, mental, emotional and for many, spiritual, too. What happens with this sense of loss? It is not only that the person who is gone but the commitment in an intimate social relationship, a relationship that entailed a shared living, loving, and for many, having and raising children, was abruptly cut in half. The identities of the widowed shift, and the widowed are feeling they are “in a fog,” as it is called by the WidowNetters (WNers), my co-participants. This chapter begins to unravel the complexities of widowhood in an online community by initially relying on the literature, focusing on theories of grief and loss as I situate the construction of social relations in WidowNet (WN). As my ethnographic field in this project is an Internet community, this chapter also concentrates on the research on communities of practice and their relation to Internet communities. I encompass all those notions through Austin’s Speech Act Theory (1975) and Foucault’s epistemological and ethical grounding. The central point of
this project is a question of identity. The crucial question in WN for the new widow is
and has been all along in the online community, the question of “who am I?” I discuss
theories of identity in a following section in this chapter. Like Derrida (1978b), I am
picking up bits and pieces of Levi-Straus’s notion (1966) of the bricoleur. Levi-Strauss
uses the metaphor in his description of spontaneous action. I also borrow the ideas
bricoleur, but with a Derridian sense (1978a) by deconstructing concepts derived from
bits and pieces of text in the WN website in my analyses in Chapter 4. I am borrowing
other conceptions of the bricoleur from other disciplines: I also use Kincheloe's (2001)
notion of the bricoleur to work on multiperspective research methods from diverse
traditions in my literature review. These will be explained more fully in Chapters 3 and
4.

Here in Chapter 2, I continue with a review of grief theories that will show how
the positivlist, Freudian theories (Freud, 1917; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Bowlby, 1980; Parkes,
2001) of the modernist mind are still today the dominant narrative of psychology, which
takes the concept of grief as its purview. These theories contain epistemological notions
of an objectified self as autonomous and independent. These positivist theories also have
filtered into general cultural beliefs about widowhood, and how the widow is expected to
mourn, and these are reflected in the WNers’ tales of how those cultural beliefs clash
with their personal experience. As I mentioned first on p. 26, the WNers call them
the”DGIs” or those that “don’t get it.” There are other theorists who currently challenge
the positivist\textsuperscript{18} ideas of the psychoanalytic school of thought in grief and loss. They delve in added disciplines such as social work, sociology, and anthropology, who amend and differ in perspectives on grief and loss, and call this “postmodern” (Walter, 1996, 2007). These expanded views support my ideas of seeing an alternate perspective in this specific experience of spousal grief. I am relying on interdisciplinary research when I problematize all sorts of seemingly stable notions such as “widowhood,” “identity,” and its accompanying concepts of “grief” and “loss.”

This chapter also includes a review of Internet research in online communities, which aids me in directing my own Internet “surfing.” I focus on ethnographic research of online communities to find more about how WidowNet is. Since I have observed how the members of WidowNet have learned from one another, I perceive us as what Bourdieu (1980) describes as “habitus,” or as Lave and Wenger’s “community of practice,” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This theory of informal learning and its relation to practice and identity is also discussed in its significance to understanding the construction of widowhood.

\textsuperscript{18} Positivism, a generalized term derived from Enlightenment thinkers, is a particular epistemological perspective on science, is one that holds values such as objectivity, observation, sense-data and scientific method to replace metaphysical beliefs from the history of thought to explain and predict phenomena. Philosophers such as Comte (early 1800s) and further carried by social scientists such as Durkheim (late 1800s) used positivism as foundation for their research, and took this to logical positivism, dominant in schools of philosophy in the analytic tradition. In later critiques, positivism was renamed as “scientism” (Popper, late 1900s). Poststructuralists today note the bias and limitations of positivism.
From the beginning in 2001 when I “became a widow,” unto now as I am researching that very question, I have been inquiring what a widow “is.” I plan to “trouble” (Lather, 1997, 2007) the identity categories that we take for granted as things people think of as “normal” and “natural” (Butler, 1990). Thus, this chapter disrupts the notions of an essentialized identity when I review a social construction theory that supports not only various constructed identities of widowhood, but also the ways language constructs various sorts of acts (Austin, 1975), which in turn are leading us into the ways we identify ourselves. I examine Butler’s (1990) social construction of gendered identity and adapt it to make a special case of the category of widowed identity, and further use her notions of “injurious speech” (1997) in the analysis of the “DGI.”

At this point, I shall also combine all this with a modicum of meta- in my autoethnography to support my endeavor and use Foucault’s ideas of genealogy and social construction to provide an epistemological grounding.

**Some Ontological Sources and Foucauldian Resistances**

To make more sense of these notions of constructing identity in this online community, some ontological and epistemological understanding is important. Ontology is a very old idea as a basis for philosophical groundings of reality as an essence (Edwards, 1965), where the word was coined in the Enlightenment with enduring philosophers such as Kant’s metaphysical theory of reality in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. These highlights of that era promulgated the thesis that reason is the supreme arbiter, the individual is the central focus, there are essences under ideas, and natural order is the ontological foundation. These ontological and epistemological foundations
have influenced dominant institutions of science to this day, though postmodern philosophers including and especially Foucault (1984), who shook old notions of the individuated “Being” into more of a mix of social factors such as negotiation and resistance in his genealogy. Foucault veers from essences, and instead combines thinking about historical power and dominance of various concepts such as madness, punishment, knowledge and power in relation to agency and subjectivity. With notions of language, power and knowledge intertwined, Foucault (1980; 1984; 1991) argues that instead of coming up with a new theory of formal and universal conditions of truth and reality, rather with our human agency, we can produce new ideas through the negotiations of the social construction in discourse. Foucault (1980) claims that knowledge is a contingency that comes from the various power regimes which define what constitutes meaningfulness through various discourses. In the case of my study of spousal grief, the power complexes, through Freud (1917) and his theoretical descendants (see later sections on grief), have created discourses that define grief, and have been deconstructed and resisted in my online community, WidowNet. When I study the WidowNetters’ conversations, I can see some framework based on Foucault’s ideas of knowledge and power.

Furthermore, as does Butler, in order to inquire of some questions of identity in my data analysis, I am calling upon some of Foucault's (1988) claims that one has an “obligation to tell the truth about oneself… . [S]exuality is related in a strange and complex way both to verbal prohibition and to the obligation to tell the truth, of hiding what one does, and of deciphering who one is” (p. 16). But then, “how had the subject
been compelled to decipher himself in regard to what was forbidden? It is a question of the relation between asceticism and truth” (p. 17). In his postmodern archeology of self, Foucault contends that the technology of the self, “which permit individuals to effect by their own means with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness” (p. 18). With Foucault’s mix of the sign systems, the technologies of power, and the technologies of production, none of which operate without the others, I shall take some of his concepts to attempt to answer the widow’s question, “who am I?”.

Derrida, Mourning and The Work.

Although Derrida was a poststructuralist philosopher of language who concerned himself with text as a deconstruction within itself (Of Grammatology, 1974/1997) he was intensely concerned with phenomenological issues that include the concepts of ‘self’ and ‘other’ when he eulogized his friends and colleagues, in essays which were collected over a span of nearly 20 years from 1981 to 2000, as friend by friend died before him. This compilation of adieus was put together in his set of eulogies called The Work of Mourning. This is only one of other works of his that deal with mourning: The Gift of Death (on death itself, its ethics and the sacred in it, the soul from Plato to Christianity, and in its sacrifice), Politics of Friendship (1997) (on the death of friend Paul De Man, the ethics and emotion of friendship) and Specters of Marx (also are surrounding themes of mourning), but The Work of Mourning is the one that he focuses mostly on the Other.
In this no fleeting attempt at making sense of the death of his friends, he took this further into the responsibility of the Other in his expression of something, i.e., death, is beyond the comprehension of the living. Derrida does not delve into the metaphysical, though assumes so, but instead focuses on the loss of the living, the void that we are left with in the absence of the Other, whom we have loved. He argues that the mourning begins with the start of the friendship, because “one of the two of you will inevitably see the other one die” (p. 107). And in his deconstruction, he takes the dialectic: that mourning is also the keeping the friend alive in us when we speak of the memories, thus a memorial. Derrida speaks of his friends, who are at the same time public figures: Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Emmanuel Levinas, Sarah Kofman, and Michel Foucault, where he deconstructs the concept of mourning, and at the same time, deconstructs himself as a philosopher, and how we can understand him from this differing perspective.

In Derrida’s essays, I am reminded of the similar patterns in the conversational narratives of the WNers, who are torn between silence and speech, who are telling stories that shouldn’t have happened, yet who are finding postmodern ways of communicating, yet still the ancient ways of social networking in order to attempt to make sense of the unspeakable loss. Derrida concluded that the only perspective we have is to mourn, and from the tribute to the Other, we are at once disturbing the peace of the silence in death, yet at once speaking, for the narrative is genealogical but it is not simply an act of memory. It bears witness, in the manner of an ethical or political act, for today and for tomorrow. It means first of all thinking about what takes place today. The
organization of the narrative follows a genealogical detour in order to …
more particularly to denounce, deplore, and combat it (p. 35).

I find solace in Derrida’s essays, not only for my own mourning, but for finding that his work of mourning assists my work of studying mourning in the WN conversations.

**An Autoethnographic Perspective of Grief and Widowhood**

*A Priori Vocabulary for “Widow” “Grief” “Mourning” “Bereavement”*

WidowNet’s community is exclusive, in that the only criterion for membership is having lost a spouse or life partner to death. WN members may or may not have been married, are men and are women, and could have had gay, straight or lesbian relationships. There are WN members who were engaged when one died; to WNers, the survivor is still considered widowed. In WN, we are all considered widows. Thus, for the purposes of this project, I am troubling the term ‘widow’ to mean all of the WN members who have lost a life-partner to death, whether women or men, including diverse sexual orientation, or gender, or legal status (or not) of partnership. We are all widowed; we are all widows. Death from our intimacy is our common finality.

I am also calling on some distinctions Raphael (1983/1997) made that have become paradigmatic concepts of ‘grief,’ ‘mourning’ and ‘bereavement.’ The distinction between grief and mourning is the distinction between the affect when one is confronted with the death of a loved one, and the actions that one takes because of and related to that affect. Grief is thought of as a complex of emotions, pain, sadness, anger, helplessness, bewilderment, fear, guilt, despair, and more, grief is all the experienced affects and
reactions to the death; whereas mourning is something we do with that affect of grief. Sometimes mourning is private, sometimes public, sometimes manifested in wailing, sometimes in conversation, sometimes ritual, sometimes informal.

Acting in response to grief, mourning becomes the outward activities, even rituals. Mourning rituals such as funerals, Shiva, or memorial services, visiting the graves, eulogizing, wearing a black armband (or white in India), forming ancestor’s altars, or other actions, religious or not, related to one’s grief are considered signs of grief. Various cultures have customs of participation in wakes, wailing, or as the Irish term it, keening (Lysaght, 1997) that are norms that vary in different cultures Depending one one’s culture, the normative activities of mourning are globally divergent, as globally different from the Ilongot (of the Phillipines) rage resulting in head-hunting (Rosaldo, 1993) to Irish keening and wakes (O'Suilleabhain, 1963, from the Hopi that believed that the quicker it is forgotten, the better (Gergen & Stoebe, 1996) to the Japanese maintaining of personal and emotional bonds with those who have died in elaborate ancestor worship (Klass, 1996). However the diversity is displayed, global cultures all share one universal inevitability: death is final. Death is sure, and we are sure to die. Those of us who love the deceased are the bereaved.

Bereavement then, seems to be a broader concept, more of a state of being: it can be thought of as the combination of grief and mourning, the whole process, the reaction and the action. Bereavement is thought to be a process, and seems to be a concept greater than its subsets of grief and mourning. The term, ‘bereavement’ carries less of an emotional tone to it, as well; the term is more clinical. Bereavement: Studies in Adult
Grief, a book by renowned grief studies scholar, Colin Murry Parkes (1972/2010) is a prime example of the term’s use.

**Dominant Grief Theories**

Scholarship augments my personal experience and the collective experiences of WN, in my attempt to understand more broadly and in more depth what these ideas of grief and loss are—not just my own, but my fellow widows’ who share their grief and mourn in yet another cultural way. Consequently, I explore the various theories of grief to inform my project. In my online community, I have seen the distinctions between what the others think we should do as widows, and what we ourselves have experienced. In this study, I turn to the scholarship to understand the extant literature in bereavement studies. I found a similar contrast in theories, with the dominant psychological models of grief based on essentialized notions of individualization and autonomy, and with further inquiry, I found alternative and expanded views of grief with a perspective of social relations, in qualitative studies.

The foundation of the modern bereavement theory is framed around Enlightenment thought, and sits on the conceptual throne with the leading Freudian psychiatric model that ascended and still holds sway with Freud's (1917) paradigm-shifting essay, "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud believed that there is a thin distinction between “the work” of mourning and “melancholia,” his term that today is called “depression.” According to Freud, the mourning process has an end, whereby the
ego must accept the loss of the “love object;” and by the end of the work, we will have “detached” ourselves from the “object” of our desire, who is now dead. Freud declares:

Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and the detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. . . . When the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again (p. 245).

Though Freud acknowledges that grief “involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life,” he expects this to end. “We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time” (p. 243). Therefore, we should understand that mourning will be finished, and then we would be “back to normal.” Cathexis, Freud’s term for the psychic energy that is an attachment to a loved one, or “object,” in Freud’s terms, is considered to be relinquished, and over time, put aside. Freud’s description of emotional detachment includes detachment from emotion and memory, which only then should allow the ego to make a new attachment to possible external others. Melancholia, or depression, by contrast, according to Freud, looks like mourning, but is considered in the internal realm of mental illness, and things that do not “close,” things that are not dismissed or detached. In this health-sickness dichotomy, if one is melancholic, then one is “fixated” with the past, incorporates an empty object, and this is “unhealthy.” If one is mourning, however, according to Freud, these symptoms, with proper work, will end within a proper, normative time frame. Freud keeps the distinction between depression and mourning with his ideas of the bifurcated internal/external, lasting/ending healthy/unhealthy ideas.
In his 1917 seminal essay, Freud argued that “[i]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (p. 246). Freud’s assumption is that mourning is external, and when breaking the attachment from the other, i.e., detaching oneself from the associations of the dead loved one, is preferable, even “healthy.”

Nonetheless, in his 1917 discussion, Freud makes no distinction between mourning of a deceased loved one, and a “jilted” lover in a relationship (p. 246). Freud did not make a distinction between the grief of a jilted lover, who still lives, and the lover who dies. This theory seems to ignore the irrevocability of death. With the jilted lover, there is a (however remote) possibility of a repair mechanism. However, with the finality of death, there is no return nor can there be a repair. Further, my distinction between mourning and grief is important, and my findings will show this distinction, for a number of reasons. The experience of grief is, according to psychologist, Marilyn McCabe (2003), “ongoing and recursive…. [it] changes both in frequency and severity of themes, [but] it does not seem to progress linearly or necessarily end” (p. 8). Freud’s emphasis and focus on his research was more on melancholia than mourning, while he mentions mourning only in passing. After he makes mention of mourning in his 1917 treatise, he focused, rather, on the elements of depression, and does not emphasize more on mourning, even though there has been a solid tradition in bereavement studies following Freud’s line of thought.

Through the first half of the 20th century there was a paucity of competing research in bereavement in this dominant explanation of grief, even though Freud himself
could not reconcile his theories of mourning from his own grief experience, in the loss of family members. Freud contradicts his theory of ending bonds at the same time he makes a distinction between mourning and grief itself. For example, in a letter to a friend, he wrote of his pain for the loss of his daughter Sophie, who had been dead for nine years:

Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute…. Actually, this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not wish to relinquish (cited in Davies, 2004, p. 507-508).

Subsequently, under the rubric of the Enlightenment’s empirical scientific method, also called positivism, psychoanalysis began, and traditional models continued within the Freudian lenses (Bowlby, 1961, 1969; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Parkes, 1970), the dominant and powerful cognitive psychological model that yet today consists of what counts as “normal” and “abnormal” grief. The current “most definitive” study, according to reviews, is the “CLOC” or Changing Lives of Older Couples” longitudinal study by eds. Carr and Nesse & Wortman (2006). The completion and publication of this “CLOC” study (“changing lives of older couples”) was so dominant that it spilled into cultural beliefs, as was reviewed in the Dec 6, 2006 issue of *Time* magazine, where it quoted how the CLOC study defined “normal grief” with a timeframe ending after six months. If symptoms persist, the grief is called “complicated” and is considered pathological. Their terms and definition for “normal” and “complicated” grief are now being considered for revisions in the upcoming 5th edition “DSM” or the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of
Mental Disorders,” the publication for the American Psychiatric Association, currently being edited. These dominant positivist theories which hold that the goal of mourning is to finish, so those who continue their mourning beyond a set of expected time frames, are seen to have "unresolved grief" and "morbid" behavior, likened to obsessive and phobic patients (Freud, 1917/1957). As a result, for example, “self-help literature is still being published for bereaved people telling them that they can and should reach a point where they do not feel grief” (Rosenblatt, 1996, p. 45). These dominant and models of finitude, normalcy and linearity are prevailing ideas of how we should eliminate negative tendencies in order to be normal in our ending of our grief.

Limits of this Freudian theory, however, include the assumption that grief is, first, something, (as opposed to a void, or a relationship or an experience) and something that is quantitative that results in social norms. Further, mourning, according to the dominant paradigm, is something that should end after a “reasonable” amount of time. Many psychoanalytic theories have and continue to rely on this “bucket-like” notion as if grief were measurable and quantifiable, and can dry up and be gone just like emptying a bucket. Other scholars after Freud, applying this psychoanalytic mode, have continued to expand on the Freudian notions of egoistic grief.

Varying on the themes of Freud, other well-known scholars of bereavement studies (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Parkes, 1972/2001; Bowlby, 1980) followed the general discourse of death and grief, and developed the Freudian theory with expanded notions of resolving grief by detachment of bonds. Stage-theory of grief, for example, was held by another dominant psychoanalytic grief theorist and is still the ongoing work of Elizabeth
Kübler-Ross (1969); (also Archer, 1999; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Kübler-Ross speaks of five stages that a person who is grieving goes through: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Akin to child development stage theories, these “stages” are tasks that the griever must go through, and when they have finished, then the mourning is assumed to be finished. Kubler-Ross’s theory brought an order to her systematic description of dying and death as a process. Following these stages, the bereaved should have returned to “normal.” Later in her research, she amended the stages by saying that they come and go, sometimes cycle back in different times, but not necessarily the order of which was originally stated (Kubler-Ross, 2005). Even though the stage theory of grief has been a widely accepted model, according to Maciejewski et al. (2007) “still taught in medical schools, espoused by physicians, and applied in diverse contexts. Nevertheless, the stage theory of grief has previously not been tested empirically” (p. 716).

A difficulty with Kübler-Ross’s phase theory is that first of all, her research was mainly with the dying, and not the experience of the bereaved. Further, the sense of a “stage” or a “phase” entails a predictable discrete, starting-and-stopping process. Not everyone goes through all of these stages, however, and they do not necessarily come and go in this discrete ordered process as described. The concept of “stage” contains the notion of discreet differences. Our lives are not predictable. Perhaps emotions run alongside each other. A griever could be experiencing any, some, none or all of those “stages” at any time in bereavement, or other types of emotional indicators that Kübler-Ross described. Additionally, we may go through other kinds of behaviors and feelings not
listed in the stage theory. Yearning, for one, was identified in Maciejewski et al’s (2007) study. Beyond that, Kubler-Ross’s work was focused more on the negotiations of the dying, less than effects of griever’s after loved ones’ death, though other theorists and clinicians have applied Kubler-Ross’s studies of the dying to the grieving-after-death condition. According to death studies theorist, Neimeyer (1998), Kubler-Ross’s research has offered limited empirical evidence for the psychological stages that she claims. In addition, other theorists (Rainey, 1988; Buckman, 1993) claim that grief is a messy condition, mourning is a normative process, and there were clinicians who tried to rush patients through this process. The condition of grief is unorganized, chaotic, fluid and messy; it is not orderly and logical or predictable, and does not necessarily have an ending, such as “acceptance.” Moreover, even though the dominant theory favors severing bonds in the mourning process, the WN data does not support that theory. Spiritual elements of grieving are also ignored in the logocentric theoretical model, thus this theory appears mechanical and limited to the multifaceted and complicated aspects of grief and mourning processes.

Bowlby (1980) should also be considered when we speak of attachment and loss connected to grief. Bowlby’s theory focuses on the attachments we form in relationships, and the loss we feel emotionally when the one we were attached to died. His ideas of loss too carried a “phase-model.” He calls these phases “numbing, yearning, disorganization, and reorganization.” Bowlby’s notions still hold to classic ideas of grief theory, but significantly, he did lean towards the persistence of the relationship, even after the spouse has died. However, his work still holds to the importance of a separation
of some sort, and believes this should be the hardest “work” of the bereaved, that we have limited “energy” for it, and we must save our energy for bonds with the living in order to return to normal. There again, the theory is limited in that the idea of separating a relationship that is highly valued is somehow beyond the griever’s understanding. I would argue that grief is not something that “is” or “is not” but rather an ongoing experience that is “active” or “passive,” and even when we think that grief is finally gone, all it takes is some unforeseen trigger of a memory that yanks back mourning with a force.

In my analysis, I am finding the dominant narrative clashing with the personal narratives of the participants in my own study. Freud, as founder and creator of psychoanalysis, has created ongoing notions of an autonomous and essentialized identity that are now quite ingrained in the dominant 20th century ideas of the psyche. Freud’s ideas of identity as ego, reify this abstract into some object that we think we lost but are we lose an objectified body that is gone? What happened to the person, or the intimate relationship, the years of social construction of the household, perhaps the children produced or the life shared in love over time? There is more to that life of two people constructed together, shared, lived, and breathed, side by side, “for better or for worse.” There is more to this construction of “a life” or a construction of the shared lives. I would argue that to be urged to detach oneself from the deceased loved one depreciates the significance of the value of that relationship that the griever has had and continues to keep with the deceased, however it changes. I examined these Freudian ideas throughout my analyses in Chapter 4 to show how the experience of grief expressed in the widows’
stories in WN contrasts strikingly with the dominant narrative of modern psychoanalysis, and stage and attachment theories of grief.

I am supporting my findings by shifting to other grief theories that have found flaws in the theories with a positivist world view, and found that there are alternative views based on other philosophical approaches with a constructivist, postmodern hermeneutics. However, even before taking this on as an academic project, I relied on other well-known and respected writers who have had this experience of grief after spousal death. For one, Joan Didion, author and widow, wrote her memoir of coping with the death of her fellow writer, and husband, John Donne. Didion (2005) illuminated some incongruence in Freud’s thought with the actual experience of grief when she quotes Freud’s ideas of mourning, where not getting over it equals melancholia, equals illness. Didion quotes Freud when she asserts, “grief remains peculiar among derangements: ‘it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment.’” So mourning is something we must “overcome” or else we are ill (p. 34). After Didion quotes Freud, she then states that she “notice[d] the stress on ‘overcoming’ it. …[but then] I could not give away the rest of his shoes…” (p. 37). She found the bereavement literature that considers the preferred type of grief, “the one associated with ‘growth’ and ‘development’” (p. 48) that was supposed to be “normal.” Instead Didion found Emily Post, with common-sense advice, and a description of grief much closer to her own experience than Freud’s explanation. Didion wrote, “Mrs. Post… wrote in a world in which mourning was still recognized, allowed, not hidden from view” (p. 60). Didion’s explanation of her own experience as a widow is compatible with other
poststructural theories of grief, and with my own analysis in Chapter 4 of WNers’ conversations.

Self-described postmodern theorists of bereavement have risen in recent years, in a growing consensus of expansions and revisions of the dominant paradigm of grief. Instead of severing bonds, they hold the view that continuing to hold the bonds can enrich our lives in the present, long after our loved ones have died. In the following section I discuss these postmodern theories of grief.

Troubling Dominant Theories with Postmodern Bonds

Continuing Bonds...

As the critique of Freudian analysis has continued to proliferate in recent years, postmodern psychoanalytic theorists (Klass, 1982, 1996; Neimeyer, 1994, 1999, 2001; Walter, 2007) have constructed the ideas of bereavement using a more relational approach. The older individualistic notions are amended with more focus on the experiential and situational social relationships that we have constructed and will continue to construct. As the widows have told each other online in WN, Neimeyer (2001) argues that grief has no common, systematized or universal explanation, but is a different experience for each person, and the griever is “constructing and maintaining our most basic sense of self” (1998, p. 90). He also contends that the griever “attempts to reconstruct a world of meaning [which] is the central process in the experience of grieving” (p. 83). Klass, Silverman & Nickman (1996), noted scholars of the psychology and psychiatry of death, question the very idea of “closure” and the idea of grief that is
something from which one “recovers,” as from an illness. Postmodern thoughts about
grief may articulate grief not as an illness, but a state of being with natural causes. Death,
however we attempt to avoid it, or even avoid talking about it, is one of the very few
inevitable and certain occurrences. It is the effects that cannot be inevitable, however, to
the inevitable death.

In the process of “deuniversalizing” the Freudian notions, other poststructural
theorizing of spousal grief, e. g., shown in Lopata (1979/1996), found that “the increasing
complexity of structure, culture, and individual life—has not affected society nor its
members evenly and in the same way” (p. 220). Lopata also claimed “there is little
agreement among the social scientists as to whether people who have experienced a loss
or bereavement feel the same sentiments, let alone the same emotions” (p. 98). The
ethnographer Rosaldo (1988) himself a widower, has written much about death and the
force of grief rather than just as an emotion, in his fieldwork (Rosaldo, 1988). Scholar
Deborah K. van den Hoonaard's (2001) work with widows led her to see “the experience
of widowhood as a process rather than a status” (p. 2). Her narrative interviews “provide
an opportunity for people to tell their own story in their own way” (p. 2). I would modify
her argument by dropping the notion of process, and focus on the experience, since
‘process’ implies an ending as well as a beginning. Other grief theorists, for example,
Silverman, Klass and Walter (2004) in their various studies of grief theory disentangle
the dominant view of bereavement and expand grief theory into extended and sometimes
contrary ideas that explain how spousal mourners carry ongoing, continuing bonds—those
that remain and continue even when new and other bonds may form. Klass (et al, 2000)
claims, "interdependence is sustained, even in the absence of one of the parties" (p. 16). He continues, “the focus in facilitating mourning needs to be on how to change connections, to hold the relationship in a new perspective rather than on how to separate” (p. 20).

I also rely on other support for the critique of the Freudian binary notions of the subject-object oppositions (masculine-feminine, e.g., or life-death) of relations, this time in overlapping circles of grief, identity and gender. Philosopher Judith Butler (1990) critiques Freud’s propositions in “Mourning and Melancholia” when he posits that the reified “bond” should be “broken.” Butler asks, what is it to break bonds? What are “bonds” in the first place? Are bonds objects? Then, if we would follow the Freudian ideas, the widow is internalizing a “lost object” of love. Freud’s grand narrative objectifies and excludes by making ‘woman’ a unifying category, and thus the widow as well. Furthermore, this grand narrative is normative as I have alluded previously, and, if the theory allows the reified object of loss as separated from one’s psyche, then the objectified widow no longer exists, and she “returns” to “normal.”

Late 20th century ideas of grief theory began to depart from the traditional perspectives rooted in the psychoanalytic tradition, and began to challenge the systematic and binary essentialistic notions of illness/health models. Hagman (1995), for example, expanded the psychoanalytic model by exploring its assumptions, and found that mourning practices have changed over cultures and over time. He argues that mourning is more than a process, but also “to be an adaptive response to specific task demands arising from loss which must be dealt with regardless of the individual, culture or
historical era” (p. 909). Klass et al (1996) suggest that positivist theorists “were observing phenomena that could not be accounted for within the models of grief that most of our colleagues were using” (Klass, et al, p. xviii). In my own work, I am being informed of and am continuing to expand the grief theories of the “continuing bonds” (Klass, et al, 1996). Social theorists such as Silverman (2004), from her work with face-to-face support groups, studied the construction of social relationships of widows to show “how the bereaved help one another.” Walter (2003) concludes with the recognition of the contradictions in widowhood, by stating that

all bereaved partners struggle with two incompatible urges—to cling to the pain of the loss and to move away from the loss, so as to focus on reinvesting in the present, The postmodern approach takes this concept one step further. Therapists are encouraged to allow clients to begin a new life while continuing a relationship with the deceased, rather than viewing the grieving process as something that should be more or less completed before beginning new relationships and taking on new challenges (p. 245). These self-proclaimed postmodern concepts (Klass et al 1996/2000; Walter, 2003) are grief theories where the notions of continuing bonds, rather than autonomous amnesia are central. The “postmodern paradigm of grief” …

give voice to an emerging consensus among bereavement scholars that our comprehension of the grief process needs to be expanded beyond the dominant model… . Within this new paradigm, the understanding between the self and its relation to others has been challenged. … The
postmodern… approach… questions the stage theories of adaptation to
loss, as well as the description of the universal symptoms of grief (Walter,
2003, p. 6).

While both modern and postmodern research has been done in regard to spousal
grief, many of the theories have been generated from face-to-face clinical situations.
However, little has been explored with regard to the study of the vernacular, especially as
used in the everyday conversations among widows/ers online. I question what is
happening as widowed people talk to each other online about their suffering and
isolation. I take these theories of grief into the tales of an online community by way of
interacting with fellow widows. Further, those widows online tell stories of those who
“don’t get it,” (called the “DGI” by WN members). Whether knowingly or not, people
come to the widows with harmful pieces of advice from the dominant points of view that
clash with the WNers’ experience, and unwittingly, subject widows to extra pain. These
DGIs are discussed from a wide spectrum of encounters, from institutional powers such
as clinicians and theorists of grief, to the friend or family member with whom the WNer
interacts. With these grief theories that informed me, I interpret the tales of what the
widowed mean about the “DGI” and the stories of how widows are experiencing
something that others who are not widowed do not understand and can be an added
source of that pain.
Grief’s Overlapping Identity

Widow as Identity-Kit in Grief

If our identities are a combination of social construction, normative sets of beliefs, myths and stereotypes laden with a history of such, then grief, loss, widowhood and identity are intertwined. It seems arbitrary to separate the notions of identity in this linear essay; nonetheless, I separate the overlaps with subheadings.

Marginalization in Widowhood

If Butler (1990) argues that woman is not fully a subject but in the margins, then I argue that the widow category is in the margins of the margins (Spivak, 1988). The widow category is marked in many ways, and does not account for the lesbian widow, for example, or the male widow. How do we know who it includes? Who speaks for us? The category in the dominant narrative excludes the differences, but I am troubling that dominant narrative, and am raising those differences and fragmentations in Chapter 4. In the data shown there, I show how the widowed identities are unstable.

The notion of ‘widow’ contains not only a normative, genderized (Butler, 1999) association with its identity, but a stigmatized and marginalized association (Spivak, 1988; Goffman, 1990) as well. As the widowed Margaret Owen (1996) researched in her cultural study of widowhood, “in some traditional societies initiation into widowhood may be violent and cruel. In developed regions of the world, too, widows may discover that the change in their status is deeply disturbing, and that the alteration in the way the outside world regards them contains elements of callousness and insensitivity” (p. 7). So
then, I ask how the category of widowhood is destabilized, and I find the answer in Chapter 4 data where the expression of our personal experiences is contrary to the cultural beliefs about what widowhood is. This is one of the central consequences that widows endure, told in WN, and that I am focusing in this study. In my pursuit to trouble the term ‘widow’ as a genderized term, I am using Butler’s (1999) ideas and applying her notions of gender to widowhood. I am informed by Butler when she is opening the “possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized” (p. viii). Building on Butler’s notions of gender identity as moving, culturally performed and constructed, my intent is to elucidate and expand the claims of a socially constructed gender identity, so that widowhood too could be thought of in a similar way. Just as Butler argues that “masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only [an] exclusive framework… but it separates “off analytically” (p. x). I have undertaken the exercise of reading Butler’s Gender Trouble and replaced every instance of “gender” and replaced it with “widow” and I find that the analogy fits. Widowhood, like gender, is a normative concept. In her Undoing Gender, Butler (2004a) argues, “that persons are regulated by gender, and that this sort of regulation operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility for any person” (p. 52). Butler includes “regulatory powers—medical, psychiatric, and legal, to name a few” (p. 52). I argue that persons suffering from spousal grief are regulated by widowhood, as well, through the norms within the academic theories, clinical experience and cultural beliefs. From the scholarship in Academe to the cultural beliefs that WNers have experienced and have been confronted with, often in harmful ways, I have found that the patterns exist. Chapter 4 describes the data in WidowNet that show examples of
widowhood that transcend socially constructed gender expectations, and socially
constructed widow expectations, where gays and lesbians’ life partners have died, where
life partners who never married, and consider themselves widows, no matter which
gender, nor what their formal legal status is. I would argue that as gender is socially
constructed, so is widowhood, even though there is indeed more to it than that.
Widowhood has a real and forceful component to it: the brute and irrevocable fact of
death. I would argue further, that while there is a semiotic association and social
construction to the identity of widow, so is a crucial and enormous element of
widowhood, and that is the reality of the human condition.

Certainly the dominant category of widow is gendered, by definition, and we even
make the distinction between the widowed male (the widowER) and female not only by
gender, but by state status, i.e., legal bounds of marriage (i.e., if no marriage, no widow).
But not all life commitments are necessarily recognized or legitimized by the state, i.e.,
gays, and lesbians too, who have life partners. Butler talks about the “cultural
inscriptions” that formulate gender and gendered behavior. If I can substitute the word
“widow” with the gender-terms that Judith Butler uses in her Gender Trouble, I would
characterize the constructions of identity that are “shaped by political forces with
strategic interests in keeping that [widow] bounded and constituted by the markers of
[widowhood] (p. 175).

Performing Identity in Widowhood

Butler also argues that identities are constructed through “speech acts,” which are
J. L. Austin’s ideas of “utterances” as more than just words or sentences, but acts of
doing, i.e., performatives, as well. These speech acts are not utterances of reporting, such as sentences that are thought of as true or false, but the utterances that are being used in the doing of things, which can change our identities. “I do” is a key example of actions that change identities. The performances in the WN conversations, act in ways they are performing their identities. In this theory of performativity, utterances that may take on a grammatical form of sentences, but in the content, the speech acts of the WNers are the doing of action.

I watched carefully the language of the WNers and how that language is seen as a performance (Austin, 1975; Bourdieu, 1980; Butler, 1990; Bauman, 2000), not in the sense of performing in theatrical play pretense, but rather performing everyday actions that construct identities. Much of these notions of identity can consist in the social dynamic of language use (Austin, 1963), where his speech act theory informed me how we do things with words. Speech act theory contains elements that are not only a 20th century idea, but harkens back to the ancient Greeks. Protagoras, for one, argued for “modes” of language that are neither true nor false. Austin, borrowing from the ideas of modes of language, defines “constative” and “performative” utterances. He distinguishes utterances that are “constative,” to be those that are considered true or false and are called statements or judgments. Then Austin argues there are the “performative” utterances to be distinct from judgments, because of the way they are used. The performative utterances are acts. An utterance such as a promise, for example, may take the form of a declarative sentence, but in the appropriate circumstances, it is not a description, or a report, but rather a performance of an act. As Austin’s example has been used ever since
his idea, the utterance, “I promise to take care of you” in the situation of persons communicating, is not a true-false statement, but an act that in the process, and when completed, has felicitations, consequences and changes in identity. These problems of identity philosophically will be analyzed in the conversations of the WN grievers who are performing their identities throughout the WidowNet site.

Showing how bereavement is a reality and a social construction, Helene Lopata (1979), in her ground-breaking sociological research on widowhood, focuses on how this new condition of existence creates a disorganization of previous support systems, social relations, and in the cases of family structures that were previously the foundation of woman’s social roles, even her sense of identification. So much of one’s identity is formulated around the social relations, through the interaction of the “network through a complex of support systems, interactional sequences and social relations” (Lopata, 1979). These social roles, support systems and networks that women are members of include families, friends, church groups, professional associates are “helpful in maintaining their style of life” (Lopata, p. 4). These support systems originally began at birth (family) but for the most part are “voluntaristic individual action” (p. 6). Marriage and/or partnership is often considered a basic social unit. Much of one’s support system is enmeshed in one’s own identity. Ask a woman who she is, and she will likely answer with statements that express her relationship to other people in her life, and if married, the prime relationships would be her husband and her children. Married couples are often friends with other married couples, and so those with children. The death of their spouses creates a dramatic change in the support systems of the widow, and a sense of chaos and
disorganization: higher rates of suicide, physical illness, mental illness requiring treatment, alcoholism, accidents, are associated with widowhood (both men and women) (Lopata, p. 7). And so what happens to those social roles when the marriage structure, constructed over years, crumbles with a death of a spouse or partner? Lopata (1996) argues that there is no role of widow after the funeral rites and the mourning rituals. After that, “the role of widow fades as others return to their previous or modified relationships with the woman and to their own lives. The widow must go through the personal consequences of the death of her [partner]…. [T]here is really no role of widow lasting beyond the mourning ritual” (p. 97-98). What then happens to the widow after the funeral?

So much about identity as viewed as a social construction is entwined with all of the other aspects of life that it is difficult to find a separate place for it. However, for the sake of this organization, I will explain more about identity itself in another section. First I am including in my review of the literature, topics related to Internet research and online communities. Identity has a major stake in those disciplines, as well.

**Theories of Identity in, Identity Out of the Internet**

This section contains two sub-sections. I discuss first, the Internet research literature, and how it relates to my research questions, and how identity is tangled and disentangled in the Internet. Much of the statistics about Internet use is mentioned in Chapter 1, but this chapter focuses more on the make-up of Internet communities and identity. Then I return to the literature that will describe how the literature about identity
will inform me when I interpret the WNers themselves, how they form a community, and how they tell tales of identity—questions, performances, and issues.

Folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett remarked in her discussion of “the electronic vernacular” (1996) and quoted Abbott Payson Usher who said, “the development of printing, more than any other single achievement, marks the line between medieval and modern technology… [and is] the first instance of a process being pushed through to a decisive stage in a relatively short time,” then (K-G argues) “electronic communication broadly conceived marks the line between modern and postmodern communication” (p. 21). I shall describe more about the “postmodern communication” in the WN community in the following sections.

Internet Research and Identity

The WN Internet community, though for the most part is lacking face-to-face encounters, since it is mainly a text-based message board, yet it has full-fledged friendships, nonetheless; even those online friendships occur on many levels, especially the level of interpersonal interaction. Online ethnographer Nancy Baym (2000), in her research, claimed that “people in… online communities define themselves not just in relation to their offline selves or to the medium but also in relation to one another and to the group as a whole” (p. 158). Friendships build within the online group but expand in other directions as well. Baym also quoted Parks & Floyd (1996) who conducted a survey of Usenet posters “and found that 60.7% of them had established personal relationships through Usenet” (p. 134), whether it be emails, phone or even face-to-face
interaction. Further, as Joinson & Paine (2005) argued, when they cited other Internet researchers, there is:

[an] accumulating body of experimental evidence, first-person accounts and observation research as shown that Internet-based communication can be characterized as highly socialized—perhaps even more social than face-to-face interaction (Rheingold 1993; Walther 1996). Moreover, issues of status and hierarchy transfer just as easily to Internet-based interactions (Watt, Lea & Speers, 2002), negating the contention that lack of cues leads to a reduction in concern for the audience or equalization effects (p. 22).

Many users of WN are part of the statistics about Internet use, and that includes my own activities with WidowNet, having other kinds of interaction beyond the WN message board. The majority of WN members are women, and this is so for two main reasons: 1) statistically, more women survive spousal death than men;19 and 2) according to a Pew Research Center study, more women tend to have personal communication on

19 According to the 2000 Census, in the US there were 13,700,000 widowed persons, nearly 7% overall, and 1/3 of the population over 65. Proportionally, as age grows, the percentages of women vs men are much higher, because women live longer than men. Further, AARP (2001) reports that of the 13.7 million widowed are in the US, 11 million, i.e., 80% of them are women (cited by

the Internet than men (Horrigan, 2001). However, my focus is narrowed to a particular kind of social world, to ethnographic aspects of the people who use the Internet as a metaphorical “place,” and carry on conversations online with others as if they were friends, and many times, they become friends (Rheingold, 1993; Parks, 1996; Baym, 2000). Online folklorist and ethnographer Nancy Baym (2000) argues,

That there might be no big mystery to how people can create friendships online does not mean that these online friendships are considered identical to face-to-face friendships. Whereas some posters who had not met face-to-face seemed completely content describing their relationships with the others in the group as friends, others qualified their descriptions in ways that indicated, if not the lesser worth, at least the greater strangeness of online friendships (p. 136).

Baym’s arguments occurred in 2000, whereas now, 11 years later, the Internet speed of change seems an eternity ago. Baym’s notions of “strangeness” still fit in several ways, though they do not fit in the WN community itself, even though some of the WNers’ stories of their family members might think an online community of widows is “weird.” People become so used to cultural body language in face-to-face experience, the facial expressions, hand gestures, culturally accepted distance from each other physically, hand shaking or holding hands or other types of physical contact, all those missing cues might make a person find this online communication weird, but the online users do not think it so, and certainly those who are members of WN. Chapter 4 discusses the many ways these online friendships developed in WN.
Reingold (1993) one of the earliest ethnographers of the Internet, and among the first to create a still-existing online community called “WELL,” used the term ‘virtual community’ to describe the relational aspect of user’s interaction through computer-mediated communication (CMC). He defines virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p.5). Webs of personal relationships form and/or are maintained through both public as well as private computer-mediated interactions. I would add to Reingold’s (1993) definition of virtual community that it is the networks of personal interaction that enable communities to form in cyberspace. Moreover, I would rather think of the online community not as “virtual,” because in fact it is real, and the friendships are really made. Real does not need sight and sound, even though those cues make it easier to understand.

Earlier online research focused on the aspects of pretense in the identities in the social life of the Internet. Much of that early research had a skeptical outlook on the anonymity and pretense, but much of the deception was related to the outburst of gaming in cyberspace (Turkle, 1995). Early research (early 1990s) of online communities approached identity construction issues—but Turkle, for example, argued that the Internet “is a place where signs taken for reality may substitute for the real” (p. 47). Thus, the early scholarship bifurcated the “real” of the world outside from the “virtual” of the Internet, and one’s real identity in the world (“real life”) vs. the virtual identities of the

20 WELL is an acronym for “Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link” begun in 1985 by Stewart Brand & Larry Brilliant.

87
cyberplace that are created, and are questionable as to their truth. Christine Hine (2000, 2005) even titled two of her books with the use of the concept of the virtual. The term “virtual,” though, is used less often now, and much of the more current scholarship uses terms like “online community” vs. “virtual community.” Hine also points out that “ethnography also has made a considerable bid for applicability to online contexts…. The formulation of the online world as new territory for social research also creates a perception that nothing can be taken for granted” (p. 5). However, if we think of identity as a social construction, then there are the same people who construct whether it is in front of the computer or the office desk or the classroom—the off-line face to face relationships may or may not be important to the research questions. Other theorists argue that the “truthfulness” of Internet identities is less important than the credibility of the users, no matter what name they choose to use. Thus with the proliferation of online communities, ethnography has become a useful tool for Internet research scholars, whether the subject be of Internet games or not.

Hine (2000) argues another important point related to Internet research:

The Internet is both cultural context and cultural artefact. The Internet as cultural context is established… through application of ethnographic methods to online settings. That the Internet is also a cultural artefact is apparent from the extent to which it is manifested as a varying and variably used set of technologies that have different meanings for different groups of people…. This complicates the use of the Internet as a research tool considerably (p. 9)
Due to the ambiguities of how the Internet is conceived, in my project, I view the Internet as a cultural context.

An online ethnography, although containing many of the elements of ethnography, proper, is not simply “ethnography plus” (or ethnography minus) (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1996; Mason, 1996; Parks, 1996 Jones, 1998c Orgad, 2005). Online ethnography twists the notions of anthropological research, which traditionally has included face-to-face interactions of observations and interviews in particular distant locations. We ordinary citizens think of the Internet as a “place” yet technologically, it is an international set of tools and protocols, software codes for communication. Christine Hine (2000) points out that the Internet is both a cultural context and a cultural artifact, in that it “could be viewed as constituting cultures in their own right” (p. 9). The Internet is also viewed as an artefact, in that it is viewed “as a product of culture; a technology that as produced by particular people with contextually situated goals and priorities” (p. 9). Online research, however, melts the walls of local boundaries and challenges the ideas of “location” and “field” into a global “space” that is not a specific location. Instead, it is a metaphorical cyberspace on the Internet where each user (of the Internet) is in a separate location, but boundaries are redefined from physical spaces to logical turning on and off of computer chips and their attached wires, fiber optics, networks and networks of networks. Online anthropological research, however, will maintain some traditional values providing “an elaborate venture in ‘thick description’” Geertz, (1973) who borrowed the notion from Ryle). Added to that is the “immersion” of the researcher into the lives of the research subjects by way of communication online, or “computer
mediated communication” (CMC). The online community hinges on participation of the users.

Using the Internet as my cultural context, vocabulary too is one consideration. I am informed by Lotfalian (1996) who discussed his own online ethnography. He noted that early on in his research, his questions shifted, because he “… had been taking this medium and treating it as one would in face-to-face interaction, that is, [he] was making similar assumptions about language” (p. 118). First of all, the vocabulary of ethnography is different from online ethnography. Although there is no one-to-one parallel between cyberspace and the rest of the world, there are metaphors that have been borrowed. Where real locations have fences, online communities have Forums, and “boards.” Where places in the world have cities, like Chicago, online communities in the Internet are “virtual” and they are “online.” In cyberspace, people are “users,” “user groups,” or “newsgroups.” Other contrasts in action: talking/posting; interrupting/cross-posting; reading/lurking. Real-life people are neighbors knocking on doors, visiting, walking, strolling; OC people are members that are registering, logging in, surfing. Places are sites. Yet, in this virtual “world” real people are really posting. (See Appendix D and E for glossaries of terms used in the WN online community.)

Moreover, the online community has some distinct differences from the physical community, in that the membership of the online community is clearly defined and listed in the roster. They are organized around a particular focus or activity (Squire & Johnson, 2000), sign in through a membership ritual, and are more fluid than the offline community. There is a stronger sense of design rather than emergence. There is less a
sense of common physical place but more a sense of common interests (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1996; Jones, 1998a). Pew reports (Rainie, Purcell & Smith, 2011) that overall, “80% of Internet users are active in one kind of group or another” and in their survey, these are interest groups, whether they be church, trade associations or sports or recreation interests. Online, people do not gather as they would in the local coffee shop that will close at a certain and same time, in a certain place, but sit still at their own desks, in front of their own computers, and do not communicate in a close proximity, but rather participate at any time night or day, either synchronously or asynchronously. And as local coffee shops get popular, so do online communities, but with an interesting twist: the more popular the use of the online community, the more easily accessed in the Google search for the people who are searching that particular type of online community. When a website is used more often, it (and this is simplistically described) gets closer to the top of the Google search engine, thus easier for the user to find. The local coffee shop, though might depend on ads, or reputation, but its location is set and not fluid as an online community might be.

Ethnography has been involved in fieldwork that traditionally had been thought of as the “Other” in exotic places where the ethnographer, or folklorist, immerses oneself into the far-away cultures other than one’s own. The online community, however, especially when the ethnographer is a member of the community, is no farther away than the computer on the ethnographer’s desktop. As Bruce Mason (1996) argues, folklorists have found the Internet a new source of anthropological fieldwork. He claims, “there are a large number of communicative possibilities” and says, “first we need to identify the
ethnographic context…. A virtual ethnography is, then, simply an ethnography that
treats cyberspace as the ethnographic reality” (p. 4). I have chosen to use the term “online
ethnography” rather than ‘virtual ethnography’ just because the notion of ‘virtual’ leaves
out an element of reality that I believe exists on the Internet. The distinction it seems to
me, is the fact that we are not communicating outside in the “field,” but we nevertheless
are communicating. The field, in cyberspace, is a technological tool that allows us to
communicate farther and faster than we have ever imagined. In this case, boundaries
have changed, from physical ones of location, to practical ones of common interest.

It is the online community that the folklorist studies requires not a different
conceptual set of tools or methodology, but more of a different set of tools. Instead of
pitching a tent in the foreign land, the online ethnographer clicks, finds the URL
(universal resource locator) or the location of the site, then registers and sets up a “login”
name, “lurks,” finds the basic information usually in a “FAQ” (frequently asked
questions) list, and types in a communicative way, when ready, in the online community.

Our Online Community: How we are folk

Though I am using a folklorist’s perspective in this project, I am blending fields
by also considering WN as a cyber-community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991;
Wenger, 1998/2001; Baym, 2000), even though it has no geographical “location.” I
maintain that the folkloristic perspective will work compatibly with a community of
practice. Alan Dundes, folklorist from UC Berkeley, asks of us, “who are the folk?”
(1980, p. 1). He argued that the common (mis)understandings of folklore as an opposing
aspect of the urban, the elite, the scientific thought, are incorrect. This “narrow 19th century definition” (p. 4) of the folk as peasant is too exclusive (and classist). Dundes, instead, argued that the folk:

... can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language or religion—what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own (1980, p. 6).

And so I apply Dundes’ idea to widowhood as my principal linking factor. With this broader and more inclusive definition of the folk, I am writing about a community that has no physical borders; its members span continents yet at the same time converse with others each in their respective homes sometimes thousands of miles apart, with no consideration of space and time and nothing else in common, except the common factor of widowhood. This common factor, though, is not sufficient, in the sense that widows are across cultures and everywhere in the globe. However, this particular community of widows joined because they were not finding the sense of community elsewhere, where they could speak their minds without recrimination or advisement without their consent. This community has found fellow sufferers, not only to share their experiences, but also to share the similar experiences of being confronted by those the WNers call the “DGIs” or the others who “do not get it”, do not understand what the depth or breadth of widowhood is. Further, this group can be thought as a folk in the sense that it offers a
way to re-conceptualize grief, a means to critique the dominant ideas of grief. Thus I can justifiably use folkloristic concepts to analyze my folk.

This particular online community that I am using as my field site is conceptually far from the early Internet research on identity (1990s) in the social interaction of online game players who played with identity on the Internet (e.g., Bruckman, 1992; Turkle, 1995). When the WNers’ disguise their nicknamed identities, instead, they have a real and shaken sense of what identity is, after all, and they take on the very real caution of security when using the Internet. As social networks have grown and developed, so Internet research has developed with it, and many online groups of all interests, including cancer narratives (Voithofer, 2000), and other online illness groups, as well as other grief groups that have spawned from WN (see Appendix A). The WidowNet community deals with very challenging, very real identity crises. The “who am I?” question is ubiquitous in WN. It is usually the main part of the introductory story from the newcomer WNer.

Identity in terms of the names we give to ourselves is not a part of an Internet game. In this online community, there might be simulated nicknames (for example, one might have named their WN “identity” as not their real name but something related to their dog, or their favorite activity); nevertheless their intent is not to play games, but to listen or try to understand grief from someone else who was having this same experience without revealing private information that perhaps could affect the security of their computers in their homelife. The WNers’ ongoing conversations of grief are entwined with unending questions of identity. Thus as Hine (2005) would argue, the credibility of the members in WN is established, and less important is the “truth” of their stated names.
Identity Shaken in Grief

I am focusing on the notions of identity with regard to widowhood, precisely because of the “who am I” question that we in the WN online community have all had in this grief experience at a time when we thought we knew who we were. The questions of the WN community have guided my research questions. I argue that these shaken notions of identity are not “essential” in the sense that these identities are not an “essence,” or “natural,” but instead, constructed. However, there is more to it than “just” social construction when this identity is involved in the reality of death. The idea of trying to figure out what widowhood is, is the work of constructing a new identity through social interaction. Siebers (2011) argues that we can consider identity a theory-laden construction, rather than a mere social construction, in which knowledge for social living adheres—though not always and necessarily the best knowledge. Thus, identity is not the structure that creates … a[n] inner essence, but the structure by which that person identifies and becomes identified with a set of social narratives, ideas, myths, values and types of knowledge of varying reliability, usefulness, and verifiability (p. 15).

The fact of facing death is essential, fundamental, real. No one constructed death. This problem of the reality of event and situation, along with the construction of the new situation after the event is the complex problem with which the widows, who, at first hate that label, are confronted. The word, the name, the identity of widowhood is
associated too much with the essential fact of death, when the widow does not want to believe that the spouse is in fact dead, yet the fact remains. Much of the complications of the identity questions in the new widow’s situation are loaded with this unsettled idea of reality and construction, myth, stereotype, stigma and norms all at the same time.

To frame widowhood around identity issues, I am informed by various theories of how identity is performed. (Erickson, 1982; Dundes, 1989; Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1990; Bauman, 2000; Didion, 2005). Rather than thinking of identity as an antiquated Aristotelian or Cartesian essence, I would argue that it is more fluid, as Butler (1990) argues, a “performance.” As we perform our identities, and in the case of this online community, we identify ourselves and are identified by a repetition of linguistic acts (Austin, 1975)21 rather than true-false statements.

Moreover, whether in an online community or not, these identity constructions are made via social relationships through the medium of language: this “who am I” can also be understood as a social rather than an individualistic identity: this social aspect conceives how others view me, as well as how I view others over a period of time. Butler (1997) claims that we are “linguistically vulnerable” because we are beings that require language “in order to be” (p. 2). She argues that “if we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it” (p. 2). Further, Butler argues that when we are insulted, we are injured by acts of language. The very title “widow” injures the griever, in that it contains death, loss, absence, void, and norms from the dominant and popular cultural norms.

21 Austin’s theory of speech acts is discussed more fully in Ch 3.
Dundes (1989) argues for a social identity in that “the concept of identity cannot be defined without reference to groups of one kind or another” (p. 7). As Dundes puts it, “continuity is one of the key criteria in defining identity” (p. 9). And thus, when the continuity of, say, marriage, is one of those criteria for the identity construction, then widowhood shakes that identity. The “widow,” however, does not instantly acquire an essence or certainty when her status changes by the definition of the changed legal status at death. Other theorists argue that identities are operating in “historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed ‘worlds’: recognized fields of frames of social life” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998, pp. 7). However, what of the experience of Widows' whose identities are shattered and suddenly confronted by the fate of death? This is explored in detail in Chapter 4.

The concept of identity is analyzed in grief studies as well. Noted bereavement studies theorist and social work support group counselor (and widowed), Dr. C. A. Walter (2003) has written several books in her 20 years’ work on grief, loss and bereavement. She posed notions of identity in contrasting theories of grief: she argued that the individualized, positivist point of view sees grief as “primarily from the psychoanalytic theories of Freud… and Kubler-Ross” where grief is a problem to be solved and “the bereaved partner must sever bonds with the dead person to have the energy to reinvest in life and in new relationships” (p 1). Walter argues that postmodern theories of grief, on the other hand, are looking beyond the more traditional perspectives, in that “the understanding between the self and its relationship to others have been challenged” when the “Other” is dead and gone (p 5). I rely on Walter’s conclusion in
her theorizing of her clinical work, when she claims, “[when one loses a partner]... this tragic loss can promote profound shifts in one’s sense of meaning and the direction of one’s life. The narratives of the bereaved partners who contributed to this book vividly reveal some of these transformations” (p. 259). Psychologist Marilyn McCabe (2003) sees the shortcomings of the prevailing theories of grief, and shifts away from the dominant model into a more relational theory of grief. She believes that our relationship with our deceased loved one is the hinge of our grief, and understanding that the relationship does not end when the loved one’s life does. Neither does grief contain a time frame as the dominant discourses have it. In fact, in this fluid and complex relationship one can assume that the griever herself is dynamic, fluid, and changing, as is that relationship with her deceased partner. McCabe argues,

Both the processes of forgetting and remembering are significant aspects of grief experience that serve to relocate the griever (perhaps again and again) in her or his experience of time, and in her or his experience of self and relationship with the deceased other. Memory, like time, is not a purely objective phenomenon, but could instead be viewed as partial reconstructions” (p. 6).

**Widowed Identity as Stigma**

Widows who come to WN come to talk about the idea of isolation, both self-imposed and in other senses, as well. Sometimes it is a self-imposed feeling of the need to separate from the world that keeps on running despite the shock of this confrontation
with death. Others are socially isolated when the widow is ignored in the coupled world (Lopata, 1979). Still other times it comes from the reaction of those in the world who wrongly tell the widow what grief is, give untested advice that does not understand the situation, or offer advice for which was not asked. In many senses, the notion of isolation is wrapped in widowhood. The widow’s feeling of being isolated seems to come in tandem with this notion of thinking she is “too sensitive,” in that the “Other” (who has not understood this kind or level of suffering) puts the widow into a separate status (Spivak, 1988; Goffman, 1990; Lopata, 1996). Cultural norms related to widowhood include a seeming acceptable period of quiet and inward mourning, with an end in sight. The widow who wails creates discomfort in many cultures, especially this one, and accordingly is silenced and marginalized often by averted eyes or turned heads or bad advice. The dominant discourse in grief theory, held from a privileged position of power, presumes Freudian bond-breaking, though it silences the marginality of the widow. Cultural norms dictate the widow to be socially distant to the coupled world, i.e., puts her “under erasure” (Spivak, 1988, p. 280). When the “good wife” or as in India called “sati” is no longer a wife, cultural norms stigmatize the widow with a number of stereotypes that “are an injunction to silence, affirmation of non-existence; and consequently states that of all this there is nothing to say, to see, to know” (p. 307).

To explain this “DGI” experience that WNers talk about, I rely on Erving Goffman (1963/1990) and his theory of social stigma, behaviors, or attributes that are discredited. These cause an individual to be undesirable in many ways. Goffman claims that we presuppose many norms about identity on a daily basis, “such as sightedness and
literacy” (p. 128): when we have them we are “normal.” These stigmas, such as aging, or of widowhood, exist where people believe that the widow must “get over it,” and “move on,” among other things. By “normal,” Goffman refers to people who, at least in their own perceptions, do not view themselves a stigmatized. I believe Goffman would see the DGIs as those who interact with the stigmatized, from the institutional powers of clinicians and grief theorists to the family, friends, etc. These “normals” misunderstand the stigmatized. This includes norms about status, and deviations from the norms, are stigmatized. In the case of widowhood, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the widow is categorized as the stereotype, and the stereotypes are closely related to stigma. Though the WNers do not discuss the stigma per se, many kinds of the conversations occur in WN that widows and widowers repeatedly communicate with each other about their isolation and how different they are from “others” (non-widowed). They discuss their interacting with people who are not widowed, and The WN conversations among themselves are not the same as the social relations with the “normals” (Goffman, 1963/1990) who do not experience this kind of grief and would hesitate to talk about it, whether it be the elements of grief or other aspects of bereavement. When they do join a conversation with a widowed person, they have been known (by WNers, at least) to give unsolicited advice based on a comparison of an incomparable experience. WNers’ reactions to this type of advice are often rendered speechless, and for some unknown reasons at the time. However, WNers find one place, at least, to feel free to interact, and to discuss this kind of harmful treatment, a place where they are having experiences like these. “Failure or success at maintaining such norms has a very direct effect on the
psychological integrity of the individual,” claims Goffman (p. 152-3). This “insider” interaction discussed among WNers which they call the “DGIs” or the WN-coined acronym for people who don’t get it, who don’t understand what the widowed experience is like, even when they think they do.

As WNers find each other and discover their similarities in their conversations about the others who act on misunderstandings of the widowed experience, it leads to a sense of “solidarity” similar to that which can be achieved by oppressed minorities. For example, Siebers (2010) argues that

\[
\text{[m]inority identity discovers its theoretical force by representing the experiences of oppression and struggle lived by minority peoples separately but also precisely as minorities, for attention to the similarities between different minority identities exposes their relation to oppression as well as increases the chance of political solidarity” (p, 16).}
\]

This might be considered another reason why the WidowNet website community has over 4,000 members—a search for finding others in the same situation, one that was never experienced before. Therefore, I want to direct my work with some of these ideas of how widowhood fits in the notions of marginalization and stigma that Spivak and Goffman theorize, especially in relation to what the WNers call the “DGIs” or the people who offend widows with unasked-for and ill-informed advice and misplaced comfort. The WNers get to interact with each other without interference of the “Other,” when they can share ideas of stigma in their performance of the new identity of widowhood. These notions of finding solidarity and a power from being with each other that they cannot
experience without inclusion in the group. This is interpreted further in Chapter 4 in my narrative analysis.

Injurious speech (Butler, 1997) shows how “things might be done with words” (p. 43). When words “perform what [they] name,” sometimes those names can be instrumental in performing what they do. As Austin made the distinction between the perlocutionary (words that are instrumental in actions) and illocutionary (actions by virtue of the words) acts, the distinction is difficult to be made, but still, the act that results from the naming causes harm. But as Butler asks, “what does it mean for a word to ‘do’ a thing,” or “for a thing to be ‘done by’”… (p. 44). I ask that in terms of this project: what does it mean for verbs directed to a widow? What does it mean to call a woman a widow? What are the things done by the use of the word ‘widow”? What is the harm done when saying injudicious things²² to a widow? A court judge says something and thus performs an act. People will go free, or go to jail from those actions in the form of words if they are said in a Court of Law. In the context of this dissertation, the words that come from the DGIs cause harm to the widow, and I argue that they are carrying a power that causes harm to the widow. Chapter 4 data shows examples.

There are many other types of consequences of the categorized identity of the widow that is stigmatized in the newly constructing identity. What can a widow do alone in the coupled world? What happens to the lowered economic and social status of the

²² J. L Austin’s (1962) “performatives” are “used in a variety of cognate ways and constructions” where the verb indicates “the performing of an action…not normally thought of as just saying something” (p. 6-7). (My ital.) He includes “happiness/unhappiness dimension” (p. 148).
widow? Goffman and Spivak inform me as to the concepts of stigma or the "subaltern," but Lopata (1996) has laid out all these stigmatized issues of widowhood, specifically.

The connections between widowhood, identity and stigma are also made when I deliberate Goffman’s (1990) notions of the “spoiled identity.” Goffman sees that we present ourselves in certain ways in order to make identity claims for ourselves, seeking material and social resources. In his concept of the self as a “social identity” (p. 12), we are constantly engaging in performing our identities by the ways we present ourselves to others. Goffman makes the distinction between attributes and social relationships, where the seeming attribute of “stigma” can be seen as “a special type of relationship between attribute and relationship” (p. 14) where normal people might see a person who possesses “a stigma, an undesired differentness” from the rest of us (p. 15). Sometimes we embarrass or shame ourselves when we are failing in our performance. When we slip up on our performance, we “lose face.” We can “give face” to help diffuse the other’s embarrassment by either saying nothing, engage in a mild joking humor or denying the validity of that embarrassing remark: “you didn’t mean that, did you?” Then the embarrassed one would “get face” being situated in “getting a break.”

When a powerful, negative social label arises, a label such as “widow,” “normal” people feel uncomfortable when with each other. “The very anticipation of such contacts can of course lead normal and the stigmatized to arrange life so as to avoid them” (Goffman, p. 23). The widows in WN often hated that label when new to their situation. The stigmatized is the marginal person “reduced from a whole and usual one to a tainted and discounted one... the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social
acceptance” (Goffman, p. 9). While dealing with the effects of the absent loved one, widows attempt to negotiate identity with the world and with themselves. If the stigma is publicly known (as widowhood is), then coping strategies can be denial (cf., Kubler-Ross), or pretense (cf., Didion’s *Year of Magical Thinking*), or be with others who have the same stigma (cf., WidowNet). I want to explore further with the tools that Goffman’s insights offer me, and hope to find that these insights can help explain further some of the purposes and consequences of the membership in WidowNet’s online community. Being aware of this particular categorization of relationship between the individuals and the group in this particular community can assist me in analyzing the reconstructing of identities in WN’s online widowhood as I explore their grief narratives.

Spivak’s discussion of the “subaltern” is helpful to this project, especially when I see her work in the context of explaining how widows in India could not speak for themselves, but only through others who spoke for them. WNers speak only to themselves about things they cannot speak in the world of the “Other.” Spivak’s focus was more on the marginalization of caste, but I am applying them to my own notions of widowed identity itself. Spivak (1993) found that those social constructions were sometimes “used” in marginality studies as a “strategic essentialism” in the “shift from (anti) essentialism to agency” (p. ix). When the widow uses the notion of being widow to evoke sympathy and bring beneficial consequences as a result, that can be seen as “playing the widow card.” One grievance was used to outmaneuver (trump) another in an uncomfortable situation. I am applying that “strategic essentialism” in my Chapter 4 discussion of how WNers have used agency in their “playing the widow card.”
In my analysis, I see this online community as one of practice, in an informal learning environment. The most ubiquitous questions that most of the new WN members bring to the group are two that they are asking in their new grief: “who am I?” and “am I crazy?” Those who have been in the WN community for some time often respond first with a welcoming ritual, and then answers such as, “no you are not crazy, and “this is a ‘new normal.”’ These WN members, new and old through their posts online are in give-and-take situated conversations. Rather than grounding my focus in the structure of the WN group, instead, with the assistance of the Lave & Wenger theory of “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2001) I am focusing on the ways that the WN social group practices in a situated learning environment, even though it is not a formal system. According to Wenger (2001), a community of practice (CoP) includes factors of meaning, i.e., “way(s) of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful” (p. 5). Further, they argue that a community of practice is grounded in the component of identity: “a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities” (p. 5). Other elements of a CoP include a master-to-apprentice relationship, a learning-by-doing, and a social structure, however fluid. Wenger’s CoPs are focused on face-to-face environments, business companies, mainly, but I argue that our WN online community, though devoid of a physical boundary and separated by both space and time, still has elements of the communities of practice. As an illustration, Baym (2003) argues, in her study of an online community,
“the practice approach’s focus on language lends itself to the method of discourse analysis in which naturally occurring interaction is examined closely” (p. 23). The online community members who respond to each other by typing their ideas still have and use artifacts (i.e., technology, symbols, acronyms exclusive to the group and beyond) as well as processes. Viewing WN as a community of practice, I am also thinking about how it functions (without intent) as a site where situated learning is occurring. The conversations in WN create and modify ideas, rather than formal, systematic, fixed and immutable thought. The WN ideas are shaped and reshaped through the telling of their experience. As such, this experiential learning that is going on in the Community of Practice is informal, and process-oriented, rather than exemplifying fixed outcomes.

Informal learning environments have been purviews of folklorists for some time and in many non-formal venues: museums, festivals, performances, for example. Folklorists have also shown how various cultures, especially “[n]on-Western, perspectives emphasizing community, lifelong learning, and holistic conceptions of learning are expanding our understanding of adult learning” (Merriam & Kim, 2008). Other folklorists, such as Bauman (2006) argue that “folklore and education do not recognize the broad common ground that they share” (p. 66). By the work I am doing in this project, I hope to be expanding our understanding of adult learning and how the online community is interactive and collaborative in their informal learning processes.

Other factors in the definition of community of practice in the online community which I study may not completely “fit,” as Gee (2007) claims when he argues, instead,
for an "affinity space" where affiliations in the online community “[are] primarily an historically changing set of distinctive social practices” (p. 24). These social practices of the WN online community “are involved in active learning: experiencing the world in new ways, forming new affiliations, and preparation for future learning” (p. 24). Thus, if we see the WN site as a place of “learning,” it is not the traditional, formally organized teacher-student model, where teaching and learning can be assessed successful or unsuccessful, and the notions of deficiency and competency would come into play. Thus, this is an informal, situated process model, one that has more of a “messiness” to it: a flowing continuum instead of a fixed, finished outcome-style. The online community of practice is even more messy with the boundlessness, the fluidity and not-clear visibility, yet they collaborate and communicate. Lave & Wenger’s collaborative theory of education focuses on the social relationships rather than the individual learner. This would imply that learning in a community of practice will go on throughout life, and the learning does not need to be judged in terms of what is supposed to be taught. The teacher and learner are not as discrete as in the more formal settings of education as well, where there are clear and systematic boundaries among processes and people such as: instruction, teaching, teachers, learning and students. In a situated community of practice, one could be a teacher in one situation and a learner in another. Lave &

___________________________

23 The “visibility” if the community sometimes is inferred by statistics shown: numbers of visits are displayed; members’ start dates, numbers of responses in threads, etc., are also displayed on the same site that shows the threads of conversation and responses from the members.
Wenger’s community of practice theory is not limited to the learning ideas, however. The concept of identity is involved as well. The next section will touch on that aspect.

When Joyce Carol Oates talked about her new social status, she said, “I have the legal status of widow, but I am nothing.”24 I had an intuitive understanding of what she was saying, because I have had that same feeling, that same affect, that same experience. I know what she means. At the same time, I believe that here is a huge difference in what is said about grief theory in spousal loss, and what is experienced. Lave and Wenger’s theory of learning claims that learning, meaning, practice, community, and identity are all tightly interwoven components; identity is “a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities” (p. 5). Thus I sit anxiously trying to “organize” the messiness of the learning experience—and the messiness of identity, because I think the two are entwined and permeating all of our lives. And so I explain identity in terms of grief, in terms of community of practice, in my analysis of the performances of identity in my Chapter 4 analysis.

Research Gaps

In this chapter, I was informed by many theories, but here I want to point out the silences in the literature, the holes that bespeak what is not there. One gap is that I have found little research about online grief groups, and none specifically about spousal grief

online. I have found literature about online groups (one quantitative study\(^{25}\) found over 5,000 studies of grief), and about grief groups face-to-face, but not specifically grief groups that are formed online and what they are doing for the general knowledge of widowhood, or of grief, or of the widowed identity. While there exists much of the research regarding online groups that are related to trauma (often in the field of nursing), little is related to aftermath of spousal death. Some of the reasons for this may be due, first of all, to the relative “youth” of the Internet: the listservs and online groups did not even exist until the early 1990s, much less the research that address these groups. Mr. G., the founder of this WN site, searched himself for grief groups and found none, so created one. Second, Internet research cuts across all sorts of disciplines, from technical communications, to media studies, to cultural studies, and more recently the biological and psychological sciences.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has included ways that show how relevant existing literature can inform this qualitative study of how people perform their identities *qua* widows. Much of Internet research focuses on construction of identity, but in this project the notions of identity will be focused on a different slant from the early Internet research. Since the core of this study is the question of how widowhood is identified, my research is also informed by a review of grief and loss theories, of poststructural and Butlerian ideas of

\(^{25}\) (Carr, Wortman & Nesse2006, p. 3) claim on pg. 3 of their book, *Spousal Bereavement in Late Life*, “More than 5,000 articles on grief and bereavement have been published in the past 10 years…”.
Foucauldian epistemology. Later, in Chapter 3, I also address theories of narrative, relative to the ways I focus my methodology.

Having been an avid reader since childhood, I found that one of my favorite writers herself has become a widow. Joan Didion (2005), in her inspiring memoir of her own widowhood, writes,

Grief when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be. It was not what I felt when my parents died… . Grief is different. Grief has no distance. Grief comes in waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life (p. 27).

Didion exemplifies one of the major points of widowhood, that it is so experiential, that words alone cannot describe, nor predict what spousal grief is or should be.

Grief is both a personal experience, and a social experience. Norms surround grief, and much of research regarding grief is generalized and simplified to just “grief,” as an encompassing concept. This oversimplification leaves out the distinct differences among spousal grief and grief related other kinds of relationships such as Freud’s example of a jilted lover. This project focuses on spousal grief, a particular kind, that involves a relationship that is emotional, economic, and social, in a degree of intimacy that does not “fit” in other relationships.

Thus my study has brought me to a close reading of various grief theories, where I looked at them in relation to popular beliefs, both the grief narratives of the WNers and those beliefs that the WNers call the “DGIs.” Then I looked at how these positivist grief theories correlate to WN conversations. I have reserved the portion appropriate to
narrative and linguistics scholars for Chapter 3, where I also discuss the research design and methodology section. In that chapter, I shall explain how I use research in narrative analysis, folklore and semiotics as well as a modicum of literary analysis as my methodology.
Chapter 3
Tales of Grief Exposing Identity: Methodology

It is certainly him whom I name, him beyond his name.

But since he himself is now inaccessible to this appellation...

it is him in me that I name, toward him in me, in you, in us that I pass through his name.

–Derrida mourning Barthes (2001)

... we live in a post-Internet,

remix culture where new tools allow new modes of discourse

–Kimberly Christen, Cultural Anthropology (2008, p. 506)

Introduction: Design Plan

Telling stories is the heart of the culture of WidowNet, an online community that is yet another venue for a folkloristic study. As an autoethnographer, in this project I have chosen to show the cultural significance in our interaction. This third chapter continues with exposing some narrative literature that supports how I am collecting and interpreting the stories we WNers tell to construct our lives after our spouse’s death. Barthes (1977) argues that “narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is … a variety of genres, themselves distribute amongst different substances… present in every age, in every place, in every society” (p. 79). I am expanding Barthes’ ideas of ubiquity in narrative to include another venue: the stories conveyed via technological forms online.
that did not exist in his time. From this particular society of the WidowNet website message board, a postmodern “substance,” these personal experience stories are about death and the aftermath, but the stories are not the same as the actual experience that we have had. The stories are interpretations, and my interpretations of these interpretations are yet another metalevel of this work. I begin, then, with acknowledging that these are not direct, objective accounts of the events of our past, but rather a version of “slippage born from the partiality of language of what cannot be said precisely because of what is said, and of the impossible difference within what is said, what is intended, what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken and what remains” (Britzman, 2000, p. 28).

While Chapter 2 explains some of the existing literature that has informed me regarding Internet research, theories of grief, theories of identity and theories of informal learning in my study of WN, my methodological design here in Chapter 3 emphasizes folklore and narrative analysis that has informed my research (Burke, 1941; Labov, 1972a; Shuman, 1986; Lather, 1997; Bauman, 2000; Ochs, 2001; Patton, 2002). That section is incorporated with the research design of the narrative analyses.

This chapter also includes the research design section, where I begin with a narration of a time line of this project. I also describe the various forms of analysis that I use in Chapter 4. In these analyses, I continue to use Geertz’ (1973) “thick description” in this interpretive approach. In Chapter 4, I focus more on the WNers’ conversations rather than the shapes of the WN site, and the various kinds of the people in that site that I began in Chapter 1. Patton (2002) claims that “description forms the bedrock of all qualitative reporting” (p. 438). With the cooperation and permission of my “collaborative
witnesses” (Soyini Madison, 2005), I have gathered and describe some of their personal experience stories from the WidowNet database in this qualitative, triangulated set of analytical methods (Denzin, 1978, 2003). I have used three forms of analyses in three separate sections: 1) findings from interpreting cultural themes and patterns of ethnographic analysis; 2) findings via a “Labovian” (Labov, 1972a, 1972b, 2006) sociolinguistic analysis, of one WN case study; and 3) a literary analysis consisting of the use of metonymy in a particular WN conversation. These differing methods are warranted from the variety of types of discourse and the myriad subject matter in the WN online community. Two major sections follow in this third chapter: first, the paradigm literature in analysis of text is reviewed, then a second section explaining my research design is included, along with the literature necessary to detail my design.

Paradigmatic Research in Narrative

Underlying Epistemological Assumptions

Poststructuralists St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) quote McWilliam, Lather & Morgan (1997) when they say, “[a]s researchers, what can we be certain about if we’re researching things that defy categorization, how do we constitute data; how do we avoid getting frozen by uncertainty; if we’re not doing realist, modernist research, what systems can we employ?” (p. 10). In the construction of this autoethnography, I search for some

26 From a seminar discussion with Soyini Madison, 26 Feb 2010, she wishes to choose the term “collaborative witnesses” versus “informants” or “participants” in qualitative research.
answers in this project, though they may not be certain. As I am producing a postmodern narrative analysis, I am using a constructivist notion that assumes the idea that people use narratives to perform their identities. I follow Judith Butler (1990/2004) who argued that she meant to “undermine any and all efforts to wield a discourse of truth to delegitimate… practices” (p. viii). In her argument, Butler invokes Foucault when she claims,

The question of who and what is real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. But it is also, as Foucault makes plain, a question of power. Having or bearing “truth” and “reality” is an enormously powerful prerogative within the social world, one way in which power dissimulates as ontology. According to Foucault, one of the first tasks of critique is to discern the relation ‘between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge (p. 215).

I too intend to delegitimate deep cultural practices about widowhood, even though this is a daunting attempt. However, I attempt. I look to Butler who is focusing on minority gendered and sexuality practices, and am revising her project a bit to narrow it to the gendered practice of widowhood, and tweak the idea of social constructionism in relation to widowed people. An analysis of narratives is not going to assist me to reveal what people “really” think, or reveal some “truths” or their essences about their identities. As did Butler, I follow Foucault’s poststructural ideas that he gathered from Nietzsche, who challenged the Cartesian “oneness” and the “eternal truths” with ideas of the body as a plurality. Hoy (2005) claims that “for Nietzscheans [and poststructuralists], the body is
not a presupposed unity but a plurality or multiplicity” (p. 21), and knowledge is not as cemented as the Cartesian *a priori* principles would have it, but rather poststructuralism is informed by understanding and interpretation through the means of historicity and ethnography (Hoy, p. 64). Foucault talks about knowledge in terms of power: “strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge” Foucault (1980, p. 196). From these ideas, other poststructuralists such as Foucault took embodiment into subjectivity and agency: as Hoy quotes him, Foucault (1979) argues,

> the judges of normality are everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social-worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavour, his aptitudes, his achievements” (p. 304).

My narrative analyses are more ways to show how we at WN perform our identities as we talk about our grief (Austin, 1975; Butler, 1990). We are discussing how others judge us as widows, and how their knowledge of widowhood is different from our own, through our personal experiences. However, these judgments are more of understandings and interpretations than any certain knowledge. Therefore in theorizing the WNers’ narratives, I can interpret us as widows who lost our identities prior to spousal death, or are searching for our identities post death, or any number of other constructed kinds of identities that we perform post death, as explained in Chapter 4. The WN narrative data supports the idea that identities are multiple, and in our storytelling, we are performing these identities in our plurality.
Narrative Analysis as Method

The fresh grief stories in WN are hard to read, except for those who are in the midst of it themselves. Even experienced widows in WN who go back to read the “early days” stories find it emotionally hard to go back, without reliving the experience again. Grief is experiential. Anthropologist Bruner (1986) argues that there is a “distinction between reality (what is really out there, whatever that may be), experience (how that reality presents itself to consciousness) and expressions (how individual experience is framed and articulated)” (p. 6). The expressions of the WNers are attempts to understand this grief experience, and even to understand the unimagined reality of death. The experience of grief is more than an event, or a process, and most times lasts much longer than the positivist theorists assert (Freud, 1917; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 2001, 2006). The WNers tell how grief occupies loss, over and over again, and for a longer period than the experts recommend. Stories about spousal grief, according to the personal experience tales of the WNers, are those of trying to make order out of disorder. Spousal grief, according to the WNers, is experienced in ways that are not understood by theorists who have not experienced that condition, and it is not at first understood even within the experience itself; the griever is in pain and confusion beyond their wildest imaginations. But the WNers try to figure it out through their telling. Folklorist Richard Bauman (1986) quotes Myerhoff’s (1978) and Herzfeld’s (1985) works and observes, “[w]hen one looks to the social practices by which social life is accomplished, one finds—with surprising frequency—people telling stories to each other, as a means of giving cognitive and emotional coherence to experience, constructing and
negotiating social identity” (p 113). The WN data supports these phenomena among the WNers’ conversations online, where the WNers are performing their identities as widows.

I call WidowNet a community, yet at the same time, the entire content of WidowNet is interactive communication in the form of text. Narrative scholar Michael Toolan (1991) explains the elements of narrative that include the teller, the tale and the addressee, or the one who listens. In the “field” of my project, the obvious parts of the narrative are the tale and the teller. The evidence of the “listeners” is embedded in the technology of the software. I can also see evidence of the listeners when I find the responses to the story in the message board. Toolan argues, “since the present teller is the access to the distant topic, there is a sense, too, in which narrative entails making what is distant and absent uncommonly present: a merging rather than a division” (p. 2). This occurs, too, in the online conversations, even though physically the teller and the addressee are far apart, and the telling and the listening are happening at different times, the merging nevertheless happens. In the online storytelling, the listening is evident in at least three ways the others are responding: 1) by the typing of their replies; 2) addressees also, can “cut and paste” to quote portions of a teller’s narrative to address or emphasize that portion, or for other reasons that part of the story has seemed important to the addressee; 3) by virtue of the automatically numbered counter visible in the software, whenever a user opens a conversation thread (clicking on the link). This counter tool indicates how many visits have occurred, or how many “listeners” have read it, even if they have not responded by entering text of their own into the thread.
Other narrative scholars such as Ochs & Capps (1996) argue, “personal narrative is a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience” (p. 2). Grief narratives in WN help the grievers understand their loss, and begin to find meaning. The story a teller shares might end in a question, and more often than not, someone, usually one who has grieved longer, will point out how relevant that story is to their grief, and how it is helpful, not just to themselves, but to each other. Their experience stories, however, can go beyond, into the realm of allegory. As Shuman (2005) argues, “the great promise that narrative makes is to transcend personal experience, both by allowing us to see our own, seemingly unexplainable, experiences in other people’s stories and by helping us to understand the otherwise unfathomable experiences of others” (p. 149). The WN narrative data supports the idea that the personal experience narratives of the WNers can bring a greater understanding of widowhood and its performativity, not only to themselves, but to the world at large, as well.

Stories involve relationships and build relationships as well; the first of which is the relationship of teller and listener. The WN storyteller builds a relationship with the “listeners,” even though the tellers and listeners take the ostensible form of electronic text and the evidence is by digital signals, nevertheless, we trust that we are real people who tell real stories in WN (Baym, 2000). This relationship between the teller and the listener(s) can depend on other factors, such as the “tellability” (Ochs, 2001, p. 20) where the strength of the account involves the activity of the listeners. Some of those listeners
become “co-tellers” or as Harvey Sacks (1974/1992) would call those interactive stories “second stories.” Sacks claimed, “the teller of the second is in some way concerned to produce a recognizably similar story to the first” (p. 249). In WN, the “second stories” happen more often than not, when as the data explained in Chapter 4 shows, the first-posters and their respondents are telling each other similar stories that help each other understand that first, they are not alone, and second, that this experience of grief is not happening only to the one who told the story first. There is comfort in the sharing of similar stories.

Other relationality types exist, as well, in storytelling. In this sense, the stories contain a relationship between the signifier (the teller’s story) and the signified (the experience) (Barthes, 1966). A type of story relationship in the WN narratives are in this sense considered a relationship between the telling and the experience itself (Bauman, 1986), where the experience is always a partial event, and the telling of that experience is even more partial. Not all of the experience is understood, and not all of the story of that experience is told, though coherence occurs even when the teller is not sure. As Rosaldo (1986) claimed, “although limited in knowledge and capable of distorting our motives, we usually offer accounts of why we do what we do” (p. 97).

The story also has a relationship between language and action (Austin, 1975; Erickson, 1986; Butler, 1990) when the construction of the language of the story becomes a performance, in the Butlerian sense. When we tell our stories, we perform our identities. We also have the relationship of teaching each other in our story-telling (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2001).
Dell Hymes (1974), well-known folklorist and sociolinguist, argued that the relationship between folklore and linguistics is a two-way street, each informing the other. It is not the structural or grammatical aspect of the linguistic elements of this study, but as Hymes argues, “[o]ne can hardly characterize personal pronouns, for example, without noting that certain pronouns identify the role of the speaker, others that of hearer, or even that the same pronoun may be plural or singular in reference, depending on social relationships” (p. 42). I am focusing on that combination of the social relationships and the linguistic patterns of the WNers’ conversations.

Thus, with varying forms of narrative analysis as method (Labov, 1972a, 1972b; Derrida, 1978b; Bauman, 1986; Rosaldo, 1988; Denzin, 1989; Toolan, 1991; Sacks, 1972/1992; Ochs & Capps, 1996, 2006; Richardson, 1997a; Shuman, 2005; Gee, 2007; Reissman, 2008), I am complexifying spousal grief and widowhood by interpreting the things that the members of the community say to each other. I investigated the combination of the sayings themselves and the people who have found meaning in those sayings to each other. We in WN have found real friendships and constructed community in our practice of sharing stories. With this folkloristic concept in mind, I am using data from the online database (Rheingold, 1993; Baym, 2000; Hine, 2000, 2005; Turkle, 1995, 2005) of a boundary-less, non-geographical cyberspace. I will explain those varying forms of narrative analysis in the following methodology section.
The Telling of Storytelling: Research Design & Rationale

Research Timeline

First, I recount a shorthand version of my timeline that outlines the project in its stages. This shows when I worked through the stages of the dissertation project, when I analyzed and wrote out my findings, and how I made some conclusions of the research. The following is my timeline:

This project formally began in the Autumn of 2005, when I wanted to take my original project of writing a book about widows in a more formal way in Academe. I had a story to tell, wanted it to be in a research format, and I had some unfinished business in completing a degree I started 25 years ago. This dissertation is the end product of my original goal. By May of 2010, after some earlier attempts modifications, I had written a description of WidowNet, my website community, and I wrote a Precis for this project that was submitted for approval to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) after some earlier attempts. Later that May, I received the IRB approval. After I received the approval, I immediately announced to the WidowNet members that I have been approved for this project, and I requested their permission for the inclusion into this project. I had earlier asked permission of M. Goshorn, the founder and administrator for this website, and had received that from him as well in several email correspondences.

During the summer, fall and winter of 2010, I worked on the first drafts of chapters 1, 2, and 3. Before December 2010, I had made some plans for member checks that were originally scheduled for January of 2011. These member checks were
dependent upon the WidowNet group gatherings (GTGs) that were informally organized beyond my control. This winter, however, the “GTGs” were canceled due to weather, and then we rescheduled for a different time and place. During that time, I added to my work on chapter 4 of this project, the data analysis. The member check writings, however, overlapped some of my data analysis, and enriched it as well.

In the spring of 2011, I rescheduled my plan for a member check that could take place during a scheduled weekend GTG; thus we met in St. Louis, a meeting that was intended not specifically for my member check, but for a few days’ of socializing in person which we had already been doing online in the website message board. During the planning time of this particular GTG, I asked my fellow WNers to reserve an hour or so for a special meeting time for the member check where we could talk about my project. They agreed, and we met in a local hotel in St. Louis, the end of March, 2011. Even in the midst of a spring snow shower (over 8 inches), over 14 people attended, nearly half of the members who had gathered from the GTG, itself, joined my group meeting, and signed the IRB forms granting permission for their participation. After the March 2011 GTG “member check,” I spent some time writing about that, the analysis, and the tentative conclusions for advisor review. By April 2010, I turned in drafts of some portions of my work, and after a review, took work home back for rewrites for the drafts of Chapters 1, 2, and 3. At the first of May 2011, I submitted a draft of the entire dissertation for review, and continued to revise after editing advice in a meeting with Drs. Lather and Shuman. I spent the summer and autumn of 2011 revising my draft, and updated my data. I met with my advisors again, in October of 2011, to discuss the
revisions and make an appointment for the defense date. The defense date was scheduled for late Autumn of 2011, whereupon I finished this project.

**Description of the Overall Paradigm for Data Collection**

According to Denzin, (1989), “multiple observers, theories, methods and data sources, (researchers) can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-methods, single observer, and single theory studies” (p. 307). I might not agree totally with the notion of “overcoming” bias, but at least I can acknowledge that bias, and in turn attempt to reduce it by virtue of its recognition in my project.. Since the discourse is full of personal accounts and recounts of personal experience, in my interpretive work I am using a combination of data collection methods, utilizing multiple data sources, most of which come from digital databases. I realize that language is always in flux; meaning changes, and it is ambiguous; language is constantly expressed in metaphor where it is reducing signs and symbols and exchanging them for other signs and symbols (Burke, 1941; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Stewart, 1993/2007). My intention, therefore, is not to claim an objective (big T) truth, or an unambiguous fact about things told, but rather I am interpreting my co-collaborators’ stories, stories which themselves are interpretations of their experiences. My analysis of expressing our experience, I am also interpreting our interpretations of each other. I first collected data from the WN site proper, starting with the “General” Forum of 2005; then I added one-to-one emails and instant messages; I also posted certain interview questions on the WN site Forums. Further, as a “member check” (Patton, 2002), I conducted face-to-face group discussions of WNers in informal
social gatherings that WNers call “get togethers” or “GTGs.” Selected self-reflexive journal entries (Erickson, 1986) relevant to my research findings are included, as well. The following sub sections will detail this triangulated set of methods.

**Research Site and Sample: Grief Discourse Constructs Widowhood**

The WidowNet (WN) website message board is a sometimes overwhelming source of information-gathering for this project. Further, this project is likely the first study of WN as an anthropological site. I began with data collection selected from the WN database, focusing on the year 2005. The WN data is so rich that I can slice through and find a profusion of representative records, given that I have known its database since 2001. I have chosen data in two ways. First, the structure of the WN GUI (“gooey,” i.e., graphical user interface) software is such that I can easily use the software’s search function and choose key words that I think are relevant to the themes that I am looking for in my analysis. Second, for the sake of consideration and protection of the newest, and thus the most grieving widows, I am circumventing the most current conversations from the General Forum. For the general conversations, then, where the freshest grief is expressed, I chose a time far enough away, to focus on the 2005 records, where those griever are now past the harshest grief force of their early widowhood. Second, I chose

---

27 The General Board--Forum carries its own irony. It is the “place” that is easiest to find (to google), and it is also the most public. That is, *anyone*, not just logged in members, can view and read the conversations, though cannot post unless registered. Other Forums in WN are more private, i.e., they can be viewed and posted by WN members only.
2005, due to the unavailability of the data before that date. Data from 2005, the earliest of
the available data, now contain more than 400,000 posts. I found other relevant threads
of conversation outside of the General Forum, more recently than 2005, that contained
themes that are relevant to my research questions, as well. I chose them mostly from the
“Beyond Bereavement” Forum, where WNers should be past at least their first year of
grief in order to post there. The search consisted of my investigations into relevant thread
topics, initially, and then I used the “search” function of WN, to enter relevant key words,
to access results related to my research questions. I then copied/pasted data from the
website into my own computer for a dual purpose: 1) to enable the use of text in software
programs intended for qualitative research and 2) to hide names and make them
pseudonyms for the sake of the ethics of this research.

Christine Hine, leading online ethnographer, claims that the online community “as a
record, an archive, is the ultimate field recorder” (2000, p. 7). She also argues that
sometimes there is a question of identity online and identity in face-to face relationships,
and “for some research questions it is important to capture both sides of the screen to
fully understand the experiences of others” (2005, p. 72). This is not the reason I am

28 “Beyond Bereavement” (BB) in WN is defined for WNers who are past their first year of
widowhood, and in turn, the topics of conversation there are a mix of grief and subjects of their current
aspects of life that can be but not necessarily are related to grief.

29 I first used “TAMS” qualitative analysis tool, but later used “Hyper Research,” a more robust
qualitative analysis software tool downloaded to my computer.
doing an online ethnography, but this does mean that my ethnographic “field” is at my
desktop. The existing WN's database is my first organizing principle coming out of my
immersion with the data. All I need to extract data is an Internet connection. Since WN
is already stored by the database owner (Mr. G), and in a digital form, I received first, his
permission, then the permission of the WNers by announcing my proposed role as
researcher to the message board several times, and subsequently collected and
downloaded more data than I needed, but relevant to my research questions. After first
giving an in-depth description of WN (as shown in Chapter 1), I continued with some
statistics about WN, i.e., number of posters (WNers who “posted” their utterances),
identification and locations of posters, and other demographic information. Where
provided by some WNers (which is optional in the site), I also could see in the WN
statistics about members. The number of posts to which each of the WNers have
contributed is a published statistic, viewable to members, along with a wealth of other
information in the database. The site has been a cornucopia of information for this
research project.

Much of my sampling and analyses happened in overlapping layers in another
form of triangulation. I chronologically overlapped my data collection with some of my
analysis “to improve both the quality of data collected and the quality of analysis (Miles
& Huberman, 1984, p. 437). Doing this increased my understanding of the varieties of
identities experienced by the WNers in their telling. Thus I used maximum variation
sampling, when I picked stories according to themes related to my research questions. I
used the search function in WN with the term ‘identity’ and analyzed the resulting data
but also then sampled within the stories for processes that I found which entailed the use of various concepts of identity. I found identity themes embedded in other discussions in WN. I also used intensity sampling when I found information-rich cases that manifest my phenomena (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

**Sampling with Collaborative Witnesses (Participants)**

The WNers’ stories tend to play out similarly as each new year goes by. Thus I determined in the beginning of this project, to focus, first on a WN “location,” viz., the 2005 General Forum, and then on the participants of those threads with themes I had chosen. I used a purposive convenience sample of WNers that gave me a “fair representation” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 331) where I keyed in on conversations held by the WNers who were the newcomers of 2005, and those who were the oldtimers of 2005, though this was not difficult to sort due to the built-in statistics of the website. The particular collaborators in any given conversation thread are randomly chosen, because the different Forums in the community create a common mix of both newcomers and oldtimers in almost all of the discussions. That is one major reason I call this online community a “Community of Practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2001) where the focus is on the performances of the people, more than the place. Many of the current oldtimers were newcomers in 2005, and many also are those who were oldtimers in 2005, and are still members today. I also use data from the current 2009-10-11 Forum called “Beyond Bereavement” where I have focused on a combination of member and researcher identities there, sometimes because I initiated anthropological questions to the
members, i.e., I created new threads of conversation with my own anthropological questions. I also asked the WN members about those particular threads of conversation that are relevant to this project, where I informed my fellow WNers that my comments and questions to them were a part of my research. Many willing participants collaborated with me in their responses, much more than I expected, and to all of my collaborators, I am most grateful.

By taking a close look at the statistics about the WN members, I could tell who were the most prolific posters, and I could find their contributions to the conversations across the Board. I followed WNER conversation trajectories, include analysis of others who are interlocutors with key participants, and combine that with themes that I found in WN that are related to my research questions.

**Guiding Questions for Data Collection Methods.**

In order to show that the design responds to the problems stated in this dissertation, I am guided by the research questions in my data collection. Since the data in WN is overwhelmingly lengthy, rich and varied, my research questions determine the boundaries of data that I should be searching. Because of the long-term pattern I found of widows seeking answers about their grief, I have constructed the research questions around that pattern. (It was my own interest in finding WN, as well.) As Gertrude Stein once mused, I myself do not even know the questions much less the answers. Further, Richardson (1997) informs me when she describes the narrative “that gives voice to those who are silenced or marginalized in the cultural narrative. I call this the ‘collective..."
story’… [which] displays an individual’s story by narrativizing the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs” (p. 32). I interpret the WNER stories as “collective stories” in my analysis. Time after time, new widows on WN come to ask the questions of identity and of normalcy in widowhood. Oldtimer widows answer those questions of the newcomers, too. Since I began to think of this WN site as a community of practice, I have been looking for ways that “old timer” WNERs are advising “newcomers.” In Chapter 4, I interpret those pieces of advice that the WNERs give to each other as a socially relational, informal learning. My overriding question is to figure out how the widows are performing their identities in this community of widows; therefore, I searched for topic threads that dealt with this theme of identity.

**Methods of Narrative Analysis**

Many (and often conflicting) theories of narrative exist, but for the purposes of this project I rely on those of Ochs & Capps (2001) who argue that narrative relies on the chronological order of structure, “to demystify [life events] and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience” (p. 2). Narrative recounts a sequence of events, or a sequence within an event. Moreover, in this social situation, Ochs & Capps argue, “conversation is the most likely medium for airing unresolved life events. When people hear about or are directly involved in an unexpected situation, they often don’t have a clear sense of what transpired and why” (p. 7). Many of the posts in WN are composed in narrative form, though as Ochs & Capps describe, “…the events may be painful and difficult to articulate coherently…. [m]any people tend to relate
events—not as a tidy narrative package but as incomplete and unresolved, and informal conversation with those one knows or trusts rather than more formal genres is the medium of choice” (p. 7). WNers may not know each other at first, but the element of trust and relief arises soon after entry to the community and a modicum of lurking. After all, for us in WN, this is a continuing ritual welcoming newcomers to a “club that no one wants to belong” and those that are there, can be trusted to be telling the truth in such an unappealing and stigmatized situation. J. L. Austin (1975) calls this ritual welcome an “illucctionary” act, since the welcome does something (good) to the newcomer widows in WN. The oldtimer WNer replies to a tentative first post to the newcomer with a welcome, and an immediate reassurance that WN is a place to be understood, when grieving.

“Conversation is a hallmark of familiarity” say Ochs & Caps. The conversations in WN, though, are situated with an Internet “twist.” We get no physical voice, but instead we use text with CAPS to change tone. We get no visible body gestures, but we do use “emoticons.” Nevertheless, in spite of the limitations of the lack of physicality, the emotions are expressed and conveyed, and are empathized in WN. In fact, in our WN conversations, I have found what Ochs & Capps asserted to be very closely allied: “commiserating, gossiping, philosophizing, exchanging advice, and other informal

30 Emoticon is an Internet term that combines the concept of emotions and icons that are used to portray the emotions. In their origins, it was the use of punctuation marks from the keyboard, and by now they have been coded (via software programs) in ways to make little cartoon expressions that represent the emotion used in the teller.
discourse interlaces lives and builds common ways of acting, thinking, feeling and otherwise being in the world.” (p. 8). The sense of narrative in the WN conversations meet most of Ochs & Capps’ descriptions, and the analysis that I explicate in Chapter 4 illustrates their points. They argue, “the emphasis is on narrative activity as a sense-making process rather than as a finished product in which loose ends are knit together in a single storyline” (p. 15). I looked at the WN conversations that illuminated “as a site for working through who we are and how we should be acting, thinking and feeling as we live our lives…” where we “ask questions, raise issues and possibilities and otherwise provoke further thinking about an incident” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 17).

One element of conversation analysis has been used in a broad range of situations is the sense of “repair” or “remedy” in conversations, a generic term that is used from seeming errors in turn-taking (when conversations overlap, for example) or corrections, as for example in a conversation, someone says something that is faulty in content, and others may be amending that conversation in one way or another. Theorists including Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks (1977) have addressed “organization of repair” in conversation analysis, addressing “recurrent problems” in interaction, whether it be syntactic or semantic. Goffman (1971) in his interaction studies, chose to address a concept he called “remedial interchange” when he focused on norms and social interaction, the process of social control, and it is…

not obedience and disobedience that are central, but occasions that give rise to remedial work of various kinds, especially the provision of corrective readings calculated to show that a possible offender actually
had a right relationship to the rules, or if [s]he seemed not to a moment ago, [s]he can be counted on to have such a relationship henceforth (p. 108).

My interest in remedial interchange in my narrative analysis is supported by Goffman when I reviewed data that showed how grievers approached WN with their notions of craziness, and the Old timer WNers. This deviation from the norm (how grief is supposed to be) and its relation to grief in WN conversations is addressed in Chapter 4.

Another concept Goffman addresses is the concept of the interpersonal ritual (p. 63), where it functions as signs of involvement and connectedness to each other. I find in Chapter 4 how the rituals in WN bring the members to a community of practice in rituals of welcome, as one example. As Goffman describes, ritual, a supportive interchange, “behooves the recipient to show that the message has been received, that its import has been appreciated that he affirmed relationship actually exists as the performer implies, that the performer himself has worth as a person, and finally that the recipient has an appreciative grateful nature” (p. 63). Other rituals of support in WN that enact remedial interchange are the violation that “ceases to be a violation and becomes instead a gesture of regard performed by…” [WN in this case] (p. 114). This is analyzed and explained in section 1 of Chapter 4.

In chapter 4, I use three different types of analytic methods in three different sets of WN conversations: 1) a “traditional” themes-and-patterns method used in qualitative analysis that showed many of the WN themes; 2) a Labovian formal analysis of a
particular narrative from one WNer, and 3) a literary analysis of a particular thread of conversation that is laced with metonymy.

I have chosen to use these three methods of analysis in the data in WidowNet in order to begin to accommodate its depth, richness and complexity. For the first section, I have chosen Reissman’s (2008) ideas of traditional qualitative methods of looking at themes and patterns in the narrative data throughout WN, but mostly the 2005 General Forum. Reissman’s theories have guided this thematic analysis. Ochs & Capps (2001) have been good pilots in the analysis of these themes, as well. In the second section, I focused on one particular story by a prolific WN storyteller I pseudonymed “Misha,” because her tales also target many of the ideas of performing identity through narratives. I also found a remark that she said in 2005, which struck me as central to this project: Misha said, “I didn’t know how to be a widow.” There it was! My dissertation title! Thus I emailed her and asked her what she meant by that phrase, how she came to that notion, and she answered with a very long story. Accordingly, I took her story and applied a socio-linguistic form of analysis to it, based on the methods of William Labov (1972, 2003, 2006). In the third methods section I explain how I explicated one particular thread of conversation in the “Beyond Bereavement” Forum which bespoke an interesting trope called metonymy and its relation to grieving, living past death, and performing identity, using Kenneth Burke’s (1941) and Lakoff & Johnson’s (1980) theories of metaphor, as well as Susan Stewart’s (1993/2007) concept of souvenir as metonymy. There I used a literary analysis of each of the participants’ stories set forth in that thread.
As I have stated, two of the most prevalent questions in the WidowNet community asked by new comers when they arrive are their question of identity and their question of normalcy. These “Who am I?” and “Am I crazy” questions seem to be the most fundamental, core questions. These questions of identity, and normative questions are the center of my research inquiry. I addressed them in the first section of Chapter 4’s data analysis where I used conventional qualitative analysis techniques, looking for themes and patterns throughout the WN conversations. I found in my analysis that in the social relations formed by the narratives of the WNers, identity played a huge role. Erickson's (1986) ideas are useful to this analysis of identity, when he argues not for an identity that is objectified, reified, universalized or unified, but instead, for identity as multiple, subjective, constructed, experientialized and particularized. I looked for patterns of identity and saw many, not just one; I looked for patterns of loss and found them ubiquitous. I looked for patterns of ways of coping with loss, the length and breadth of loss, and the ways that others treated them in their loss.

I found more data than I needed for my coding, and looked for the themes and patterns in my coding analysis. In the data analysis, I looked for meanings in several ways. One was to use a “literal” coding procedure where I used and found pattern in the terms that the WNers used themselves. I built from the descriptive code categories by finding more interpretive themes from various phrases and paragraphs of stories that WNers had told. I explained how these identities are constructed in the WNers’ conversations. In my sorting and coding, I also chose several themes to look for: types of
identity, the set norms of widowhood vs. the personal experience specific to their grief, kinds of stigma, and the ways of socially situated informal learning.

I chose to analyze a portion of WidowNet’s conversations according to conversation topics related to the research questions in this project. For these conversation topics, I used the standard qualitative analysis by looking for themes and patterns in my data that are those conversations. In my analysis, I found that these notions of social identity are not unitary, and are “thought of as a package with diverse contents” (Erickson, 1982, p. 13).

Fred Erickson (1982) argued, “[T]he answer to that question [of whom the participant is] does not appear all at once. It is arrived at cumulatively across real time during the course of interaction” (p. 13). Identity is not evident, nor is it some innate “something” that if we look hard enough from the “insides” of us, we’ll find it. But rather, the identities that I have found in the analysis, I found over the time of listening to the talk of the WNers, reading their personal accounts of their discoveries, I have seen that “cumulatively across real time during the course of interaction” (Erickson) happened in the WN conversations. Evidence for this is shown in Chapter 4.

An understanding of Erickson (2004) also assists me in data construction, when he says that “data must be found—they do not simply appear to the researcher—which is to say that they are not apprehended passively by the researcher as natural entities” (p. 486). My search for the keywords has been years-long, and even distracting at the outset, as well as ongoing, because of so many possible interesting related concepts, subjects and thoughts. But in this qualitative research I am aware that (again understanding Erickson),
I am finding a process, “of progressive problem-solving in data construction and analysis...”. “Such an account [of data analysis] demystifies the qualitative research process in a very useful way” (p. 487). Erickson also describes the origins of the notions of “qualitative” with the questions of asking “what kinds of entities” in the social world or ‘local community of practice’” (p. 487).

I also simultaneously combined document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants [whether mainly email, IR (Internet relay) chat rooms, or secondarily phone or face-to-face] interviews, direct participation and observation, and introspection" (Patton quoting Denzin 1978, p. 266) in my overlapping methods in this project. In this portion of the project, then, I searched to see what kinds of widowhood are there, and what kinds of identity that the widow performed, as well as how these kinds of identities have gotten constructed.

2. Labovian Analysis of the Misha Section: Shapes and Functions of Narrative

In the second section of my methodology in Chapter 4, I chose a Labovian tool for narrative analysis when I analyzed a very long narrative that a WN widow I call Misha wrote to the General Forum in 2010 in answer to an email question I sent her. Her 2010 thread conversation is a result of some of my research earlier. During my data collection, I discovered that in a 2005 conversation which Misha had said: “I didn’t know how to be a widow.” (WN, May, 2005). In my early keyword search, I found someone
else using MY dissertation title! I wrote her to ask for clarification of aspects of her
initial story, and Misha, as always, was abundant in her answer. In response to me, and
to the rest of the WN community, After more than 10 years into her widowhood, Misha
very willingly and promptly provided a long synopsis of her widow story to WN during
the summer 2010. As I parsed her sentences, I found nearly 350 subject-verb clauses. I
used the Labovian categorization in my analysis of her. Labov (2003) argues that “[w]e
will be concerned with the smallest unit of linguistic expression that defines the functions
of narrative – primarily the clause…” (p. 75), though occasional phrases and single words
(e.g., “so there!”) are sometimes used for evaluative purposes. In his formal

[T]he complex, symbolic and lexical attempt at depicting meaning when
[he defines] narrative as a particular way of reporting past events, in which
the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted [my ital.] as
the order of the events referred to. They then describe the full elaboration
of adult narratives of personal experience, beginning with an abstract,
orientation, an evaluation section embedded in the complicating action, a
resolution and a coda (p. 37).

31 Actually, the phrase “how to be a widow” was suggested in a discussion with one of my
advisors (Professor Shuman) very early in my project. It took me years to understand the significance of
this phrase.
Labov also observes, “any sequence of clauses that contains at least one temporal juncture is a narrative” (p. 38). Other clauses are often contained within the narrative that are not in a temporal sequence, but are still important to the story. Labov (2003) calls those clauses that “range freely through the narrative sequence” (p. 84). These “free range” clauses are identified by noting that they can be displaced in the narrative sequence without changing the fundamental semantics of the story. Labov calls these free clauses “evaluative” and they are usually constructed syntactically as modals or past (and rarely as present) progressives.

Consequently, the way that Labov categorizes a narrative is to look at the types of the clauses. Stories contain clauses that are in the shape of: 1) orientation—beginning a story; 2) complicating action—elements of the plot; 3) evaluation—some point to be made—a “why” to be answered or surmised; 4) resolution—the result of the narrative; 5) coda—a returning to the present moment. In other words, in a Labovian analysis, one would see that in a narrative, the fundamental semantic interpretation of a story would have a linear sequence in the order of the events, but within the narrative, elements of the stories are enhanced with evaluations that clarify and enrich the story with reasons that could make the narrator the “good guy.”

I used this system to explain how Misha’s story evolved, and delved into her utterances that are actions which were “refusals, challenges, retreats, promises, threats, etc.” as Labov (1972, p. 299) argues. These actions in turn “are used to evaluate the experience within” Misha’s culture and situation (Ibid., p. 355), and thus to find ways to define (what Labov used as a chapter title, called) “the transformation of experience in
narrative syntax” (pp. 354 ff). The analysis of Misha’s story aided in understanding more of the mechanisms of grief, and how individual this phenomenon is, yet how many of the grievers could at one level relate to her story, and at another level know that her story is not their story.

3: Using Literary Analysis Metonymy for One Common WN Thread Called “I left his Beer in the Fridge”

The third method of analysis I chose focused on one particular thread of conversation in WN that was strikingly metaphorical, and intrigued me so that it led me to find more ways that WNers constructed their identities in their losses. This particular thread I also noted had the linguistic relationship that I mentioned earlier—what Harvey Sacks (1972/1992) characterized as “second stories” whereby one teller started the thread of conversation with a story about her situation, and others chimed in with responses by telling their own, similar stories that agreed with the first. Sacks called this “something that operates by virtue of procedures which are socially organized and are characterizable” (p. 7). The second stories in WN showed that the responders analyzed the first story, and understood it before they started a similar story of their own. These second stories served to let the WNers know that they were listening to each other, they were not alone in the abstraction of the experience and they could understand the point of the differing experiences yet similar stories.

In second story conversations, turn-taking sequences occur with unspoken rules, according to Sacks. His characterization of the second story highlights the social interaction in storytelling. Sacks’ lectures in turn-taking in conversations helped guide
me in my analysis of WN conversations. In a particular situated conversation in WN, I was immediately struck by its poetic tones, but there was something beyond the poetry of their utterances to be addressed. I used a rhetorical analysis of the WN conversation that seems to be a paradigm type, a WNer starting a post, speaking of an experience, then a response came with a similar experience, and the responses continued in kind. I found in the WN conversation titled “Toothpaste and other absurd things,” that the participants very easily and openly made some profound remarks about their past relationships with their partners in their speaking of the remnants of their old lives, the pieces of their stories about their losses and their keepsakes. This particular conversation frames the poetic in their expressions, and it seemed to me the best way to approach that was to recognize their use of the literary device of metonymy. I took their statements apart and critiqued their poetics.

To support my analysis, I researched metaphor, and designated three leading theorists in metaphor. Over the years of linguistic analysis, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) have become primary and influential in their work on the role of metaphor in language. In their treatise on metaphor, they discuss one particular figure of speech, metonymy, which is a trope that is a linguistic way of referring to one entity to mean another entity. For example, when I say “I am reading Joan Didion,” I mean to say that in a shortened way, “I am reading the essays and novels that Joan Didion wrote.” In WN ’s Beyond Bereavement Forum last year, I found a very poetic kind of thread where the WNers talked about their lives in metonymic terms. Though the members had no intention of writing poetry, nevertheless, their utterances were poetic; although not planning to show
their prowess in metaphorical device-making, they were using poetic tropes to try to understand why they were clinging onto certain objects that were related to their past lives when their partners were still living with them. As Lakoff & Johnson point out, “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action (p.1). They also explain how metonymic expressions come in various forms, as well (p. 37 ff). These could be parts substituted for wholes, as in “I need a strong arm to lift this.” They could also be expressed as a “producer for a product” (p. 38), as I did in my Joan Didion example. The metonym could be an “object used for a user” as “the gun he hired wanted 50 grand”; or it could be” controller for controlled” as “it could be “Nixon bombed Hanoi.” In two other institutional types of metonymy, according to Lakoff & Johnson, “the institution [is substituted] for people responsible,” as in “the Senate praises the President” or the last type, “the place for the institution,” as in “the White House made a late night announcement.” The final type of metonymy is “the place for the event” (Ibid.) as in “remember the Alamo.” In my analysis of a particular thread where the WNers are talking about various objects with which they cannot part, I saw various kinds of metonymy as a way to discuss the identities performed in widowhood, and ways to express their loss.

Kenneth Burke (1941) argued that “metonymy is a device of poetic realism…” and he believed that his “primary concern with them here [is] their role in the discovery and description of ‘the truth’” (p. 421). I am modifying Burke’s “truth” to speak more of how the tropes can substitute, and to turn “the constructions,” or, how the teller interpreted their experience in metonymic ways. I have been looking at how these tropic
constructions are related to constructions of identity, to find more meaning in their newly widowed lives. Metonymy is a substitute for something, a usage shift, and often a trope of language that is studied in poetics, not so much anthropology. Burke also argues that the metonymic trope is synecdoche, but in a particular application. The synecdoche is a turn of phrase when we speak about a part while we mean the whole. This part, in fact, is more importantly the part that is considered to have a much larger significance than other parts; it is a way of understanding how we use discourse to create hierarchies and develop discrimination (both aesthetic, and prejudicial). For example, we say we would “set sail” when we mean we are going to get into the sail boat and do all the other activities that are needed to make the boat sail on the water when the wind is right. The sail is the most prominent part of the boat. One of the most interesting aspects of language is that we shorten ideas into tropes and we use metaphors to go from the known to the unknown. We compare the microcosm to the macrocosm in synecdoche, and in the use of metonymy, we take two unlike entities and relate them into a pair by saying one entity is a sign of another. In these substitutions in WN, however, I am not looking at the grammatical and lexical substitutions, but how the semantics are affecting the lives of the widowed and how they are making meaning out of the metonymy.

Susan Stewart's (1993/2007) study of souvenir aids in this discussion of metonymy, when she shows how the souvenir is one particular example of metonymic use of a particular remembrance. Her illustrative thoughts are relevant here when she says,
the souvenir is… a metonymic reference existing between object/part and object/whole in which the part is of the material of the original and this a “partial double.” Within the operation of the souvenir, the sign functions not so much as object to object, but beyond this relation, metonymically, as object to event/experience. The ribbon may be metonymic to the corsage, but the corsage is in turn metonymic to an increasingly abstract, and hence increasingly “lost” set of referents: the gown, the dance, the particular occasion, the particular spring, all springs, romance, etc. (p. 136).

Stewart is describing the practice of language I found in the metonymic discussions of the lost or kept objects of the widows in WN. Chapter 4 will explain more what the widows did with their kept objects, and how their kept objects became more than the symbol.

Kenneth Burke argues,

The basic "strategy" in metonymy is this: to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible, e.g., to speak of "the heart" rather than "the emotions." If you trail language back far enough, of course, you will find that all our terms for "spiritual" states were metonymic in origin. We think of "the emotions," for instance, as applying solely to the realm of consciousness, yet obviously the word is rooted in the most "materialistic" term of all, "motion" (a key strategy in Western materialism has been the reduction of "consciousness" to "motion"). In his Principles of Literary Criticism, Richards is
being quite "metonymic" in proposing that we speak not of the "emotions"
aroused in the reader by the work of art, but the "commotions" (p. 424).
Burke’s argument about motions, emotions and commotions fits the metonymic
conversation of the WNers well. We were “moved” to tears with the stories we told in
that context. In that third section of my analysis in Chapter 4, I show how the metonymic
uses of the WNers’ conversation assume a much larger concept of the WNers’
relationships with their departed partners.

In addition to the triangulation of analysis methods in my dissertation, I add
portions of a reflexive journal to illustrate my own self-awareness of this study, as it can
enhance my methodological aims. The following section explains further.

**Analysis: Reflexive Journal as a Broader Prism of Interpretation**

**Journaling as Revision**

In this insider study I include memos in my reflexive journal, along with its
benefits and its limits (Richardson, 1997a, 2008, 2009). Sociologist and
autoethnographer, Caroline Ellis (2003) argues, “there’s plenty of time to read about
autoethnography. I want you to experience autoethnography first” (p. 206). I took Ellis
at her word by beginning chapter 1 with a revised journal entry which situates the “I” of
this autoethnographer. I am using the reflexive journal in this autoethnography to
strengthen and understand my own experience of death and connect that with and attempt
to offer insights about this culture of widows in WN, and their ways of life as they tell in
their stories. I am an individual, but I am connected to WN, to the other widows who
have had this same experience. I am “working among the ruins” as St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) characterized “all those things we assumed were solid, substantial, and whole—knowledge, truth, reality, reason, science, progress, the subject, and so forth” (p. 1). I see this concept both as the elements of the “post” as well as in qualitative analysis and elements of widowhood as well, where I elaborate in Chapter 5. The emergent approach in the journals is how I begin to connect my own cultural experience to that of my community in WN. I am attempting to reveal some of the “multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Patton, 2002, p. 85) in these examples of my reflexive journals. Starting with the meaning-making of my reflexive journals, my project has broadened into a tool intended to spawn a better understanding of widowhood and grief in WN, and even more broadly, how WNers practice our new identities, while situating the “I” as a source and a springboard. From my journaling standpoint, I revise it here so I can focus on “protect[ing] against my own biases” (Ellis, p 215) in my quest to work on a narrative inquiry where I can focus not as a centerpiece, but just as a small part of this greater group, as researchers practice in a qualitative study. Ellis & Bochner (2003) argue that “autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 209). In the portions of my journal that I put into this dissertation, I am risking parts of my self that might “move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” thus adding more layers to this endeavor. Richardson (1997a) argues, “… a goal of ethnography is to retell ‘lived experience,’ to make another world accessible to the reader (p. 180).” I am following Richardson’s views in my ethnographic
attempt to make the world of widowhood more accessible to the “other” i.e., to the rest of the non-widowed world. Through this qualitative perspective, I can boldly express the issue where the researcher does have an affect on the research. Thus with the support of autoethnographers’ theories for this inquiry (Hayano, 1979; Buzard, 2003; Richardson, 1997a, 1997b, 2008; Ellis, 2003, 2004, 2009), this writing is to articulate the widowed experience in ways other than the norms that control widows’ lives. Even though this is a contested issue (Hesse-Biber, 2007), there is something feminist about the self-reflexive “bent” in qualitative work when we “bend the rules” of quantitative science into a more flexible and thus expanded inquiry. However, there is more to the feminist line of reasoning that informs my work. The prismatic lenses of reflexivity do not guarantee a certainly clear vision, but rather more ways to find the pieces of perception that otherwise are not seen. Already “troubling” the issues (Lather, 1997) that are much more complex than I first perceived in my journals, I choose to use metaphorical layers thicker than bifocals in my attempts to interpret and understand this project. With these multi-focals, I analyzed the “insider” vs “outsider” issues in the stories that WNers tell of their marginalization (Goffman, 1963/1990; Spivak, 1994; Davis, 1996 referring to Levinas; Butler, 1997). Yet even with all the foci, and more than one prism, objectivity is not possible. However, with my descriptions of the practices of WNers’ conversations online, I attempt to situate myself with a reflexive perspectival investigation, and my credibility is stronger with that understanding.

Using a journal is nothing new to me; I have even taught that technique to my students for years, and I have been keeping one or another for more years than I want to
count, as well. “Practice what you preach” was ingrained in my own teaching background. Sometimes I would read something from one of my journals in my classroom to make a particular point. They have been tools of my trade for years. They have been my habitual critical thinking crevices. When Allan died in 2001, I scribbled in my widow journals constantly, one right after another, and they were so wracked with pain that I thought I could turn only to them, even though I had also turned to WN, more than I realized. By the end of that first year of widowhood, I expressed my grief in twenty-or-so thick bound notebooks with my fine-tipped pens. It was important to me then to phrase what I was trying to understand, and what I was feeling about the loss of a whole human being to death—something that was impossible to even imagine. Today I now stare at those closed journals early, stacked in a pile on the floor, in a shadowed corner of my room, and I am loathe to open the pages to review. After a few years, other journal notebooks developed into the thoughts I had about my work. Journals have a meta-purpose: I choose to think about my thoughts there; I explore my ideas about what I think with freedom. Some of my journals reflect many levels of my evolving thought that has been revised into places like this dissertation, for instance. It gives me many powerful meta-purposes. I felt freer to look back on my reflexive journals, and I saw what I was doing intellectually earlier, from a reflexive point of view. Pillow (2003) discussed how “reflexivity is commonly used in qualitative research and has been posited and accepted as a method qualitative researchers can and should use to legitimize, validate, and question research practices and representations” (p. 175). Pillow’s influence brings my journaling work of the past ten years of widowhood into focus, and
melded into the development of this dissertation project. The following section reveals one of my main concerns, the issue of my being an “insider” in this ethnographic research. As a journal entry, I must say, I like Pillow’s quote of Geertz’s (1973), “All ethnography is part philosophy and a good deal of the rest is confession” (p. 175). That characterizes what I do as an autoethnographer. I am hesitant to share it thanks to my haunting Catholic background that wants to keep the confession in the confessional, not here for an audience. Neverthesess, I do; after all, it is a part of my qualitative project.

**Journal Entry: Insider Issues**

The "relationship between the observed and the observer has been called into question at every level" (Patton, 2002, p. 84) in qualitative analysis. Thus the importance of my reflexive record keeping is paramount in this “insider” project. My values and cultural background inevitably affect what I observe. There is a range of possible roles for the researchers in ethnographic study: from the observer, to the participant-observer, to the complete participant. Much of anthropology’s literature on the “insider” status, as it has existed, has played a larger role of acceptance in the late 20th, and the 21st century for these types of ethnographies (Foley, 2000). From Zora Neale Hurston’s study of her own community in the 1930s to Renato Rosaldo’s (1993) study of grieving headhunters while he grieved himself, insider ethnography has established its place in research. Much of the insider ethnographies are occurring in the health fields (Gerrish, 2003), while others who conducted insider anthropologies are focused on ethnic and gender studies, and educational issues (Hayano, 1979; Chaudhry, 2004). However, my research is not
centered on ethnic or gender issues specifically, though gender issues are entwined in widowhood. Insider research can have the advantage, with the commonalities of gender, or class or status of allowing for participants to be heard (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 140). In this case, I argue that since grief is such an experiential phenomenon, as an insider I have an insight as to what grief is. However, as Buch (2007) argued, “Choices regarding how much of an insider to become can have complicated ethical, legal or moral aspects” (p. 203). Soyini Madison (2005) asks, “I have questions like this of my own, and it seems to me the cubby hole for them belongs to a reflexive journal.” And so here I write, as in the journal, to contemplate these issues. There are more concerns that are entailed in this insider project. My insider status brings challenges that are about things such as, “am I still a member of WidowNet if I am writing about it?” I attempt to do so with conscious consideration now. Another question has always been, “how do I refrain from using my co-participants?” When I chose my field to be WN while still studying in classes, my role before my announcement was still complete participant, due to my already-active and well-known role as WN member, even though I knew my time as a researcher would surely come, and I began to be more cautious and unobtrusive in my interaction in WN. After my IRB approval, I reached the long awaited and long dreaded time to announce my new status as a researcher to the online community. I was told that things would never be the same.32 Early on, I had made it known in WN that I had returned to school, even before I considered working with WN as my field of study. My fellow participants

32 This came as a result of a conversation I had with Dr. Yvonna Lincoln, who had come to OSU to lead a qualitative workshop April 23, 2010.
in WN have long been supporters of my return to school, as several others in WN have
done since their widowhood. But when I approached the WN community seeking their
permission for my research in their stories, I sought their approval with apprehension. I
was about to expose their privacy, and I was about to interfere with their intimate
conversations. I was about to extract their conversations and make partial accounts,
while I planned to interpret my friends. I was about to take liberties with some of the
most painful parts of my friends’ lives.

To my pleasant surprise, however, all of the WNers who responded to my
research proposal in my posting, did so positively and supportively. They cited a few
reasons for this: 1) that they have known me already, 2) they had been aware of my
returning to school, and 3) they still look forward to reading this (collaborative) study in
completion and have it published for the world to know. Only one poster asked me not to
quote his/her writings, but had no reservations about my research itself.

**Journal Entry: Ethical Power Relations**

I assured WNers in my announcement that by the ethics of this study, I would to
my utmost in making sure the participants were anonymous, and the conversations
trustworthy. My fellow participants and I share a reciprocity of purposes with this
project, for they, as well as I, want this project published, and they as well as I wish and
hope that our culture at large can have a broader understanding of the complexities of
widowhood. My fellow participants’ informed consent was obtained, though my
boundaries and roles between member and researcher remain blurred, indeed. This keeps
me aware of my ethical obligations every day I work on this project, and beyond, since the doing cannot be undone. My promises are my actions, and I have and intend to keep them, though this stance will inevitably be open to challenge.

I also told fellow WNers in my announcement that my work would not claim to provide a complete understanding of who we are, nor would I claim that this would be a certain, statistical account, but rather it should be an interpretation of our community. My awareness of the pitfalls of this research adds a heightened caution to my participation in WN. Since my announcement and my subsequent data collection and analysis, I have refrained from being as constant a member as I used to be, and now I am more a constant observer and a cautious participant. Most of my (fewer than the past) posts on WN since my announcement have been either supporting someone who is in pain, or else putting anthropological questions to the community, making clear to the WNers in my posts that I was presenting them from my researcher perspective. Added to this, as one can see right here, I am using this reflexive account in this autoethnography, with the telling of the social interactions that have been reshaped by this research. So far, however, my relationships with fellow WNers have remained solid and supportive, evidenced by the quick and helpful answers to my anthropological questions in WN (I call those threads online interviews) to the face-to-face interviews that they have cooperated with me in various cities in the US.

I also give attention to the otherwise hidden parts of a gendered identity such as widowhood, which is a subordinated group. Even though both men and women are widowed, the dominant narrative genderizes the widowed identity, since statistically,
there are many more widowed women than men. Thus with this insider perspective, I also use my feminist background in this reflexive journal, I study my coding more intently, and understand from this particular stance that it is still considered a “situated, partial, and perspectival” account, in Haraway’s (1988) often repeated words.

When my fellow WN members granted me this privilege, I took on this responsibility for the “storytelling rights” (Shuman, 1986, 2005) of this project. Shuman points out that the relation between the “participants in an event and the reporters who claim the right to talk about what happened” shifts the focus from the stories that belong to the WNers, to the teller of the stories, viz, me. Keeping that layer of interpretation in mind brings the “study of rights” in this project. My interpretations of their narrative accounts adds another layer of metacommentary of which I am constantly aware. The WNers have been willing to allow my use of their rights as storytellers; they are the owners of their experiences. This is the core reason why this project is not just my own. On top of that, the WNers’ stories are of an extremely sensitive nature, so I will not proceed without mentioning the ethics that is intertwined in this collaborative autoethnography which “hinge on … the use of concealment, as well as on the transmission of informative messages” (p. 3). We at WN conceal ourselves for the sake of Internet security and for the sake of keeping these stories close to our hearts, all the while knowing it is splayed out to the global community at large. But these stories are emotional and personal and coming out of a source of pain not known before. Why we do this is interpreted in Chapter 4. Considering the ethics of telling these stories is
paramount. For these are not just my stories; these are “other people’s stories” too (Shuman, 2005), and thus I borrow Shuman’s ideas for questions I have asked:

what does it promise (empathy, redemption, meaning), and at whose expense? Together, these questions help us to address not only how other people’s stories traverse boundaries but also and importantly how they fail this redemptive promise. These are the fundamental questions ethnographers ask (p. 162).

I follow Shuman’s example in this project when I work on the promise of the WNers’ stories. This promise has its own layers, of greater understanding of widowhood, and of greater hope in the widowed identities after loved ones’ death. Britzman (2000) also enlightens this work when she claims, “an ethnography offers moments of empathetic power in the ways it positions cultural knowledge and in the ways it positions the readers of culture” (p. 28). The WNers and I both keep our eyes on the prize: we allow these very personal stories so that society at large may have a better understanding of spousal grief.

**Journal Entry: Triangulating Ethics, Power and Insiderness**

While the insider status brings ethical considerations of power relations between my fellow participants and me as member/researcher (Foucault, 1988), other issues obtain, as well. Since widows are a subordinated group (Lopata, 1979), it behooves me to bring these issues of disenfranchisement to the front. The journal is the place where I started by asking the questions, “in what way(s) are widows stigmatized or
subordinated?” Traditional societies have placed widows with “a strong drop in status and limited life choices” (Lopata, 1996, p. 16). I answered this early on in my journals by talking about the ways grief even today is not to be discussed in ordinary conversations, and ways widows are thought of as “different.” It is not acceptable to be negative. We shouldn’t but we are sad. We are alone. We want to be alone, yet we are feeling left out at the same time. We are isolated in a coupled world, and much of this is addressed in my Chapter 4 data analysis. But it seems a tricky subject, and I hesitate to start with it, though here in the journal, I should be able to begin to articulate this, at least. But what if I report stories that someone does not want to be told? Yes, I avoided those who asked me not to tell theirs. But there is the issue of public access to those painful stories—can I truly keep their anonymity? Further, it is not just I who can illustrate these issues; my fellow WNers are perfectly capable and routinely do analyze and critically examine their situatedness in their grief. This too is shown in the data in Chapter 4.

In reading the work of Naples (2003) I became more aware of the dialectic when she speaks of dealing with

… the dilemmas of power in fieldwork, [where] I have developed a strong reflective ethnographic practice that acknowledges how relationships in the field blur what counts as “data,” takes into account the contradictions of friendship in fieldwork, and openly confronts ethical dilemmas faced in fieldwork-based friendships to enhance fieldwork agendas (p. 37).

Varied ethical conundrums have occupied my thoughts aside since early on in this project even before this research became formal. I have felt the ethical dilemmas, and
thought through the ethics for several years now, both in my reflexive journal and in conversations with several other WNers and advisors. My reflexive journal has become a source of thinking it through before I put the ideas into this project. As Naples (and Richardson, 2000) influence me, I have thought more about how this role in the power relations of researcher and participants can be carefully mediated “in shaping what we come to know about their lives” (p. 37). And when I am more aware of the consequences and ethics of this power, as I keep a running track of that in my reflexive journal, I can “counter the reproduction of inequalities in ethnographic investigation” (p. 37). Even as I discussed Spivak in Chapter 2, I find Naples reiterating this point where my work can make visible the blurred relationship between the subject positions of the participants whom I seek to understand, and the subject positions of myself the researcher/member who interprets their stories. While the WNer seeks company in solitude, the researcher also seeks to understand the dialectic of the social relations between the system(s), the popular beliefs and the individuals, and the social relations that are constructed by the everyday practices of conversational narratives. By using this reflexive journalistic method along with other dimensions of the ethnographic research, I continued to triangulate in yet another way, and finding that the reflective practice should be able to reveal the inequalities and domination processes that I anticipate.

**Member Checks for Validity**

Qualitative research has had its challenges in its relatively short history, academically speaking. With the dominant model of quantitative research, along with its
incumbent statistics, surveys, and search for certitude, their notions of validity have been long-lived. Qualitative research, in its shorter history has answered to some of those challenges by offering varying methods to show validity in consistency. The variation in methods is called triangulation, or multi-modal ways to approach the data, are those that I have already discussed in my research design. I now discuss yet another layer of triangulation that I am using, which is to take my varied data collections and analyses into the “member checks” or the follow-up group interviews that I have conducted to gather feedback from my collaborators after my data analysis. After preliminary findings of my own, which are explained in Chapter 4, I took my findings with me, and conducted follow-up member checks with my fellow members, in order to receive feedback from them. These member checks consisted both of various forms of technological communication as well as several face-to-face focus groups at weekend social events which WN calls a “get together” or “GTG.” I have used various emails, one-on-one, for analysis clarification, peer debriefing and online open-ended interview questions, then combined them with the use of my reflexive journal as an autoethnographer. I have been bothered by the term “triangulation” because it seems that my work is much more kaleidoscopic than triangulated. I found Richardson (2008) to support this disposition when she said, “[i]n what I think of as a postmodernist deconstruction of triangulation, CAP (creative analytical processes) text recognizes that there are far more than “three sides” by which to approach the world. We do not triangulate; we crystallize” (Richardson, 2008, p. 478).
These follow-ups have served several purposes in my qualitative analysis, especially the validity of verifying my interpretations with my peers in WN. All along the path of this project, I have consulted with them to see if my explanations fit their ideas of what WN is all about. Their input has increased my understanding of this research project. More importantly, to my co-participants, these follow-ups are ongoing communications that I am having with fellow participants and friends who are very interested in this project and are eager to find out the penultimate conclusions of what I am saying. I have an ethical responsibility, therefore, in my endeavor at validating my research and sharing it with my collaborators in WN.

I used several methods of communication for clarification and validation during and after my data analysis. Some of the methods were email messages to individual participants for expansions or clarifications on what I thought they were saying. Another form of communication for validation was to post a message in WN to find out answers that I expected to find to some specific questions related to my research. Finally, I conducted both pre-pilot and after analysis “member checks” face-to-face in WN member ‘GtGs’ or get-togethers. One was an “informal conversational interview” (Patton, 2002), or “unstructured interviewing” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 652), which offered “maximum flexibility to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from observing a particular setting” (Patton, p. 342). The other, and most recent was a dinner conversation among six of us recoupled widowed folk who talked about our widowhoods, our lives in WN, ideas for further research, and
our coupled lives now, thus led me to writing Chapter 5, where I placed the findings from my member checks.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described my data collection methods and ethics as a collaborative participant in the online community, as well as my data coding processes, using a theoretical framework that will make an ethical sense of my analysis and interpretation. As Lather (1995) expressively illustrated, in her model of member checks, they “freeze a moment of our danger in the display of lives in which truth and hope rest in the folds of a fragile witness charged with history as passage and threshold” (p. 196). Chapter 4 includes three variations of methods on my data analysis findings. Chapter 5 covers member check findings, conclusions and limitations of my research, and implications for further research.
Chapter 4
Performing Widowhood in WidowNet: Narrative Analysis

Introduction: Triangulated Interpretations

The title of this dissertation, “How to be a Widow” suggests the question, “how do we perform our identities as widows?” This chapter is my attempt to answer that. Chapter 4 covers findings arising out of a range of themes that I have analyzed, including themes of identity, of grief and of learning. I argue that the sense of the performative involves “illocutionary” acts (Austin, 1962) in that words are acts, in and of themselves. That is, in “the speech act, the name performs itself… [it is] an act of speech at the same time it is the speaking of an act,” as Butler (1997) explains (p. 44). Through an analysis of the data, I have found a variety of narratives that demonstrate how we learn to be a widow through a Butlerian and Austinian notion of performativity.

In this co-participation in the WN community of practice, the ways that WNers responded to each other, over and over again happened in what Harvey Sacks (1972) called “second stories.” In those turn-taking stories, the WNers were asking, giving and taking advice, making important points, learning from each other and making friends all the while. Further, through that story-telling process, the widows in WN constructed their identities as they were learning how to be a widow. WN became a “repair mechanism” (Goffman, 1974) to reinforce our concerns about this new and unknown
experience, and comfort our pain at the same time. WN’s repair brought the hated notion of ‘widow’ to an earned badge of honor. In this chapter, I show how we negotiate our diversely constructed identities, by way of engaging in these conversational exchanges in our community of practice. In my findings of this data analysis, I have a better understanding of the various experiences of grief, ways WNers’ fears are allayed, and the changed identities through this community of practice. I reached these findings using a triangulated set of methods in my data analysis. I divided three major sections in this chapter, which are classified by the types of analysis that I used and the categories of data that I collected.

The first section is characterized by a thematic qualitative analysis, where I coded for themes and patterns throughout WN, with the 2005 General Forum as a focal point of data collection, using two different coding methods: 1) the use of “literal coding” where I found key word patterns from the collaborators’ own words and looked at the relationships in these patterns; 2) the use of “focused coding” where I interpreted the themes by analyzing data facts, phrases and statements throughout the collections. In this section, several key points in this dissertation are addressed, and found in the data. A short outline of that follows here:

The second section of this chapter utilizes a Labovian socio-linguistic analysis of a particular case study. This is a narrative that a participant, whom I call Misha, wrote. Misha is a long-standing WNer (widowed in 1999 and still active in WN) who is a

---

33 For all the “names” used in WN here, I have re-pseudonymed, even if they are already self-made pseudonyms.
prolific storyteller. This section shows how I parsed her narrative in terms of the six categories that Labov classifies as a basis for drawing conclusions as to what the widow performs in spousal grief.

The third section focuses on a particular thread of conversation of about in WN that has poetic style and tones, whereby I analyze the narratives by focusing on one particular trope that is categorized as metonymic descriptions that, in the context of grief, illustrate the objects that we do not want to let go. These metonymical uses have also illustrated the representations of the strength of the bonds that continue with grief, and reform the identities in widowhood.

These triangulated analyses are discussed in this chapter, while my analysis through member checks will be shown in Chapter 5. Even though addressing the community of practice (CoP) must be presented in a linear fashion, it is pervasive throughout WN. Consequently, I attend to the CoP in the first section, since I find this is the basis for much else throughout WidowNet. However, other themes arise while discussing the CoP.

1) Qualitative Analysis as Ethnographic Investigation

Initial Ideas: Name and Place of Ethnographic Site, and Why?

This section begins with the ways that WidowNet (WN) is situated in a “location,” except this field is one without a geographical place. WN, however, encompasses a purpose that replaces locus. The “locus” of WN is situated in a digital place that anyone in the world who has an Internet access can discover. As traditional
names and addresses exist on a cartographer’s map, this community of practice has a name (i.e., “WidowNet”) and an address (URL), http://www.widownet.org. Even if you do not have that address, you could find it with a very simple Internet search, more simple than a compass, when you use your Internet access: All it takes is to type in the word “widow” in a Google search engine (www.google.com). New widows find WN’s location not by knowing its address, but by searching for some meaning in the word they were recently labeled as, “widow.” WidowNet usually comes up on top of the Google search results list, and everyone (who is a WNER) who knows WidowNet, knows where its name came from, i.e., its founder, Mr. G., the widower who looked for a place that didn’t exist, and so made one, in 1993, when he was first widowed. Thus, he named it as such, as was explained in more detail in Chapter 1.

Two of the most ubiquitous themes of WN are the perennial questions, “who am I?” and "Am I crazy?" The continuing answers in WN are addressed in this chapter. Specifically I address this relation between craziness and grief, and how the WNers as fellow sufferers respond to each other in the community of practice (CoP) in order to separate out these issues. Many factors are involved, both the institutional powers and popular beliefs that result from them. Specifically, cultural beliefs about grief are produced by way of the discourse from dominant theories of the psychology of grief. In this case, grief is being institutionally defined by way of the APA—American

__________________________

34 Google is the most popular search engine, but not the only one. Yahoo, or Alta Vista, or Ask.com are just a few others. Wikipedia offers a list of search engines at

Psychological Association’s (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV, 1994). The APA is also in the process is updating the official DSM document to DSM V soon. In this powerful document, serious definitions about grief are included, first by definitions of APA’s terms, “normal” grief and “complicated grief.” These definitions are bounded by a timeline, wherein “normal” grief with its attenuating grief behaviors and emotions are expected to be “pathological” if systems persist two to three months after the loss (cf. McCabe, 2003, for more explanation). The DSM is operating as a speech act in its institutional power. If a griever exhibits signs of grief that include the definitions of the DSM, then the griever is put on the pathological road to medication to “cure” this complication. From this discourse, which Foucault (1980) sees as “neither true nor false” but rather the “effects of power” (p. 118) popular beliefs arise, as this is shown later in this chapter. Cultural beliefs are disseminated through theories that were put into practice. These popular beliefs affect grievers in many ways, both internally and externally.

Enter the widow who finds this new status a radical change in her life after her spouse dies. What counted as “normal” to her before was the ordinariness of life: getting up, brushing their teeth from the same tube, going to work, cooking and eating meals, washing dishes, playing, fighting, sleeping, making love, all those everyday activities that we customarily would count as “normal.” Then… s/he dies. All those ordinary activities, things we thought of as our “normal” lives, ended with that death. The dominant and almost universal response is pain, psychic and physical pain. A pain like we have never had before. And how do we react to something so unknown or never
experienced? Cooking? What for? No one there to cook. Or make the bed. Or to have sweet breath for. Or to come home from work to. Or to fight with. All of a sudden, that void affects everything about our so-called “normal” lives and suddenly, nothing feels normal again. This unknown experience brings a sense of fear, maybe because it is so unknown (Lewis, 1962), and is entwined with emotions that have been topsy-turvyed in a groundswell of grief. Actions seem frozen and we wonder why? We are “in the fog.” Widows do not seem to understand what this experience is, and much of their experiences do not correspond with the dominant timelines and prescriptions of what grief should be.

When the widow finds WidowNet, its role begins for her. The new WNer finds the online community who are articulating things she has not yet, but feels, lurks for a while to see what this is, and after a while of reading, ventures to introduce him/herself. In an interaction vignette, the newcomer asks, “who am I?” and “am I crazy?” These fearful feelings, do not seem to be the “normal” we knew before. Then the WN operates as a “remedial interchange” (Goffman, 1971) in the community of practice. The Oldtimer WNer says, no, this is not crazy, this is grief. It is something that all who experience the death of partner have. In the data, I found that 1) This grief experience has no set timeline that the outside powers tell us. 2) The Oldtimer tells the newcomer that there is hope, because in one’s own time, grief WILL change and there IS hope. Grief will never go away, but the pain will lessen and we will remember to live with it. 3) WN also operates as a repair mechanism when a WNer finds all the nearly 50 other Forums beyond that first, General Forum full of fresh raw grief. There are other places
that serve other functions in the repair of this grief experience. The 50 Forums are places where conversations and discourse occur that cover a myriad of topics beyond the fresh, raw, fearful pain, and in the process three major ways that WN operates as a repair mechanism emerge: 1. WN functions as a comforter of pain, in the ways that affirmation makes people feel better even when in the deepest pain. 2. WN functions to allay fears of the WNer by surrounding her with assurances of others “in the same boat.” 3. WN is also there for hope, for the change that will happen, maybe not by the rates the dominant powers would have it, but the change can happen. These themes are supported by the data that is being analyzed in the first section. Who Are We?

Widows in WidowNet are as varied as people are in general. Earlier in this dissertation, I have mentioned that I am choosing to use the word “widow” to mean all of us in WN, whether men or women, gay or straight, married or not. I have used Butler’s convention of pronouncing “she” as a universal pronoun, for one main reason, i.e., that there are more widows than widowed men, even though grieving men are included in this project. All who joined WN because they have lost an intimate partner to death are WNers. While all the members number over 4,000, there are fewer active posters, with approximately 1,200 or so having posted at least once, and over 600 have posted more than 100 times. But the distribution of WN postings is very similar to the graphic of Krebs (2008) when he analyzed social networks in general (see Appendix C). The majority of registered users do not post, but in WN, there is a large core group that has been posting in WN for years.
One particular WNer, who lost her partner, privately grieves a public death, when her partner was in the United Airlines 93 flight on 9/11 that crashed into the Shanksville Pennsylvania field. Darlene has been a regular member since then, and still tells stories and comes for advice and validation. As recently as April 2011, Darlene said this:

even though [X] and I hadn't yet married, the members on this site validated my status as a widow, (something his family did not do). I am grateful for the diverse membership and the discussion forum that have been set up to recognize that widowhood is not one category and that people will have different experiences and needs, depending on the status of their relationship at the time of death.

Darlene says a lot in this short narrative. Even though she was not legally married, in her pain she identifies herself a widow, despite the fact that the state—or his family—did not recognize that—which caused her added injury. Her “identity” here in WN, is the combination of Darlene’s and WN’s social construction; she was negotiating meaning from her experiences with others, both inside and outside of the WN community of practice (CoP). In these years as a WNer, Darlene’s constructions of her relationship with her dead partner continues, as does her identity as a widow. The responses of WNers in WidowNet, though, substantiated her new identity as a widow that others in the culture would not. Darlene’s story also demonstrates that there is more than one identity category for widows, and those identities are varied, situated, diverse and experiential. She finds comfort in the WN community, where WNers validate her situation, and give her the credit she wants for the cherished partnership that she lost in her widowhood. In

35 Actually there were several 9/11 widows in WidowNet in the past, but most of their participation in WN was between 2001 and 2005, thus the data from those periods is unavailable.
this case as many other WNers, in Darlene’s validation, WN is acting in the remedial interchange, where the symbolic meaning of ‘widow’ changes to include her. WN is acting in the Goffman sense of “supportive rites” (p. 114). Darlene shares her private grief with us in this closed environment, tells us of her anxieties involved in returning to that field year after year while she endures the public commemorative events with others on anniversaries. On Sept 11 this year, many many WNers posted to her personally to say things like, “((Darlene)), You’re in my thoughts. Wishing you strength this weekend.” Darlene’s participation in the WN community of practice that accepted her and recognized her spousal grief is still helping her through the years as she has dealt with these complex relationships that we mutually constitute together in our online group. She performs her identity as a widow in this community of practice, or as Wenger (2001) characterized it, “place[s] learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world” (p. 3). The WN community of practice is an informal social learning place based on the experience of participation.

The WN population is not specifically numbered, although the numbers of those who registered are published. We do have lurkers, and there are members who have “left,” so far as we know, but there are unspecified numbers who have not “un-registered.” We do know the majority are women, just as there are more widows than widowers in the world at large, due to the statistics of women living longer lives than men. However, WN is not exclusive to women, nor is it exclusive to married people. Spousal grief comes from intimacy, no matter what the norms of gender or the status of a relationship in the eyes of the State.
The “Whys” of Us

Now that we know “where” the site of this ethnography is and some idea of who we think we are, this discussion follows, to show more of the patterns found in WN conversations. One of the early questions I had in my project was to ask why the widows are online and what were they looking for? I reinforced my preliminary answers through my analysis of the 2005 General Forum by asking a few direct questions through my role as researcher to the current “Beyond Bereavement” (BB) Forum earlier this year. Thus, after sifting through the General Forums, I decided to ask some direct questions to search for reasons why WNers find WidowNet. I started a discussion thread with a set of my own research questions that I posted in March of 2011. I prefaced the new thread topic with the fact that this was part of my research, and I received 50 responses within three weeks. I received many varied answers to my questions, even more than those that I can cover in this dissertation. Much of their powerful answers are put in my “Later” files.

Are the WidowNetters (WNers) in WN seeking a public sphere? Because there is little doubt that the Internet is a public sphere. Rather, as Kelly, who has been a WNer since 2002, expressed,

To me, grieving is private - private in the sense that I don't do it alone but with the help of others in the same situation in a protected environment. The WN website was my anchor at the very lowest point in my life. I read others handling of their grief, I cried with them and was able to express myself, however feebly at times, but others understood. (WN, May 2011)

36 The “Beyond Bereavement” Forum where discussions occur from the WNers who have been members for at least a year.
Kelly’s sentiments are similar to many WNers who think of WN as a protected and private environment. Certainly there are some protections, and much of the WN message board site is restricted to the members. But ironically, the most “open” of the sites is the General Forum where the freshest grief is apparent. Anyone can read the posts; however, only the WNers who are registered can actually say something in the site. This idea provides the WNers with a notion of a better sense of safety and comfort. This is one of the major ironies of WN, in that the most painful conversations are open to public reading, but the members ignore that: instead they take solace in the fact that no one else can speak and respond unless they too are fellow sufferers. Without discussion, WN’s membership-only message board carries a strong note of consolation based on our willing suspension of disbelief that makes the rest of the world disappear in our conversations.

The WNers are there first of all to see if there are others who have been through a similar encounter in their experience. The initial phenomenon is that uncomprehending confusion about the complex emotions and behaviors of spousal grief, the widow is searching online for something s/he has not found but not sure of what yet. They also search and find WN where they get support and confirmation in similar stories from persons who have had the same experience. The W Ner is not looking for expertise per se, but for validation. Moreover, the WNers find much more than they are looking for. They are looking for others who were having this experience, i.e., they were looking for fellow sufferers. And in that search, they learn from each other. For example, when I created a post and asked how and why they found WN, I received several ready answers.
In a reply to my question, Dorthy, a WNer who has been a member since 2001, shows how her trauma was leading her to find others who had the same experience, saying,

I was looking for people to talk to, who were in the same boat... who had been where I was in their recent past, or were where I was at that moment going through the same things, or were where I had just recently been and needed something I could offer them I was trying to find communication (and validation for what I felt) from people who I trusted because they were my true peers - they were experiencing what I was (as closely as anyone could, allowing for each person's grief being unique). (WN 2011)

Dorthy’s reasons are similar to the others in WN: “the same boat” is the “boat” of pain, and loss that is irrevocable, pain that encompassed a void. Moreover, her explanation shows how experiential this grief force is, and is not a kind of knowledge that can be wholly explained or understood by theory. It also shows how the traumatized widow feels detached from the rest of the world, since much of the dailiness of life seems unimportant when the loved one dies. Yet there is still the urge to find others, and in this specialized case, others who feel this same detachment, because it has not been experienced before. The sufferers look for other sufferers. To find others who are similarly detached affords the WNer to see how s/he is not alone in this detachment. Many of the initial posts from newcomer WNers are like this one: Miki shows how this experience seems so isolating, in her first post:

Friends didn't understand my feelings; some of them even hurt me. Only recently I met someone who has gone through the same pain as I that has lead [sic] to my discovery of this website. I am so glad I know there are people out there to whom I can talk with. (WN 12/05/05)

Suzi said that she searched and was glad to find WN because she found something written for widows, about widows, something to show me what to do, how to live, what to expect (WN 3/25/11).
She was looking for someone else who might know what this unknown experience is.

Suzi, like countless widows in this site, does not know how to be a widow, and is using the WN community of practice to find some meaning and sense of identity in this unknown experience. Tonya’s response was similar. She found WN for:

Support. Help. Somebody else who had done this. Somebody who knew the answers, or at least had had the experiences and could comment on their impressions. Perspective. A friend in the middle of the night, when I was so alone. (WN 3/30/11)

Tonya also makes a distinction between “knowing” and “experiencing” widowhood, where she as many others have told how the experience is so much more intense and greater than the theoretical ideas of it, and the urge to find others in the same circumstance leads her to a collaborative participation with others who have the same experience. Tonya mentions how the online site can be a source of friendship, too, even though the majority has not met face-to-face.

In the spring of 2011, after my work in culling data in the 2005 General Forum, I composed a new WN thread as a researcher question, and posted my questions about reasons why we are here in WN. Very quickly, I received 39 answers within a few days. These are some of the direct answers to my research questions from active WNers, and one from a newcomer. They gave me paradigm answers with common themes I have seen of community, help and learning, along with the out-of-control emotions that seemed crazy but were renamed grief. Out of the very personal answers, I found several major themes that the WNers said they were looking for: a) validation; b) support and help; and c) peers—someone to talk to who had this same kind of grief experience, not
just grief in general, but specifically spousal grief. Here are just a few examples of the patterns that emerge from WN conversations:

1. I expect I was looking for something to validate my feelings.

2. It [WN] was the one and only thing that convinced me that I hadn't lost my frigging mind—so many weird things I was doing (sleeping with my PURSE, FCS) and I finally posted about my sheets (sleeping on the same destroyed sheets, albeit laundered, because I couldn't face the laundry cabinet still full of sheets from the hospital bed) and everyone said THROW THEM AWAY, and that was it for me—I had a glimmer that I was not insane, I was grieving.

3. I was hoping to find some guidance on how to do it. What I found was much more—support from like minded people and a sounding board. I also found that some people's ways were antithetical to mine and this was actually very helpful, in an "I don't want to be like that" kind of way.

These examples are continuing themes throughout WN through the years. And these themes are exemplified daily in the ways WNers come to the community, ask for help, and get it. In WN, learning in a community of practice is not a result of the traditionally formal class, but it comes to WNers in an informal sense, not a separate activity from everyday experience. It can be a remark someone else says that as a result brings you a sudden insight in a missing link. That remark may not have intended to teach, but the one who listens, learns. The stories in WN often unintentionally function not only to tell, but to teach.

Others found WN and stayed there for additional reasons: Bart, who has been a regular member since his wife died in 2003, and has since remained a WN participant and a willing supporter of this project, sent me a personal email asking me to amend what he said in WN, because that particular board (the BB Forum) does not provide the edit function (though some do), and after some thought, he wanted more to be said. His message was,
I was attending f2f widow/widower supports groups and seeing a Hospice shrink, but there were things I could not, were afraid to say much less discuss with a gender mixed group of people I did not know..... i.e. - here I was drinking too much wine so it could boost the Ativan I was taking. Didn't want to tell this as it would seem I would be a druggie/drunk to them, me Mr. church going rock solid got his shit together respected man. I didn't want to tell them of the panic attacks - thought it was a sign of weakness and that I was going crazy. I was also dealing with being VERY horny and how could that be when I deeply grieving??? I wanted to f@%& someone - anyone - badly (I came to know that to be skin hunger). At Widownet I found a place where I spill my guts, my feelings, the wine/pill abuse without anyone knowing who I was (except for a screen name). It was a safe place, and the replies to my posts were for the most part non judgmental.

Bart’s quest for anonymity was precisely to maintain his local reputation, a man who did not want to lose his respect and honor among his 3-D neighbors. In WN anonymity, he felt he could tell the truth. But the irony in Bart’s cyber anonymity is that he has become friends “f2f” (face-to-face) in the WN many GTGs (get-togethers). He still wavers with his social identity, and seeks anonymity by sending me his comments via the emails he sent me, rather than currently posting on the General Forum, even though he still wants to be heard. (“Skin hunger,” by the way, is a phrase that WNers have coined when they talk about the missing and yearning for another body, for the sexual intimacy they lost since their partners died. This is another subject that has been discussed at length in WN.)

**WidowNet as a Community of Practice (CoP)**

I interpret the WN as a community of practice (CoP) and this shows throughout the website message board, from the very beginning of the new WNer’s participation, even when the newcomer’s situation is peripheral. Wenger talks about how the “apprentices” learn from each other through participation in a community of practice. Of all the places in WN, the General Forum is the most open of the nearly 50 Forums on WN, and the place on the Internet people discover first. From the welcoming
“interpersonal ritual” the newcomer is affirmed in the beginning of her relationship with the neighborly acts of the WN community. This act happens at the time a hesitant WNer begins a dialog with an Oldtimer, and continues throughout. The WN General Forum is full of new widows, and yet quite a few “oldtimers” that stay, join the dialog and believe in “paying it forward,” as oldtimer, “Louisa,” describes her continued participation. I am centralizing this theme of community of practice, because, though it begins at the General Forum, it continues and permeates throughout the WN site in all its 50 forums: the WN CoP laces all other themes and topics that happen, in that it locates learning in all of the processes of conversation, thus co-participation. Operating on very old notions of the guild system, still in existence today in crafts and trades, the “master/apprentice” concepts that Wenger uses. The WN community of practice is the place of social relationships where old timers show new comers the ropes, so to speak. In WN, the widows who have had this widowed experience for awhile give solid and pervasive advice to the widowed who have not been in this state of widowhood very long yet.

**Beginning Identity Practice**

Participation in the WN CoP begins with a newcomer who has lurked for a while, and starts his or her activity with a post in the General Forum to introduce him or herself. For example, Janie (Wd’d Nov 2005) found WidowNet and I could tell she lurked for awhile before she began posting. She started her membership in the community by saying

\[\text{______________}\]

\(^{37}\) WN provides users with a considerable number of statistics on the site. For example, some are the list of members’ IDs, when they joined, when and how many posts they have made.
Hi Everyone, I'm not sure if this is where I'm supposed to post for the first time or not, but I wanted to share my story and get to know some of you on here. My husband was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma (a rare type of cancer) on my birthday in 2004. He died exactly 5 months from diagnosis, Nov 23, 2004. This last year has been horrible, I'm sure you all know and understand. Christmas was bad and I tried to hide my feelings from my kids and grandkids. I do that a lot. I'm on a roller coaster. I've been trying to be okay. I promised my husband that I would be okay, but that promise is very hard to keep. Thank you all for listening. I'm sorry we're "meeting" this way.

Janie’s first post is a typical newcomer’s first story: a short narrative of the death of her or his partner, and the first, but not the only, mention of the feelings after spouse’s death, confirming her widow status, and equitable membership to the community. Janie also mentions a variation of the ritual in the ironic greetings that widows in WN have, to mix that sorrow for being in this unwanted group and to be grateful for being in it at the same time. This “supportive ritual,” as Goffman (1971) claimed, “mark a transition to a condition of increased access” (p. 79). The combination of welcoming and calling it a club makes a sense of community immediately. Moreover, this illocutionary act (Austin, 1975) does more than say something. The welcoming act actually does something for the newcomer: the familiarity begins, a sense of relief and comfort for the newcomer, and the beginnings of the online friendships. As Wenger (1998/2001) describes,

It is anchored in the things they do every day, in why and how they do them… sustained by a reciprocal understanding on the part of [the fellow members]. Overall, there is a striking complementarity between the attitudes of [new members] with regard to their respective involvement in each other’s purpose (p. 169).
In response, an oldtimer I pseudonymed Larry seconds Janie’s story with a short comparable story of his own, which is another way to validate her membership, and then gives a piece of advice:

I am so sorry to welcome you to this board (it is the right one). My dear wife ... died on April 21st of colon cancer, after an almost 5-yr battle, and I understand how you feel. So do other WN'ers - this is the best online Forum for us widowed.

This first response evidences what Goffman (1963) would characterize “focused interaction.” The behavior is in a public place, and people “extend one another a special communication license and sustain a special type of mutual activity” (p. 83). Even though these people are strangers, the interaction is warm and comforting, as if they were friends already. The first responses to the newcomer often come in a ritualistic sense, something very similar to this one of Larry’s, first of all a welcome, and then the “me too” type, what Harvey Sacks would call a seconding kind of turn-taking in the telling. The next theme in his remarks is one of empathy, the understanding of personal, experiential knowledge of spousal grief. Janie can find that she is being heard but not bombarded with a lot of specific advice. This time, finding a fellow sufferer, she finds truth in the “I know how you feel” response.

Quite a few other WNers welcomed Janie with the ritual to the community, even though it began in the wee hours of the morning (2 am Janie’s time). This representative beginning is a very typical response to WN beginners, as well. The WN community, and especially the General Forum, is a warm, welcoming and empathetic site. Janie was surprised after some of the responses in the conversation, and returned in kind:

Oh My Gosh... I can't believe all the wonderful responses from everyone. I can't say thank you enough. It is so wonderful to know that, even if I can't make a complete sentence or finish my thought, you all know exactly what I'm feeling. It
makes me feel that I'm not as alone. I know that my kids and my friends love me and they do support me, but they don't really, deep down inside, understand. I AM trying everything I can to heal and move forward... never to forget... but to try and lessen the pain. There is a quote I like... "Grief is not the process of forgetting, but of remembering with less pain" I am trying to remember with less pain.

Janie’s post, then the responses form other WNers, and then Janie, in turn, illustrates the nature of WN, not a piece of journal writing, but indeed, the WN site is a dialogue with stories and in Sacks’ (1972) phrase, “second stories” as well. These dialogues constitute this online community as a community of practice.

In the absence of actual physical closeness and visual communication in WN’s cyberspace, many of the responders used an alternate technical icon (with the use of parentheses) to indicate a hug around her name, e.g., “(((Janie)))” indicating their empathy and support. These images become more evidence of the “willing suspension of disbelief,” and at any time. Janie posted her first message at 2:40 am, and within 15 minutes, two WNers responded to her. Regardless of the time of day or night, posters are ready to say something. All in all, there were 26 messages to Janie’s thread, within three days, and posts from oldtimers and fellow newcomers, all sharing their own stories of their spouse’s death, sharing their feelings, openly talking about the tears they shed as they read others’ stories.

______________________________

38 WN has provided ready-made icon software “emoticons,” i.e., graphic icons to expression emotions, that replaced the inventive ways that early on digital users had created with punctuation to express emotion or mood, e.g., ;-), semi-colon, hyphen and closed parenthesis indicating a smile and a wink. These pictorial facial expressions and bodily expressions can alert the responder to the complexity of communication.
Another newcomer, Trina, began her sojourn in WN:

Hi I was told about widownet by a friend. I lost my Darling D two weeks ago today after a four year fight with cancer, epithiloid sarcoma. I thought that somehow I would be more prepared knowing how much pain he was in and knowing it was best that he go in peace.

guess I am here just to understand what is happening to me and to talk to others going thru the same things. Thanks for listening

And so it begins… the WN newcomer starts her narrative by telling the community that this new experience of widowhood is. She also announces what many WNers start with: that this experience does not make sense at first, no matter what we expected before they died. Betty expresses her anxiety about her fears, sleeplessness and constant memories of her spouse’s dying, by saying, “I was worried to bring this up with my grief counselor last time for fear that she would think I am getting more crazy.”

In response, the WNers’ CoP reads Trina’s first post and immediately explains the grief experience to a new widow, as are shown by several posters’ responses to a newcomer:

The good news is you’re not crazy, everything you do and say, how you behave is ‘normal’ in OUR world of normality...for a ‘grief’ book, wish I had found this place.... for a support group, I'm GLAD I found it! And it's got the most wonderful bunch of people on here, too. (Sally, WN, Sept 2005)

T..., you will quickly learn to use this site as your primary support vehicle. Here the members truly understand the emotional turmoil we all go through and can offer concrete suggestions on what to anticipate and various ways on how to cope with the situations that will present themself to you. Ask questions, rant and rage, offer your own insight to messages posted by other members. This is a mutual support community where we all try to help each other when the GM (grief monster) pays us a visit and we need help to make it through the day. (Sam, WN, Sept 2005)

There are no words that can adequately express the sorrow we all feel that our ranks have been increased but we offer comfort to you now that you are here. Be gentle with yourself. This is a very difficult journey, but you don't have to make it alone. We are all here to help. (Tanya, WN, Sept 2005)
These responses show first how WNers’ conversations can use what Goffman would call a “remedy interchange” where these feelings of craziness are expressed in accounts of activities or feelings not done or felt before grief. The responses, as Goffman would say, “change the meaning that otherwise might be given to an act, transforming … to what can be seen as acceptable (p. 109). This remedy mechanism is telling the newcomer that what seems crazy is the “normal” of spousal grief. Other WNers have it too as a part of the grief experience. Second, it operates as a community of practice in that the support of the community starting in the welcome is always there, and the advice to the newcomer is supporting this new construction of the widowed identity, not something that happens instantly, but over time and through the social interaction of the WNers.

**Trajectory: One WNer, a Community of Practice**

In my search for evidence of the community of practice, I analyzed the trajectory of just one WNer, to see how her posts are related to the principle of WN’s CoP. Sheena was an “oldtimer” in 2005. She felt she had gone through a milestone when she joined the “Seasoned Widow/ers” Forum.³⁹ I looked at nearly 300 of Sheena’s posts from January 2005 to July 2006 to see how they were related to informal learning. I looked to see what her narratives were about, and categorized them into five: “play,” “me too,” “similar story,” asking advice,” and “debated opinion.” Of those 300 posts, I saw an overwhelming majority of her posts (nearly 4-to-1) to be empathetic or cheering on for a

³⁹ “Seasoned” Forum is intended for the conversations of those WNers who have passed the five-year mark of widowhood.
fellow WNer. In those empathetic narratives, she was gently and subtly giving advice, often indirectly by using her own narrative as a model to aid another in their own path.

For example,

[CG]. I agree that you should try and postpone the big decisions for a while. I'm glad your landlords are being so sweet. Sometimes, we can be very disappointed by those close to us and very overwhelmed by the kindness of virtual strangers.

I also lost my husband to suicide and as I said... I do understand at least some of what you're going through, in a way thankfully that most people won't.

What I can say is that I thought I was thinking straight in those few months but I can see with 20/20 hindsight that I wasn't. Fortunately, I fell on the conservative side of things...didn't give anything away for months after R died and then only small things. I felt that already there had been such an uncomprehendably large change in my life, that everything else should remain just the same if at all possible until I'd some handle on what had happened.

Sheena’s supportive welcome to a newcomer indicated that she was listening to CG’s story, and gently gave advice to the newcomer who was considering a plan. She showed her camaraderie by letting CG know how long she had been a widow, and interspersed with a little of her own narrative. She then reiterated what most WNers say, that her life has changed irrefutably, and without understanding. I shortened part of her narrative here, but she continued with these themes, elaborating and supporting the newcomer, CG. Newcomers are grateful for her input: As Terri said in response, “I am glad to get this feedback. As always, on WN, we find that we are not the only people to feel a particular way” (WN, Feb 05). With Sheena’s support, newcomer WNers go through what Lave & Wenger (1991) call the “process of learning to speak as a full member of a community of practice” (p. 106).
Remedying Craziness in Grief

In C. S. Lewis’ memoir (1961), the very first remark of his own widowhood was, “no one ever told me that grief felt so like fear” (p. 1). Fear was the waking thought of my early days of widowhood, as well, though I had no idea why I felt fear. Shirl expressed it the same way I personally experienced in the early days of grief:

Waking up not remembering and then remembering. For that split second everything was "normal". Then it wasn't. I hated that. Stomach sinking and then feeling that hard ball in the pit of it. I lived in fear. The fear of not being able to stop what was coming

Since the expression of grief is the center of the stories in WN, a broad theme of the WN community of practice is that the widows say over and over again how the unknown feelings they were having in their grief made them fear they were “going crazy.”

Chrystal’s fears were expressed this way:

full force--claustrophobia, heights, leaving the house, going into places by myself. I was extremely fearful that they would never go away

When I searched for the keyword in WN I found over 400 pages of conversations that had the word “crazy” in it, over 5,000 uses of the word. There was also a huge pattern of the questions, “am I crazy?” and the remedial WN answers, “no you are not crazy, this is what spousal grief is” and attestations to their understandings as a result of telling their tales in WN as a community of practice. Another sort of response is the phrase, “this is the new normal” of widowhood. For example, from the 2005 WN General Forum, the pattern of the newcomer asks if, and is relieved to find out that s/he is not crazy. This example shows how the CoP apprentice pleas for guidance in an expression of chagrin:

Someone please give me the answer. I am so tired of feeling like I have gone completely crazy!!
The remarks of the WNers who think they are going crazy or think that other people think they are crazy, show how it involves a social relationship. This is further evidenced in their interaction when they ask for advice, and are quickly answered from others who have been there for a while, and reassure them by saying,

In the beginning you may only be able to get through 5 minutes at a time. YOU ARE NOT CRAZY, it just feels that way. We have all been there. It is grief, and it is brutal. But you have found the right place to be. no one can tell you how time will play its cards for you. Our grief journeys are as unique as we are. Hang on & keep hanging on. We'll get you through.

The oldtimer WNers bring accounts of their own in this remedial work. The sense of craziness comes from having an experience that is new and beyond comparison, beyond imagination. This kind of grief involves a permanently irrevocable change for the rest of one’s life. Elements of grief from this permanent change include increased vulnerability accompanied by fear (I feel I have no control in my life), guilt (I should have died instead), and isolation (people do not understand what I am going through). These are only a few of the myriad of elements in this personal grief experience, along with this common fear of craziness. The WNER feels crazy by having so “not-normal” behavior, all those past everyday experiences of their lives together now empty with the void called widowhood. The partner is gone. How do those formerly “normal” activities go on? The new WNER does not know, until an oldtimer gives her some advice. The newcomer widow asks about this new experience. And multiple replies come in return, with many who have been here long enough to have a better understanding of what this is. The newcomer WNER finds relief in the remedy: Sharon replies, “thanks for letting me know you are having the same thoughts and feelings. Makes me feel less crazy” (WN Sept 2005). The dialogic interchanges create new action for the WNER in that not only
are there new alignments but in these performative utterances, the WNer can find comfort and a better understanding in the remedial interchange from craziness to grief.

Through the conversations in the WN CoP, the social interaction is giving the participants this opportunity to build relationships with each other, and constructing a new sense of learning through social participation. In this case, the bonds of fellow widows are strong, not only in a mutual understanding, but from understanding mutual pain that may be the strongest of one’s lifetime. This emergent form of learning, not the formal shape of the classroom, students and teacher with an educational design, but more a situational context in which, through negotiated dialogue of peers, is an ongoing and informal process. In the environment where the WNers are feeling free to talk about their grief candidly, they find a sense of relief when they share their preoccupations and feelings with others who have them too. The WNers are identifying with each other in a transformative experience. The repair mechanism of WN through these focused interactions allows the participants to deal with a range of trouble sources. This sense of “remedy” is not necessarily a correction of an error, as “fixing” the lexical item ‘crazy’ to the lexical item ‘grief,’ but rather the substitution may be informed by the relationship of the turn-takers in the conversation. That is, the newcomer who fears she is crazy is being comforted by the old-timer who substitutes the lexical phrase, is operating as a building block in this social construction of the widowed identity in this CoP. The newcomer is learning how to be a widow, crazy or not.
The cultural beliefs about craziness and grief are close, especially when considering ideas of how widows should be acting “normally.” Beliefs about grief are also conflated. Both psychological and conventional assumptions about grief, first, are conflated into one concept, “grief” for all sorts of death relationships: grandparents die, parents die, siblings die, children die, friends die, co-workers die, strangers die, pets die. All of these relationships are different yet the belief is that grief is one and the same. According to the accounts of the WNers, non-grievers are uncomfortable with the thought of what the grievers are going through. Grief, however, is an individual experience, and each one’s grief is different, based on the social relationships with the dead and the griever. Psychologists have created terms such as “normal grief” and “complicated grief,” but the griever in WN says that all grief is complicated. Having a dead loved one is not normal, in the sense of “average” or “standard,” of daily living, the kind of normal they had before their loved one died, but in WN, grief IS normal, in the sense that everybody in this context is having it, and in the presence of everyone else who is suffering this experience of spousal death.

Arial inquired,
what I am talking about now is the sense that I am invisible. I have no family, and my friends are wonderful, but busy. Since I lost my loving husband, I know I am not all-important to anyone, and it hurts. Part of me thinks it is a compliment, that others think I am doing so well I don't need to have phone calls returned right away. Or whatever. This loneliness stinks. And I know being sad does not actually attract other people. Has anyone else felt this way? Am I nuts? (WN 1/2006)

Arial thinks that the non-grievers regard her as not normal. Arial is suffering not only from her own subjective grief, but also because of her isolation from others, the non-
grievers around her who are uncomfortable with her grief. The psychic hole that is the pain of loss cannot be filled, even though the non-grievers believe otherwise. Many emotions are a part of grief, fear, loneliness, sadness, panic, anger, despair, ennui, sleeplessness, etc., but grief has one extra element that makes it distinct from depression. Grief must be defined to include the sense of irrevocable loss, the irreconcilable yearning for what can never again happen, such that people’s lives seem splintered, pieces missing. How can a null set be so vast?

Within six minutes Joni, an oldtimer, answered:

the dates....our anniversaries, the date of their deaths, their birthday, milestones passed of plans we made together that passed, and dreams never realized, plans never followed thru on, because half of us was missing. ALL dreams, plans, hopes never to be realized, shattered. Yes indeed, I felt that way... and still do. No, you are not nuts!!! Quite the norm amongst us widders I would venture to say. You were right on target when you said,

[quote] I am not all-important to anyone, and it hurts.40

That is a hard reality to adjust to. Everyone else has gone back to their normal lives with family & friends. Our life as a couple; with the one we were all-important to; with the one we came home to each night; the one who loved us above all others, whether our relationship was rosy & perfect or challenging & imperfect; the one who we could count on; the one we could lean on when life got turbulent.......well, that life has ended. It came to an abrupt stop--it is gone. A thing of the past, shattered without the possibility of piecing it back together. At some point, be it 1 year or 2 years, this stark reality hits us full force. Many of our old friends don’t come around or call anymore because they don’t want to hear our same sad story, it is “old” news to them because they do not live the reality of it each day. And ....it makes them uncomfortable. It reminds them of what might happen to them-- their life too can change in an instant.....bang! And we become invisible. They stop calling. They stop coming around. They stop inviting us to functions-large or small. We fade from their lives.

40 (Aside: the message board has the “copy/paste” and quote function where the user can use it for emphasis and to make a particular point.)
Joni’s blunt response answers not only Arial’s plea, and as the 26 other responses to Arial’s story of feeling invisible, all of them were relieving her that WN is a place of validation where one is noticed. Joni gives a remedy for the loneliness by telling her own “second story” about disintegrating 3-D friends but WN gives them the cyber friends in the CoP. Joni is not singular in that situation: many WNers have become friends with each other. This conversation exemplifies the stark conditions of grief, with many elements similar to depression, but that sense of loss is at the core, the center, the gigantic void that causes all those other emotional symptoms. WNers feel “crazy,” because we have not yet made sense of this experience, and we cannot comprehend its force or complexity in the beginning of this new experience. Others in our surroundings, non-grievers, avoid our behavior (or ennui). We do not feel like doing the things we have done on the past, what we used to think of as normal activities. We come to WN to find others who are having this odd experience, not possessed before. The first remedy is finding that one is not alone in this void. There in WN, the oldtimers say this is what grief is, and it is normal. At least in the WN culture, this is the way we all feel, and how we all behave: if we want to cry and scream about this situation, then other WNers will allow it for as long as the griever feels like that. If we want to talk about it, continually, even, then so be it, someone in WN will listen and respond. Consequently, the WNer finds relief, and appreciation and WN can be thought of as a place for remedial work in the Goffman sense, in that WN can control a new frame of experience where both the speaker and listener can agree.
Yet each grief experience is subjectively different, and the spousal grief experience is often respected for the differences. Since the WNers tell our stories, we find those differences constantly, yet the sameness of suffering exists as well, since we all have that void, which is in itself an oxymoron. How can we have nothing? For ourselves in WN, we can say, from this experience of a relational loss, that this spousal grief condition is not fully understood just through conceptual ideas, formulas, and theories, but rather, through the experience. And the experience is not at all like it might have been imagined or conceived or theorized before grief. Moreover, since this experience is individual and complicated, the notions of comparison are not apt.

Included in this experiential pattern of behavior in spousal grief, time after time in the WN conversations, the WNers who have been there for a while also tell the newcomers that there is no timetable of what we “should” be going through in our bereavement. Instead, the oldtimer WNer might say something like this:

I think whatever you want to do or can do is what's best for you. There is no right way or wrong way or better way. Just one day at a time. One foot in front of the other. Just do what you feel you need to do to get through the day. (WN 2005)

The most common piece of advice from the oldtimers and the most often repeated remarks are saying that the grief experience is a personal experience, that norms can be ignored, and the shoulds can be dismissed. The assumption in WN, and often stated, is that a personal experience, though it may be common to all in WN, is still unique in its trajectory. Because it is the experience of an individual, the grief “journey” is not the same for everyone; there are no “correct” notions of how long it should last or how deep the pain will run. Yet the personal experience is also the allegory, when others learn
those lessons from each one’s personal narratives. This social practice of asking and giving advice for some very painful experiences gives the participants confirmation of their views of attachment in their bereavement. Death may end a life but does not end a relationship, and that was something that the new widows need to learn how to believe. Death of a spouse changes the relationship, but does not end it.

What is Spousal Grief?

This is one of the constant questions, asked and answered, sympathized and empathized throughout the WN community, from newcomers to old timers. There is a difference among kinds of grief. The “DGI” who says “I know how you feel, I lost my cat…” is enough to say there is a difference; people have actually made comparisons like that to the widow. However, spousal grief is deeper, wider, and longer than culture says it is. There might be only one constant in all the definitions of grief, and that is the pain of loss. The depth, the amount, the length, and many other factors have no pattern, but this constant is evident. For example, Tami said it this way:

“I think you get better at living with it, but I think it's always going to be there. My 2 cents. I'm over 5-1/2 yrs out, and miss my husband every single day.” (WN 2005)

Note that this “5-1/2 yrs out” is a common “marker,” as well. Milestones in grief abound: the first year, all the firsts, first birthdays, first Christmas, first day of school for child without dad, then second year, and then third year, and grief does not seem to end, just as the loss is irrevocable.

Spousal grief is also not the same as other kinds of grief. Georgia explains when she compares deaths in her life. She said,
The difference between losing a spouse and losing other people we loved is VAST. I lost my mother and brother in my twenties, my father when I was 40. I loved them, I grieved their losses, I miss them even today. My mother's death was especially hard, but my life in those times did not change. My life has completely changed since my husband's loss, it has transformed me into a different person. The depth of his loss to me is profound, the waves of grief, the timeline is so much longer. I've lost status, most members of his family, financial security, my love, my friend, all of our shared experiences etc. This is expressed on this board every day, it is very, very different from any other loss. (WN, BB 2011)

The crucial point that Georgia is making is that all of her relational experiences built over her adulthood with her spouse are lost, and cannot be put back together, or replaced.

Georgia is talking about her identity, the social construction that she developed with her spouse, and points out how much of it is gone with his absence.

**Grief as a Situated Condition**

Dominant grief theory describes sadness beyond a certain time-limit as a clinical depression. The DSM\(^41\) (-IV, 1994) sets a temporal view of grief that has a finitude about it. Within months, if bereavement symptoms continue, then pathology is in charge. CLOC\(^42\) calls it “complicated grief,” if it surpasses the time limit. WNers, instead, say all spousal grief is complicated, all the time. The DSM, in its definition of grief, can have the power to prescribe medications based on that definition. It is, however, more than depression, more than pain. And grief lasts longer than the dominant views. For as many kinds of social relationships we have, we have kinds of grief that erupt out of the rending in the relationships. When one has an intimate relationship with another who shares living quarters, shares sexual intimacy, shares the everyday of life, from laughter, to

---

\(^41\) American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.  

\(^42\) More details about CLOC in subsequent sections regarding the “DGI”
squabbles, to raising children, to eating together, brushing teeth together, driving the kids, reading the newspaper every day, sleeping together and waking on another day, then that grief condition or asseveration from all those aspects of a relationship entails myriad features of a social relationship that contained every emotion, from all facets of life they shared and is now permanently gone. Spousal grief is not the same as grieving for a pet, or a parent, yet those are compared in our culture. More on that later, but for now, this is focusing on the state of grief.

When “fresh” (sometimes a more apt description would be “raw”) widows find WidowNet, they are in a state that is often in WN called “the fog” (WN phrase). The fog is a metaphorical way to think of the state of mind that we have had in the early period of our grief experience, when grief is strong enough to push away everyday, normal thoughts create lapse of this everyday memory, and we find ourselves doing things such as putting our keys in the refrigerator, or not cognizant of how we managed to pass two blocks of stop lights, or other ways that spousal grief takes over memory. Sometimes in WN, this state of fog is facetiously called “widder brain” (another WN phrase). I remember some of my own widder brain the day (early in my grief) when I arrived at my work parking lot and noticed a “click” sound on the pavement from my right shoe, and a “clack” sound from my left. I looked down and noticed that I was wearing one black shoe and one brown shoe. Feeling guilty, I posted that story to WN when I got to my

43 Perhaps only grieving over a dead child, or a minor child grieving over a dead parent would be worse, if there is such a comparison. This too is an intimate relationship, but of another kind, not meant to be discussed in this project.
computer, and the others remedied my action by telling me, “yes, that’s widder brain. Perfectly normal” (WN, 2003). Many WN threads have engendered “the widder brain” threads, much to the laughter at the consequences. A good example of some widder brain activities is Dora’s thread (WN 2005):

Then there was the day I bought the very expensive gift certificate for neighbours to thank them for helping me after B died. On my way home I stopped to mail some bill payments. The second I dropped those envelopes into the mailbox I started screaming and crying, thinking I’d dropped the gift certificate in there too. Tried to get my arm inside the mail box but couldn’t, try to call the Post Office on my cell, but couldn’t get through. I drove home sobbing all the way. Opened the trunk to get my groceries out and, you guessed it, there was the gift certificate. No idea how it got there. I put clothes in the dishwasher one night and went to bed. The next morning when I went to put my coffee cup in, there were my jeans! Widder-brain.

Thread after thread of conversations about lapses of awareness that grief has overtaken have engendered funny conversations to the ones who “get it” as WNers who think of themselves as “insiders.” The remedial interchanges with their ritualistic consequences carry both the apologies of the confessed transgression from everyday common sense, to the supportive ritual, “yes, its widder brain” much to the relief and thanks of the transgressor with their appreciation. Thankfully, these stories have not resulted in serious consequences, though we wonder how we have survived those awareness gaps, especially when we had been driving.

Grief is a Monster, Mostly

At the core of WN are the myriad tales about the pain of grief, the all-consuming experience that intrudes itself to the reconstructing life of a widow. WNers very often compare this kind of pain to a monster, and tell tales of this monster; some even like it. Whatever metaphor we use in WN, the recurring conversation about the “grief monster”
(or the GM) show that the experience of grief has no predictable pattern, grief does not
come in “stages,” and grief is not “done.” It may change, but does not go away.

The “waves” of grief are described in WN, and when they come, they are fierce.
The grief monster slithers or lunges in and creeps or slams out, and surprises in invasion;
it does not dwell always, but attacks when one least expects it. So far as WNers are
concerned, grief never goes away, but just changes. It has been described often in
various ways:

From time to time the Grief Monster bites, grief really is a monster that sneaks up
at times, we feel so wretched, so alone and so frightened. Frightened and alone.

The conversations repeat through the years in what WNers think is a good analogy to
express the way grief is experienced. Periodically, an ongoing thread devoted to this
subject is reserved at the top of the General Board. Sometimes the discussion about the
GM is that of the practice of learning as participation. The talk of GM is not merely
describing one’s own grief, but how we apperceive it, how we cope with it, and how we
help each other understand it. Narrating it within the interchange oddly comforts the
WNER.

You are not alone with the grief monster hitting you. Every person’s journey with
the grief monster is different. We can help each other learn to live with
this monster named grief.

As in any community, however, not everyone totally agrees with the majority of
opinions on just about any subject, much less the grief monster. Junie had something to
offer in a GM discussion in 2005 when she offered,

While I did see grief as a monster, I also kept him/it in my heart...something to be
let loose, felt and tamed.
From yet another perspective, in response to Junie’s remarks, Alice claimed, “I never saw grief as a monster.” Ruth chimed in with her perspective on grief:

I will honestly say now that I have not known the Grief Monster. My choice entirely. I never saw grief as a monster. I knew that I would feel grief and I welcomed it. I invited it into my heart. I kept it there, and received comfort from it. I cried away entire days, I deeply wept for nights when I should have slept. But this helped me. This was my way of handling the pain. Grief was never something I fought. I do know that crying at anytime or anyplace could make people cringe, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t doing this for them, I was doing it for me. And this kept me together.

Accordingly, even if grief is viewed in different ways, no one in WN has argued that there is no “right” or “wrong” way of grieving at the death of his or her spouse. Even the conversations in the “Ambivalent Grief” Forum, where the discussions turn to the stories of grief after a troubled partnership, or a suicide, or other reasons, the grief is still there in that void called widowhood, intertwined with many complex emotions, and still talked about amongst those who create their categories of association and use multi-faceted metaphors to explain what this is called grief.

Learning How to be a Widow: CoP Performing Identities

In one sense the widow who seeks to find ways to take care of oneself by seeking others on the Internet seems a contradiction. Often WNers claim they exist in isolation from the rest of the world, or want to be isolated from the rest of the ordinary everyday world with its everyday concerns, and feel different from the rest of the world’s ideas of grief. But there is still that urge to seek others who are in this same condition that might help deciphering who one is. This idea is not at all clear to the newcomer WNer, but rather still in a “je ne sais quoi” mode at first. Nevertheless, when a WNer stays, and participates, after a while of social relations, the WNer is making speech act changes in
the social practice of storytelling, and in the process, acquiring a new vocabulary, as well. Those changes are happening in performing identities of widowhood, and these acts are something the WNer is learning.

The WNers are finding social practice in the online community useful and comforting to build these “insider” social relationships in the safety of conversations with others who have these same feelings in grief, they are learning how to be widows. In the enactment of their narratives, they are performing identities with sharing each other’s life stories and descriptions of their condition. Using Austin’s speech act theory here, I can see the words that WNers are saying can be thought of not just as signifiers, but more of as enactments. As Austin (1962) discussed in How to Do Things With Words, they can sometimes be the acts themselves. In looking at WN from that angle, I also see Butler’s (1997) point when she indicates “how things might be done with words” (p. 43). In the case of WN, I argue that there are several points to be made when I see words spoken among the WNers themselves in the sense that they are performances of identity. In other situations, when words spoken to widows things can go wrong or harm can be done. Can words be injurious action? I argue that it sometimes happens. I will get to that point of injurious speech in the section that addresses the “DGI.” At this point, I see that WNers, by the social interaction of our conversations, are performing our identities not by social relations that seem clear to the dominant cultural belief, which is simple: widowed means death of a spouse. But to the new widows themselves, just being named as such has little meaning. The contrast between the name and the internalized identity is stark. Widowhood as a cultural identity is not that simple or easy to comprehend or as
swiftly acquired as the legal status indicates. It takes practice. Part of this is the conflict that widows experience. How should we act? What is a widow? What is the harm in being a widow? Being a widow, talking about widowhood, with each other, conversing about all its aspects that are not considered in the dominant theory of grief, lead WNers to think about those personal experiences in participation. WNers are performing the identities of widowhood in their meaning making.

The new WNers confront that stable identity by showing the particularities of their differences. WNers are destabilizing the dominant widow identity into “a thousand (not so) tiny resistances,” deconstructing identity into a thousand different kinds of identities. The deconstruction begins by coming to WN with confused notions of the dominant notion of the widowed identity and the actual experience of it, when the WNer has stopped lurking and felt bold enough to participate, posing those two main questions: “who am I?” and “am I crazy?” These repeated questions are answered from the long-time members who have had those same questions, and through their performativity, their positing distinctive acts of their thousand kinds of identities. “No you are not crazy, this is what grief is” and “Welcome to the club that no one wants to belong. It will take you a long time to figure out who you are. We’ll help.” These answers, like the questions, are enacted repeatedly, in this ongoing “club that no one wants to belong to.”

The “who am I” is thus performed, taking sometimes months, sometimes a year, sometimes many more years to understand what it is to be a widow. And the conclusion is that “a widow” is just one. A widow is not typical, even though the norm claims we all know what a widow is. “A widow” is not universal, even though that one fact of life—
and death—is universal. There is no prototype. A widow is not naturalized identity, but
a socially constructed one. Yet it is more. That biological fact occurred.

**Performing Identity, Reconstructing Lives in Widowhood.**

My analysis of the WN site illuminates a portion of the culture that is under the
radar, on the margins, a converse of the dominant paradigm of grief. It also illustrates in
a new way what grief does to persons’ identities when the lives of their closest and most
intimate cohorts no longer exist. This section is focused on the social construction of
identity that was found in WN. I culled this data by starting from an advanced database
search by using the key word, “identity” in WN’s 2005 General board only. I found over
50 results, which meant over 50 conversations (thread topics) in WN with many more
participants using that key word. There were other conceptual indicators of ‘identity,’
but I focused on the term itself to begin. I found an overwhelming majority of the
material relevant to my research questions: these results were presented in the search as a
collection of text surrounding the key word, along with all the rest of the data from the
quoted key word. This includes the thread topic from which it came, the date and time of
the post, and the ID (by WidowNet membership naming) of the interlocutor, as well as
links to get to the actual thread from 2005 where the word was included. Thus, I had
access to the context of the key word in my search. I copied those narratives from the
threads of discussion and pasted into documents into my own computer, and analyzed
them. I paste only a sampling of this rich data here. In this I found a much more
complex notion of what ‘identity’ is and how it is performed in WidowNet. These
findings indicate many themes, including the dominant narrative of “I don’t know who I am now” to the competing narratives of that reflect moderninst views of self (I had an essence, but now I don’t) to postmodernist views (I am constructing myself). These conflicting views indicate the strength of the power of competing cultural beliefs. Taken as a whole, the following comments are illustrative examples of how widows are performing their socially constructed identities, and how they are negotiating this identity within conversations among other widows. They talk about their lives that are drastically shaken and changed so that they will never get back to the way it was. This transformation in identity is expressed in many ways.

Take for instance, an old timer, Stan, who speaks to a newcomer, giving advice to him. Stan (12/29/05) says:

... and creatively, we come to value life with a new awareness. And so, become. Become the most you can become. Enter into a new dimension of self-identity and self-dependence as you come to love others more fully and unconditionally.

Stan’s sense of identity is a Butlerian “becoming,” constructing something new, one with more sensitivity.

Next, I found Chris, who quoted an anonymous list about grief, a list which was previously posted (12/01/05):

Grief is the identity crisis that ensues when we lose those who help define who we are, how we live, and how we relate to one another. I relate to more and more of these as time goes on.

Chris’s sense of socially constructed identity builds on the narratives that he learned from other WNers.

John’s experience of the death of his spouse created an identity crisis as do other traumas that might create an identity crisis; in this situation, one knows about identity only when
one has a crisis: there is no residual category of an essentialized category of identity except in a crisis.

i will never be the same. i liked who i was. i don't know who i will become but there will always be a melancholy feeling attached to everything i do. i imagine every occasion, every decision, every one of life's events will inflict some sorrow. how sad. never to feel uncomplicated joy again. (WN, 08/ 05).

This example from John troubles the “stable identity” of widowhood, dominant in Western cultures, at least. This is more a shattered identity.

Justy (11/05) remarked in another conversation about how

“I didn't realize that I had so much of my identity tied up with him.”

Justy was not the only one who talked about having her identity socially constructed by her closeness to her mate during their lives together.

Luis stated (10/05):

Seven months later and I am still unsettled, unsure of myself, trying to find my identity without her.

When the self that was interrupted by her death, Luis has a lost identity, and searches for a substitute for his relational notion of his identity.

Lynn (10/13/05) claimed identity in her marriage such that

It becomes everything about you, and you don't recognize who you are without it. You can look in the mirror, but you lose your identity.

Lynn’s lost identity was wrapped up in her relationship with her husband, and without him, she felt her identity was gone.

Toni (10/08/05) talked about how her spousal grief led her to believe in the growth of her spiritual values, and constructing a new self-identity on her own.

... changes this life altering loss has commanded. I am so filled with humble gratitude for all of the spiritual growth and the emergence of my own identity. I
would forego it all to have my darling Michael at my side again. Alas, that I cannot choose!!

In another conversation, another time and another thread, Toni said (9/27/05),

“All of those years, Michael and I shared our entire lives and identity. With him removed from earth, I had no idea, whatsoever, who I was much less actually like myself. I was only half of an opinion, or so I thought.”

Toni’s identity crisis has cut her notion of self in half, yet she could see the changes in her construction as some of the time in her grief was passing.

Edith (09/13/05) talked about performing her reconstructed identity in this way:

... I almost enjoy it in a demented way. I drink and put on sad music and think of Jacques on purpose. I fear it has become too much a part of my identity.

Edith’s music, drinks and deliberate thought are tokens of her emerging identity, dwelling on the past and keeping it in the present in a Bakhtinian “self authoring,” where the teller is the author of her own story. In this process, the self becomes dialogical with the narration; the self has a multiplicity. Edith’s ‘self” is also functioning as a dialogical relationship with her spouse, as well as a dialogical relationship with her own mind.

Brown (09/05/05), a father of four remaining children, lost his wife and 3 month old baby in an auto accident on the way home from the grocery while he was bathing one of the other children:

One of the toughest tasks after the death of your spouse, at least for me, is finding your identity again. When that “link” is gone, the reality begins to play a bigger role. To certain individuals who never knew Faith, I am simply [Brown]. I don't have that little tag anymore.

This quote is but a piece of a rather long narrative of not only the details of Brown’s wife’s sudden death, but about their busy lives as young parents, and how he has learned to stay at home more and at work less, how to cook, clean and parent, how he wanted to teach his children how not to forget their mother, even though he would at times rather
curl up under the blankets. In the process of his story, he told others who also responded to him by telling their own parenting and death stories, making sense of it, letting others know that they are not alone in this crisis. He sees his reconstructed identity as a way to make himself a better person. Brown’s sense of identity shows a self that in practice is reconstructed after the crisis.

Polly (09/06/05) talked about how aware she is of her emerging identity that is slowly changing:

But me... that which is me... is slowly emerging and growing in awareness each day...Yes I still look after other people things.. haven't completely found my own identity, strengthened by all the shared experiences of my marriage of so many years... But I have confidence NOW.. It is developing...

In this narrative, Kitty (08/18/05) responded to a non-widow who was worried about his widowed mother’s behavior after nearly a year of spousal grief. This conversation occurred in the only WN Forum that allows non-widows to speak. It is called “Questions from Non-Widowed Persons.” Not only do WNers help each other to be widows, but WNers are also eager to give advice –when asked– to others who “DGI.” (don’t get it). This in response to a person who has a widowed mother and is worried about her grief not being “normal.”

One year is a very, very short time. Just not enough time to process the loss, long nights, the shock and fear, too much quietness, the sadness, lethargy and exhaustion, raw anger, the identity crisis, the aloneness, the depression, the new status of widowhood. She hasn't had a chance to even start breathing normally yet. I began to inhale deeply around the 13th month. Something so elementary and yet breathing is impossible for new widows.

Kitty had much to say about grieving and the identity crisis of widows, instructing the widowed mother’s son. Not only the widowed do not know what to expect of themselves in this new experience, but those around the widowed who are not having these
experiences are worried due to these curious phenomena not seen before. Who knew that there might be a breathing problem in grief? Nevertheless, breathing has been discussed in WN for a number of years, enough to note the pattern of behavior in widowhood.

Milly (w’d 2 yrs, posted 08/12/05) spoke of her identity both before and after her spouse died:

we were identified with each other first, then with others. We made our friends together, very few were just his or just mine except a few from our growing up years. That is why it is so hard to create a new identity now.

Milly’s idea of identity while her husband was living was clearly a socially constructed one with her spouse. Her identity was entwined with his, and then their identity as a couple was seen by their mutual friends. But then, after his death, Milly is solo, and for her, constructing this new social identity so closely related to her self with others, was difficult doing this alone. Milly’s creating a new identity alone and this sets up a contradiction, in that one can say that her new identity is impossible. This is different from the new identity in investing in the children, as in Brown’s case; Milly’s sense of identity could be thought of as one that is not the same as a found identity, but finding oneself in a new way, which could be possible.

Others spoke of their identity, both before and after widowhood. In that same conversation, Patty (8/12/05) responded with,

I guess I have to find out who I am and create a new identity.

Patty is starting to work on an identity that she will have to find. In that conversation, there was debate, whether or not there was total agreement as to whether “he was my life” or not, whether the spouse “gave me a place” or not, and in that conversation,
interlocutors acknowledged the differences, and respected them, even though they disagreed.

Brown (08/12/05; w’d 9/01), in another conversation, said,

When I was working outside the home, my identity was wrapped within that work. Selfishly, I believed that my worth was invested in how well I performed at the office; how long the hours were in my work schedule. After F and N died, I invested everything back into my children. I don't have much of a time for myself away from my kids. My identity is wrapped up in them now, and I probably could use a break. I suppose that will come in thirteen years.

With Brown’s explanation, his notion of identity involves in what he focuses or invests. First he constructed his identity involving his job, and now his newly found construction is focused on his children, all that is left of his family.

In a subtle debate, RW (08/12/05) argued with an alternate narrative, first of the dominant paradigm of essence, yet he adds to it another paradigm, that of change and particularity:

"I think that we have a core being of Who-We-Are... I think we arrive with it. It is our nature. Our clearest essence. Then we make choices. Am I the same 'me' that first got together with [Joe]? Yes & no... Yes because that core remains the same... no because I have 13 more years of experience & choices. At 16 months I see this time as the most difficult in my life... but also a time of opportunity."

On one hand, RW gives us the essentialist theory of identity, an old idea that we had learned from the positivist theories and internalized them. But she has difficulty with trying to explain the “yes and no” problem, the contradictions that give us the beginning of the dialectic. Thus she has the impossible identity of change and not change.

Since the days of Old English (500 AD at least), the word “widow” came from viduus, which meant “void.” Widows in WN talk a lot about the void of widowhood, and it was very evident to me in my experience, as well. Colleen (8/12/05 w’d 5/05) wanted to refine the idea of having a “hole” since the spouse is gone: She argued,
I feel the spaciousness, the long stretch of time and emptiness that was filled with relationship and that I now need to redefine.

For Colleen, constructing her identity is the void, the hole that was created by her loss.

Edna (08/13/05; w’d 8/04) told a longer story about her identity, both before and after her husband’s death, when she said,

When I was attending Al-Anon meetings and was realizing that I was holding onto my husband as the center of my universe, I also realized that this followed the pattern of most of the relationships I'd formed throughout my life. From my very first girlfriend in grade school, through high school, college and so on, I had a pattern of getting into exclusive, dependent relationships with people with strong personalities. My world would revolve around those people, and when anything would happen to jeopardize the relationship, I'd be lost. I had no strong sense of self. I think in coming to terms with being in a marriage with, ultimately, a very sick individual, I started to become stronger and to come to know my own self. I was devastated when he went and miss him terribly. But I also am feeling - and I’m going on a year here - that I'm now coming into my own time. He's gone, and I'm finding myself with the time now to do things I didn't have the time or initiative to do before.

Here is a widow who has had a history of lost identities, and now later, without her spouse, constructing a found identity.

One of the more prolific WN writers, Misha, wrote (08/05/2005)

I lost my identity the day Karl died. I was no longer a wife, I was his widow and I really didn't know how to be a widow.

When I first found Misha’s comment in my data collection, I was quite surprised, since her speech act is the whole thesis of this dissertation. Misha is a good example of the identity that she hadn’t constructed yet, and she illustrates how she does construct her widowed identity through the social relations of other WNers. She did learn, though, from other WNers, and from telling her own tales to us. She told her story thoroughly and repeatedly for years in WN. I remember reading the pain of her stories in 2001 even before I was ready to speak myself. She was the first WNer I met at the first GTG I attended, and the first thing she did was to hand a tiny angel lapel pin on my shirt. I still
have it on one of my coats. I will discuss a personal narrative she wrote recently to expand on her 2005 comment about not knowing how to be a widow in the next section.

Angel (4/28/05) spoke of her identity as an outsider in widowhood. However, she as many others have reiterated, spoke of the comfort she has found in WN.

I don’t feel as if I belong anywhere anymore. Feel like I have a disease that no one wants to catch. I have 2 1/2 acres to take care of basically alone now but I don’t mind. I’ve learned a lot the last year & done things I never knew I could do but I did it & I am proud for that but I’m still alone & scared of some of my life challenges of which there seem to be many now. It is so nice to have a site like this. THANKS.

Angel’s ideas are bigger than identity, but here she tells the story of not belonging. If identity is socially constructed, then embedded, there is a sense of belonging to her social community. In this case, though, there is no belonging in this new identity kit called widowhood.

Many other WNers show how they think they lost their identity, while at the same time will assure the one who talks of being alone by reminding them they are not alone in WN, and there will be someone, 24/7, to answer to one’s calling. JP (04/29/05) responded to K by saying,

K, You will find that so many of us have gone through the same thing you're going through. You loose [sic] your spouse, your identity, your sense of being and your friends. I knew I would have to make new friends, so I made a real effort to do so.

Misha spoke of her lost identity in another thread (04/27/05):

I was so angry with him....I realized that if he could come back...I wouldn't take him back....I wouldn't take his abuse ever again.... It was hard for me, I had lost my identity to him....I had given up good friends for him....I quit jobs because he would accuse me of seeing someone....I lived as his prisoner for 22 yrs.

JC  (02/06/05) responds to a fellow WNer in another thread, by including herself in the company of uncertainty.
All of the emotions and doubts you have about yourself, your identity and your failings, I have, too.

These conversations in WN express so many ways of sharing those similarities in the social relationships, teaching fellow WNers how to be a widow.

Mayme (12/18/2004) claimed that

Some parts of me feel stronger but I feel like I am still trying to figure out who the heck I am. I feel like I have lost my identity. I tend to be a loner so I have a small circle of friends. I have gone thru all of the cycles of grief, numbness, running from it, dealing with the pain.

Mayme is theorizing for me. Her sense of “lost” identity is yet another example of the myriad kinds of identity that can come from the widowed.

Marg (01/06-05) jokingly said, in another thread,

No one would want my identity -- oh, sorry, I'm confused. I meant no one would want my life.

Even in the midst of conversations about grief, the dark humor is on the verge. However, her remarks can be interpreted in many ways. And in fact, WNers have had identity discussions, coming out of concerns about the sort of “identity” that can be stolen these days, meaning social security number, driver’s license, or other keys to theft, and often through the use of the Internet. People have been victims of what has been called “identity theft.” So Marg is playing on that notion. However, she could be separating the idea of what her identity was, or what she thought it was, with what has happened since she became widowed, hence the differences in constructing identities she has had with her experiences.

Widows also suffer a significant loss of identity in family relationships, especially the in-law relations. WNers have asked if they still had in-laws after their spouse died.
Little control is held over the family relationships that the WNER has with the in-laws.

“Mars” is grateful for the kindness of his dead wife’s family.

He gratefully reports,

Yes, in-laws are still family. I am remarried and have a baby boy from my new marriage and a daughter with my late wife. Tonight, my late wife’s mother came over to babysit them both while we went to a church auction. She considers herself a grandma to both of them, and we are all blessed she is a part of our life.

And finally, in the search for the term ‘identity’ as a key word in the General Forum of 2005, I found a post that gave, among other things, some advice to the new comers from an old timer. She had saved it and remembered that it was posted before the 2004 hijacking, and so she re-posted a list of pieces of advice: One was this:

You will have some identity confusion as a result of this major loss and the fact that you are experiencing reactions that may be quite different for you (01/15/05).

Constructing one’s identity seems like a never-ending process, from birth and not until one’s own death. Kelly, who was widowed twice, sent a message to Annie, a WNER who was about to remarry:

Yes, Annie, remarrying is a huge step. But it is also rewarding. I was not the same person when I remarried as the one who was widowed. I had been through hell and fought to make a new life. So, you kind of separate the new marriage from the old, not forgetting, for it is a part of who you are, and building a life on that new person with another.

Kelly shows how hard constructing a widowed identity is, but at the same time it does happen. And in the constant construction, that past experience with the widow’s spouse is incorporated into the new life, the new identity, rather than forgetting the old one.

When I reduce this data to some core points, I argue that diversity is recognized and respected in WN, and people who disagree with each other about their various aspects of the grief experience, do so almost always with respect and tolerance, as they
claim that we each travel on our own grief’s journey. Widowed identity is not the culturally accepted “stable” one of what a widow should be doing or thinking. Instead there are many kinds of identity: lost, found, new, emerging, identity in crisis, confused identity, and even the impossible identity illustrated in the WNers’ stories.

**Widow Shopping**

The Community of Practice shows itself everywhere in WN places. In this case, in one thread (2007) that was titled “Shopping Addiction or Masquerade?” This thread as others is a recurring topic through the years. The WNers discussed our “shopping therapy,” wondered why we were collecting objects that quickly we felt guilty about, or found useless, or unreasonable, and wondered if others too were going through this and why all this shopping. In analyzing the thread, I saw how the WNers were attempting to fill a void, and knowing it was unreasonable, the remedial interchange of conversation allowed the affirmations that weren’t just making face, or saving face, but actually more: they made them feel better, and even absolution in figuring out what to do about it. This thread shows again the asking and giving advice that assists the WNer in learning how to be a widow. I analyzed an interesting conversation that was started by Tootsie, in BB (Beyond Bereavement 2007) Forum, when she said,

I really wonder if it is just me or has anyone else gone through or going through it now?? I am on a buying frenzy and I cannot stop myself. It really is not a good thing because I am spending the life insurance money that I will really need someday. Sometimes its little things for the house or sometimes a car. I justify my spending by thinking how short life really is and just go out and buy some of the things I have always wanted. Then after about a week or two later I feel bad that I spent the money. So now I am feeling bad, what do I do?? I go out and shop again to feel better. Am I just masking the pain, the loss of my husband, my life. I cannot sit at home and do nothing, so I go shopping. It has to stop. How do I stop?? (WN-June 2007)
When I read Tootsie’s post then, I could fully relate, because I myself had made many wasteful or useless purchases shortly after Allan died. I remember specifically seeing a huge telescope on an easel on sale at the Discovery Store, and thought that the night sky would be a very interesting sight to see so close up! I have never studied astronomy and I know very little about the stars, but at that moment, the idea of watching the stars was intriguing. Maybe that would help me find Allan, my ongoing search after he died. I was sure his spirit is somewhere in the universe. After the purchase, though, the pieces of the telescope sat in my dining room table, and I never put them together. Perhaps in my secret epistemology, I knew I would not find him through the telescope. In any event, my interest waned, and I and eventually gave the telescope pieces to my grown son, because I thought I was wasting it, and he would find a better use than I would. I’ve never asked him about that telescope. However, for the short time of purchasing and taking the package home, my attention was diverted, and I thought of something else besides Allan’s absence.

The responses to Tootsie’s conversation starter were very much of the ritual “me too” seconding variety, interspersed with quite a bit of ritual advice: both JH and T suggested that Tootsie put aside some money into a CD; JH said to stock a little here and there into the “mad money” pile, and then spend without guilt; Allie responded:

This happened to my daughter and I. (sic) Filling our empty spots up with "stuff". Allie’s own theorizing seemed to make sense. The accounts might not bring, as Goffman would call it, “satisfaction that matters are closed, [but] at least with the right to act as if they feel that matters are closed and that ritual equilibrium has been restored” (p. 140).
Shopping in spousal grief seems to be the attempt to fill the void.

RT’s rejoinder is an attempt at figuring this out herself:

I've been there, too, and still am a bit, I think. It's been very weird and unlike me. I was the person who had a pair of shoes for work and flip flops for home and now have 20-30 pair. I started buying things in multiples from sheets to purses to p.j.'s to necklaces. Things that didn't make any sense if you knew me and my purchasing history. My secretary said she couldn't dress out of my closet because there were too many choices. I just went through it, and there are things that still have the tags on. The only explanations I can come up with are that I kept seeking something to make me feel good, maybe create a tangible thing to explain my guilt, maybe try to trick myself into believing I really did have control where my husband's death was proof I didn't. I'm at six years and have royally screwed up finances--really just guaranteed I'll have to work 'til I die. I suppose it could be worse. All in all, I do think it helped me get through some times, though. They don't call it therapy for nothing.

RT has a strong relationship with her objects, the substitute for her relationship she had before her partner died. She keeps collecting, and is purchasing over and over again in place of the void in her with her grief. She is running real risks in her solvency with these purchases, and she has no logical reason to continue with this commodity fetish. She has rationalized with the coda in her narrative: “I suppose it could be worse.” She also finds that though it is a substitute, it is better than the void.

And as Tootsie knowingly responds with her explanation,

I do remember how good it felt when you bought something nice for yourself... I guess I am still looking for that great feeling... which we are hoping will replace all the sad feelings. It is only temporary.

Molly’s additional explanation to the conversation brought us to laughter when she told us she

Did the same thing, at about the same time. I think it's because you are coming out of the "I don't give a shit" fog. In my case I was buying stuff off the Internet, cause that's where I spent all my time! ... I realize I don't really need it—like the cast iron pancake puff maker that was just delivered last week. I do think it's a way to indulge ourselves.
Molly filled me in with even more information about her shopping sprees when she emailed me with details about them. She “also bought three 8-track players, two turn-tables, and a life-sized green boxing man44 [punching bag]” (email 12-5-07). Her “coming out of the fog” is that time early in grief where the widow is mostly stunned with the reality of death, and often reduced to traumatized shock.

As often happens in various “Beyond Bereavement” Forums, humor lightens the seriousness of the discussion. Louisa quipped to Molly:

Cast Iron Pancake Puff Maker???? Better stick to Scrabble

This comment illustrates another factor of the ways an online community expands into relationships that are not exclusive to that particular community. Louisa, who lives far west in the US, Molly, who lives in the East Coast, and I have constructed an “off-line” friendship (but online, elsewhere) that we have constructed beyond WN. We all have met in “3D” a few times, but we correspond online every day as friends, and by our playing daily Internet scrabble game, interspersed with commentary. The friendships that have been constructed are illustrated in that remark from Louisa to Molly, a sort of “inside joke,” because not everyone in WN knows about our online scrabble activity.

The conversation about shopping therapy lasted for a few days, and over 30 people participated in characterizing their own feelings about the seeming irrational

44 I’ve actually met Molly in person and stayed for a few days at her house on the East Coast. Her giant green man punching bag “stands” in the living room in full view as one walks past to the stairway. I was startled more than once by thinking that someone was standing there as I passed, someone very green and ugly.
shopping phenomenon many experience (I am no exception). People requested a remedy, others provided relief in advice, reasonable explanations. Often the result is appreciation, when the posters offer their thanks for the advice. These provide evidence that the WNers possess “at least one of the traits of character of a worthy person, namely aliveness to favors done him” as Goffman would say (p. 142). No one disagreed in the WN conversation; this experience in widowhood seems to be thought of first as “something missing,” and in the dominant narrative, as either an “addiction” or “therapy,” psychological (and ideological), or medicalized terms for something we feel guilty about and/or try not to feel guilty about. Several of the WNers tried to be the “therapists” by giving bits and pieces of practical and philosophical advice that might slow down or make the shopping frenzies more reasonable. But the common theme in these conversations was about widows “filling a void,” rather than evidence of an addiction. We are bombarded with commercial advertisements “in your face all over the place” as Jean Killbourne (2000) claimed in her study of “how advertising changes the way we think and feel.”

Tootsie said,

someone please tell me that this will go away and I will feel whole again. I am so tired of feeling empty. No amount of shopping seems to work, fixing up the house or staying busy with anything just does not take away the pain. It may be on the back burner at times, but its always there. (WN Oct 07)

There was no answer to her request for this one in that thread, because all the WNers have that sense of void, the sense of something missing, marking an absence. And they have not found a way to fill it, at least the way they would want to fill it. The widow
knows that the something transcendent is unattainable, irreplaceable, and yet oh-so-wanted, even if “one more day.”

The Ideology of the DGIs (who “don’t get it”)

Earlier in the dissertation, I mentioned the term, ‘DGI’ as an acronym that the WNers coined and have use quite commonly in the online community. To understand what DGI means, one must also understand grief, since that is central to this issue. The conversations about the DGI are used only as “insider stories,” ones that are told only to each other because of the commonality between the teller and the listeners and no one else. In this case, the ‘DGI’ became a catch-all term to describe many situations where a spousal griever is interacting with a non-griever, who might say something about spousal grief. Despite thinking they know something about spousal grief, one who would be called “DGI” often displays little real understanding. The trouble with the term “grief” is that it is lumped together in varied situations, relationships and experiences. The term is generalized too often, and the particulars get left out. “Grief” gets lumped together as descriptive of what one experiences when one loses a loved one, whether it is death or divorce. Grief is also thought of as something one experiences when one loses a job or a pet. Today’s use of the term is ambiguous, vague, and stereotyped, and it seems that the one common thread involved in ordinary use of the term is to characterize loss of any kind. The trouble with the stereotype is that it misses out on the beauty of the particulars. The distinguishing factor in spousal grief is that quality of personal and sexual intimacy between partners that does not exist in relationships with parents or friends or pets or
jobs. When aWNer talks about a “DGI” the WNer presupposes that the utterance is a performative act based on misunderstandings that show a range of offense. These so-called “DGIs” have been described by the WNers to include a wide range from the trivial remarks to the institutional powers of some medical models in grief theories, which includes the act of defining by the DSM of what counts as “normal” and “complicating” grief.

I return to Judith Butler’s ideas of speech as enactments from her article, “Burning acts, injurious speech” (1997) in the context of the discussion of the “DGIs” in WidowNet. From the perspective of performativity, a speech act is a form of discourse that has the transformative power of doing things with words. One of Butler’s strongest paradigm case for performativity is the judicial branch of Law, in that the judge by virtue of the pronouncement has the power to sentence a person (in the worst case) even to death. In this case, the act of sentencing a criminal is injurious in the sense that the criminal is put to death. Butler may have focused these principles in her discussion of the context of hate crimes, but in less severe cases, the principle is the same: “performativity requires a power to effect or enact what one names” (p, 49). In the case of the stories that WNers tell about the injurious speech, the acts done to them are compilations of the cultural history, the resulting cultural beliefs about what a widow is, and how a widow should act. Butler shows how it is not just the person who perform the injurious act, but “a community and history” of such beliefs that prompt the speaker in the first place, so we may not find a clear answer to determine who or what actually caused this harm. Despite the cloudiness of the source of the acts, the WNers call those people who inflict
these injurious acts are called “DGIs” or the persons who “don’t get it,” meaning the non-
widowed do not understand the full impact of spousal grief. The WNers’ stories run the
gamut from passing mentions to serious harm that has lasting effects to the widow.
These range from the neighbor, family member or business associate’s actions to the
more institutional powers that affect widows’ lives.

The dominant theorists, through the medical and psychological model, are
entrenching cultural beliefs about widowhood by publishing in a popular weekly news
magazine, a *Time* magazine review article45 (*Time*, 12/04/06 Bonus). In this case, it was
a review of the quantitative study called “CLOC” (*Changing Lives of Older Couples*) that
was published in Time. The reviews46 have raved about how “definitive” this is (Caserta
2006), how “superb” (Hansson 2006), how it is “destined to become a classic”

45 [http://www.time.com/time/generations/article/0,9171,1562962,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/generations/article/0,9171,1562962,00.html) In this article, reporter Sally
Stitch quotes a book, *Spousal Bereavement in Late Life*, co-edited by Deborah Carr, Randolph M., M.D.
Nesse, and Camille B. Wortman, psychologists. The study known as "Changing Lives of Older Couples,"
or CLOC, and various scientists in the reviews stated in Amazon.com are quite positive, such as this:
“Among the many contributions of the CLOC study is the shattering of myths about grief and bereavement
- how people grieve and what is adaptive or maladaptive in grief. The findings of CLOC have already
reshaped bereavement theories. The results and analysis presented in this book should have far-reaching
effects on clinical practice and on social policies for health care and support of older adults." Says Susan
Nolen-Hoeksema, Professor, Department of Psychology Yale University.

46 These quotes are coming from the reviews at Amazon.com.
These claims of “normal grief” (i.e., that which is “gotten over” by six months after spousal death) are ideologically credible and the conclusions that they have arrived might have become definitive for the dominant “science.”

Even today, the dominant science is attempting to define grief in the American Psychiatric Association’s finalizing of the production of the fifth edition of their definitive manual: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*, 5th edition, or the DSM5. In the proposed changes for the DSM5, prognosis is calling for specific time frames for bereavement, specific behaviors to be defined and finding “termination” for the “adjustment disorder.”

These proposed changes, however, made many widows on the WidowNet community seethe at the *Time* magazine article in our conversation. We clearly saw the dialectic between our lived experience and the conclusions which came from the scientistic claims of the dominant paradigm. The resulting online conversation reacting to that *Time* review painted quite a different picture of spousal grief. I wonder if perhaps those scientists have not been asking open-ended questions, that perhaps they have conflated “depression” and “grief” and “stress” to reach unrealistic conclusions. The WNer discussion thread that popped up very shortly after the *Time* magazine article started with Bart (WN, 12/02/06) when he said:

47 See [http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx](http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx) for full details from APA. The specific definition that is being edited is here:

I started reading the latest issue of Time magazine last night....There was an article that (to me) said that if death comes to a good solid happy marriage that (in effect) in 6 months many/most are all better and move on happily with life !?!?!?!? I stopped mid way through the article and decided in my opinion they got that WRONG so whatever else they had to say was doubtful and they did not know that the hell they were talking about on this matter. Here I quote Time, "We found that almost half the people who reported satisfying marriages grieved - sometimes devastatingly immediately after the loss but by 6 months later had few major symptoms of grief. " Does that mean to Time that if I still grieve all these years later that my marriage was not solid? That thought really pisses me off. Damn, I guess I (at 4+ years out) and many/most of you are not of the norm as we "seem" to grieve for years. On the other hand, Time may be wayyyyyyyyyyy out in left field on this one and not have a clue of what they are talking about (which seems to be the case to me on much of Time's stuff). I think what Time blew was the fact that we can go on and lead "normal" lives but that we still grieve. We just go on through our tears. ps - I did go back and read the rest of the article but its about the same spin. I'll bet the writer, Sally Stich is not a widow.

As Bart tells of his reaction to the news reported in Time, he shows his anger, and also shows how the experience itself is not even close to the definitive claims about grief based on the medical model.

Nora responded by saying,

Grieving is process - evolving and continuous. It is not a procedure where your spouse is removed, you heal up and head out into your new life with a few scars. Being widowed means a reinvention of self and adjusting into a solo life -- if a person does that in 6 months they can be commended, but in the international widows/ers community that I belong to this is clearly NOT the case. I was married for 23 years, had a very successful relationship and was widowed over 4 years ago ~ 6 months after my husband died I was still thinking I could hear him pulling up in the driveway. I was 44 years old, my husband was 58 ~ there is also no clarification in this story that quantifies "older couples". This story minimizes the effects of losing a lifemate

Not only does she have a contrary opinion of the magazine article, but Nora also defines grief, and compared the 23 years she spent making a life with her mate, to the 4 that she has had in her new widowed identity, and the habits of those 23 years still hard to break in her new practice.

Kelly, a two-time widow, and fits the category of the “older couples” in the CLOC study, was one of the first responders to Bart’s opening thread: She said,
Ah, [Bart], don't blame the reporter, she is only reporting on a study, which IMO is flawed. I wonder if there is a follow-up with the people involved, say, after a year, two years, three years, or more, to see how they are coping with grief. My own personal experience was that I did just fine for the first three years (I had been widowed before and thought I could handle it on my own), then had a complete meltdown. Three months after that, I found WN, which did me more good than the psychologist I had been seeing. There may be exceptions, but it is my personal belief that the only people who conduct these studies or are grief counselors should be widows/ers. Only then can they make judgment calls on who is doing well and who isn't and what works and what doesn't.

By using her own experiential knowledge as a marker, she believes that there is a difference between theoretical understandings (or beliefs) and experiential knowledge.

Further on, after other responses, Kelly claimed,

According to the reviews of the book, the supposed study was started some years before illness/accident resulting in death and afterwards. But doesn't state how long afterwards. A comparison of widows with non-widows is a non-starter to me. How can there be a comparison? Or do they mean that at six-months some are bereaved and others non-bereaved? A slapdash article such as this only confuses the issue. If we're not fully over the death of a spouse by six months, there's something wrong with us. Balderdash.

I honestly don't want to spend $60 to find out what I already know and that is that there isn't any "norm".

Kelly’s remarks came from her research of the book itself, as is her habit to be a thorough researcher, anyway. In her opinion, however, a review of the book was enough to keep her from reading the book itself. Moreover, she, as many other WNers have said repeatedly, there is no norm for spousal bereavement, despite the dominant medical model.

Further, Birdie chimed in, saying:

It is unfortunate when this crap get published, though. A lot of people who maybe don't have support could read it and wonder what is wrong with them? Also, this trash supports the DGI's who prod the grieving with, 'What's wrong with you? Why aren't you over it yet?'

When Birdie uses her quote of “what’s wrong with you?” this example is one of injurious speech that is a performative act. Birdie’s comment is pointing to the ways that widows
can be conflicted by thinking of what a widow should be doing and thinking. This example of performativity hurts the widow, not just a mere momentary hurt feeling, but could be a diminished sense of self worth, when someone tells her something is wrong, then she either has to defend her condition by saying “there is nothing wrong with me; I am grieving” or she could believe that since others tell her something is wrong then there must truly be something wrong that she has to fix, or needs to be fixed by someone else more professional.

Arlene responded by:

This really chaps my hide! [3 grouchy emoticons inserted here] As if it isn't bad enough having to educate all the DGIs (and we all were DGIs before we went through this ourselves, let's face that), now this false propaganda is out there in a "legitimate" source publication???? I agree... sounds like a good way for drumming up business. Six months! For effen's sake, she's totally skipping all the cycles one goes through at 9 months, 1 year, the serious 18 month point, 2 years, etc. This is totally bogus!!!!! And what REALLY is a p***er is she got paid for it!

Arlene’s angry response also tells us more about the DGIs, which in her mind are all those who have not had the widowed experience. She is claiming Time magazine, the reporter and the science that the reporter is claiming to be “DGI.”

There were more angry and frustrated responses from other WNers from that narrative thread, but the discussions of the DGIs are one of the most of the common threads that have been the WNers stories throughout the history of WN. This is a case of injurious speech acts that are harmful to widows, not only the ones who reacted to the magazine article, but all the history that is compacted into it, from the longitudinal study of CLOC to the magazine editors, and all the community and history entailed. If the DSM IV continues with its intentions, the definitions of grief will continue in the dominant narrative, and as shown in this data analysis, the cultural beliefs filter down
from the dominant narrative. These result in the confusion of the widow who has grief experience contrary to the dominant narrative, and the conflicts with the “DGIs” as seen in the conversations in WN.

**Other DGI Stories in WN**

Additional conversations have been woven in and out of WN about the WN-coined acronym, “DGI” to mean the people who (often unintentionally) say hurtful things to the widow but “Don’t Get It.” This conventionalized phrase is well-known in WN because of the tales WNers perennially tell each other about the people in their lives who do not understand the enormity or depth or the relations of spousal grief. Conversational threads about the DGI pop up quite often through the years. Some people (who are characterized “DGI”) do not understand what is entailed in the experience of widowhood, but think they do. These comments, though usually not intended, cause hurtful, offensive and often dumbfounding reactions to the WNER who is already in pain. These utterances run a gamut of offense from the slight to the stringent. Often the DGI stories are told in WN because the WNER could not speak in the actual event, could not find a response because of the shock of the utterance, but telling the story with a willing audience helps the WNER understand the meaning of what happened. Sometimes the DGI stories are absurdly humorous, and the WNers find dark humor in the fact that the DGI’s commentary is so far from the reality of the widow.

WNErs have retold these stories that arise from the conventional widow norms such that sometimes, they have even generated a perverse “insider” humor that insiders
tell each other occasionally. The “oh yea? Well, how about THIS one!” “this is even worse” one-up-man-ship attitudes that the second storying sometimes burbles in and even create solidarity.

This first example is a more serious narrative told to fellow WNers is an example of un-asked-for advice from what Ceely called a “DGI”:

Three days before the first wedding anniversary after my husband died, only 5 months after his death, my former sister-in-law phoned long distance. This was her first contact with me in the 5 months since my husband's death. After she asked me how I am doing and I replied with the above information, and that it is very hard, she replied that her father died so she knows about grief, then quipped, "You need to stop focusing on your husband. You need to do something for yourself. You need to find closure. I couldn't sit around and grieve for six months" (WN, May, 2006).

These orders are what Austin (1962) called the “exercitive” (p. 151), class of “illucotionary forces of an utterance.” Ceely recounted to the WNers what she was rendered speechless to her sister-in-law:

It was only five months, and three days before my wedding anniversary, when she said that. I should have told her, "I didn't realize you made love with your father. Shared your heart and soul with your father. Faced the world with your father." But, I was too dumbstruck to say anything other than, "Goodbye Sue," and hung up. Then I permanently removed her from my life and have not talked to her since. I've never regretted that. (WN 10/05)

Here the injurious speech has resulted in severed relationships, and an absence of yet another family member. These “exercising of powers, rights or influence (Austin, p. 155) are examples of the ubiquitous Foucauldian judges. This idea of a widow being “too sensitive” happens when others (who are non-widows) around her have tended to reinforce the cultural belief that grief should not be ‘this’ long or this openly painful. Further, the idea of being isolated seems to come in tandem with this notion of being “too
sensitive,” in that the “Other” (who has not understood this kind or level of suffering) puts the widow into a separate place.

When something that is said to them that is insensitive, or ignorant, WNers name them “DGIs” to talk about the things said to them that they consider stupid or ignorant, lack of understanding, lack of tact, or lack of common sense. When DGI conversations start in WN, they usually start by some extraordinary experience when the widow has been affronted and often felt speechless in that experience. So s/he comes to tell the tale in WN. Some examples of the DGI comments that widow/ers have encountered are here:

Bob told the story of his girls and first Christmas without his wife:

The first Xmas at the ILs was a horror. Standing around chit-chatting, EVERY time I or one of the girls [his daughters] mentioned anything about [A], zoom, instant subject change. By end of the evening my girls were in tears and I was shaken. Later, my SIL said it was planned... they'd all agreed that whenever we mentioned her or and "I remember when", they'd change the subject "so we wouldn't be sad"!!! Yeah, her own family pretends she never existed so we won't be sad? ”

Bob’s story ending with a bit of sarcasm is an example of the belief that people have when there is a death in the family but people do not speak of it because they think that mentioning the dead will bring more sadness and tears. This however, is not the case, but rather the silence is more hurtful than being able to tell stories, where the stories bring better memories. Tears might fall but it is not the worst thing to happen—often tears can bring comfort. Bob continued with another story:

And then there's the woman at work, a perfectionist workaholic type … whose husband sometimes travels on business. After he'd been off on a week-long trip and she was stressing out over everything, moaning over all she had to do by herself, she told me that now she knows exactly how it is for me. I just gave her a

48 IL is an acronym for “in-laws” and SIL is an acronym for “sister-in-law”
flat stare and said, "But he comes home, right? And you talk to him every night, right? Try doing this every day forever!" Stupid DGI!

This story tells of how the DGI often sets a comparison between a periodic absence (though a return) of a person, and the irreversible absence as in the death of a person. The WNer sees no comparison, and in fact, an absurdity.

Bob brought this DGI story at another time:

From my mother, the day after Christine died, "Don't call me with anymore bad news, I can't take this." Thanks for the support ma—and then a friend at the time kept telling me "Just don't think about it" lol49 thank god his wife was there to tell him to shut the hell up with that...."

This type of DGI acts but is not thinking about the widow, just of herself—the avoidance of pain DGI. Of course, the widow too is thinking of self, but much more, the thought is of the one who is gone, i.e., the void, thus hurting.

Paddy said:

i went back to work about a month and a half after dave died, i was working at 711 at the time, and one of the customers came in and said, "so, your husband's dead, huh? you lookin'?" WTF!!!

Paddy’s DGI is one of the insensitive DGIs, where the assumption is that “now that he’s dead, there’ll be someone else.” The DGI is trying to make a joke where there is no room for jokes in death.

Ju’s response showed how the DGI is using a cliché to fill in and even though it is unintended, the communication does not “fit” the situation:

I just got an e-mail from a friend. "so and so"’s husband died and the funeral is today at "xyz". It’s sad but they're making the best of it." Will someone tell me how they make the best of it?

49 LOL is an acronym for “laughing out loud” (a way to show emotion or laughter when there is a lack in physical embodiment.
Deb responded to Ju by explaining with an absurdity:

> What comes to mind when they say "they're making the best of it"? Two things; either it's a tooth that needs to be pulled or rainy days ruined thier tropical vacation.

This DGI story is another faulty and harsh comparison, this between death and divorce.

Juny’s DGI friend was expecting the widow to be cheering up the friends rather than the other way around:

> I just loved the one from a 'friend' who wrote me an e-mail telling me that my grief was upsetting people - they wanted to hear me be cheerful and positive when they asked 'How are you?' - She wanted to know how soon until I would be 'back to normal'. This was three months after the death of my husband.

This DGI has a comparison that is such a non-sequitur that it made the WNers just shake their heads. The uneven comparison can be seen as a sort of failed second story, as shown in the following example.

> I was talking to the father of one of my 6 year old son's friends. I said that I worried about my son and the impact that losing his father at such a young age would have on him. He told me that his son had it much worse - they had moved 3 times in the last 6 years!

One of the more patronizing of the DGIs is the one who does not hesitate to ask about the family finances after death. This example shows that often the widow’s status is lowered, and the discussion of finances reduces her to the child’s rank:

> On the day of my husband's funeral... a relative on my husband's side came up to me and said.... "What are you going to do with ALL THAT insurance money? (It was $10,000. Obviously...SHE never had to pay for a funeral and raise three children.)

Some DGI stories are so far beyond the superficial that can aim almost to the biblical proportions. In this case, the injurious speech act resulted in severing more family relationships and ending a beloved mother-daughter companionship, even though
the mother was an in-law. Here is a Ruth and Naomi story from this WNER I named

“Ruth.” She tells her story:

The other thing was when my sister in law removed my mother in law from my care after eighteen years and took her far away. She said I am no longer mom’s family. The fact that mom is miserable means nothing. What is really happening is her fear that mom would leave me an inheritance. My husband and I nursed her through cancer and heart failure, but I am no longer family. She would not even give me a mailing address. I am supposed to write mom in care of another relative.

Why is it that it takes the death of the most important person in our lives to find out what bastards exist within our life circle. People you loved and thought loved you. I am beginning to think that I am incredibly stupid and a horrible judge of character. I often doubt my own judgment now.

This story heart-breakingly speaks for itself. Ruth truly lived the story of “your people shall be my people” while her sister-in-law tore the widow’s heart. The cultural beliefs of this DGI traces all the way back to the Biblical story of Ruth, where two wives lost their husbands who were brothers. The bereaved mother-in-law, Naomi, offered the widowed daughers-in law the chance to return to their own tribes, but Ruth chose to stay with her in-law family. In the present-day story, not only did Ruth lose her beloved husband but this family was torn in many other ways: her sister-in-law took away her beloved Naomi also.

Even though many of the DGI stories are examples of the ways the WNers have been hurt, others after some time and perspective think that most (but not all) of it is not intentional, and many of these stories come from the fact that the DGIs have not had this experience, and there are no ”right” words to say to the newly bereaved. So much of the DGI enactment comes from a social construction based on a history of misunderstanding and half-truth that is seen as a social reality.
Sheena, a WNER now of more than 10 years, is not as active in WN as she used to be, but she occasionally is still posting on WN, and she and I have stayed in touch via email. She gave me her opinion of the DGI in a personal email when she said,

I think my basic stand was that people *shouldn't* get it if they haven't been through it and we *shouldn't* expect them to. That most things are said with good intent and that's where we should be looking. That I was--am still--capable of having foot in mouth disease, not because I don't get it but sometimes finding the right thing to say or truly appreciating another person's experience can be nigh on impossible. So maybe we are then in fact all DGIs. I think it's always been a bit of a tribal thing, a them and us situation with somehow 'them' being a lesser mortal by simply not having experienced a spouse...like it's their fault. Let's face it..I and most others would choose to be a dgi if given the choice of not having to loose a spouse.

More often than not, WNers do not answer to the clumsy sympathy, or the misunderstood notions of grief when people are patronizing us or pitying us, or we are excluded from settings because we are widowed and they are not. The stigma involved in widowhood is subtle. Maybe the reason we do not answer to them, but instead talk to each other about it is more than just finding someone else who could empathize. I surmise that the act of telling each other stories helps ourselves to understand the stigmatization while we are being validated by our peers, and telling each other that the DGI is stigmatized, not us. Further, it might also be as Goffman (1963) would call the DGIs “the normals,” when he put it this way: “it is not the set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a pervasive two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connexions and in some phases of life” (p. 163). As Arlene stated before, the widows were DGI before they were widowed. This state of grief is understood only through the experience and through the long term understanding of its situation.
The following section will illustrate the second portion of my triangulated methods, by using a Labovian sociolinguistic analysis.

2) Labovian Analysis of Misha’s Story: How to be a Widow"

In this second section, I used a Labovian analysis, parsing each clause of Misha’s story to show what points a WNer I call Misha was making and how she was evaluating her own experience and her newly constructed identity in her story. I analyzed it using Labov’s components of the narrative, such as abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda. All I had to do was ask one question to receive Misha’s 338-line narrative of personal experience. First I would give you some background, even though Misha performs her identity so thoroughly in her stories. She has been widowed since Mother’s Day, 1999 when her husband died in a small plane crash in a field in the mid-west. He had left the house earlier for his flight, and while he was gone, Misha and her three young children were summoned to the field where the plane crashed. A handful of other skydivers as well as the pilot were also dead at the scene. Misha was 41 when her husband died. Lately, she has been a bit less active on WN than she used to be, even though she still posts to many Forums, especially the General one, where she still gives support and advice to newcomers. She has since remarried (to another WNer, whom she met at a GTG). I asked her what she meant when in 2005 she said she didn’t know how to be a widow. In answer to my request for an explanation of what she said in 2005, she retold her story for not just me in 2010, but because she is a good storyteller, she explained this to today’s newcomers who would not have been as familiar with Misha’s
story as we old timers would. Moreover, in her narratives, Misha is also performing her identity as a widow. She is not only talking about widowhood, but she is doing the widowed identity. Over the years, she tells her story again and again in ways that she has apperceived meaning to her newly constructed life as a widow, and now as a remarried widow. She performs her identity, also, so that she can share this found meaning with other newcomer widows in WN. Whether she thinks of it in this way or not, I can see Misha’s storytelling in a dual role: she constructs her own identity through the others in WN, and she also performs the social practice of teaching and learning in a community of practice.

As did I, Misha found WidowNet shortly after her bereavement began. I remember hearing her stories, especially, in WN when I began my own membership in 2001. Misha’s tales were vivid and prolific, and I was amazed at how much she bared her life, good aspects and bad, to the other WNers. I also met her face-to-face in the fall of 2001 in Chicago when I attended my first GTG where 12 of us WNers met at the Navy Pier where she was demonstratively friendly. From the beginning when she found WN, Misha had told the story of her husband’s death, of the troubles she had with her children who were grieving their father’s death, and how she was coping with the world, her church, and her extended family who did not give her the kind of support she was craving. She found solid support in WN, though, and became a very active member and a copious storyteller.

Earlier in my data collection, I found a part of Misha’s story that she wrote in 2005 in which she said then, "I was his widow and I really didn’t know how to be a
widow” (WN, 2005). Here is another example of the ways widows hear the word but do not comprehend its impact. At that time, Misha had been telling WN about a letter she had written to a new widow she knew, and in that letter she was telling the new widow what to expect, and how different it would be from anything imagined. In effect, Misha was teaching the new widow what she practiced through her participation in WN. In my data collection phase the summer of 2010, I found her 2005 story, and subsequently emailed her to ask for clarification. I asked her if she had remembered that 2005 thread where she said she didn’t know how to be a widow, and I sent her the hyperlink to that particular story to remind her. She wrote back very quickly and told me she would give me a longer answer in a couple of days. When she did, instead of writing to me personally, she created yet another new story thread into the WN General Forum the summer of 2010. She titled it “Widowhood—WidowNet: What I have learned.” I collected her story and put it into an Excel file and took the story apart via a functional analysis according to the Labovian theory of sociolinguistics. I took Misha’s relived tale apart and categorized each clause into the Labovian categories: orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. (See Appendix D to view a graph of this finding.) By describing the types of clauses in her story, I also am finding that nearly twice as many parts of her story are not the story line itself, but more important, the method that Misha is using to make points, the reasons why she is telling her story. And in this case, her reasons go far beyond her own particular story. When I parsed out Misha’s narrative, I found that of those 338 clauses, 112 lines, or 34% of her story were recapitulating her experience, or what Labov calls the “complicating action,” while there
were 203 lines, or 60% of which were “evaluations,” the points that she made, which consisted of twice as many as the story lines. 50

Using the Labovian techniques to parse the subject-verb clauses of Misha’s tale, I found the beginning itself was longer than ordinary. It took her 14 lines of abstract, evaluation and orientation before she started with the complicating action of her narrative. After six lines of abstract, where she introduces her narrative, Misha’s story begins by judging her own story, then some generalizations about her marriage with her husband and children. Then at line 14, she started with the event of her husband’s death when he was a passenger on a sky diving excursion on that Mother’s Day of ’99. The young pilot, an apprentice, ran out of gas during the flight, and Misha’s husband, along with five other divers, died when the plane crashed in a farm field on a state border not far from home. Misha and her children arrived at the scene soon after.

Throughout her 338 lines, her narrative lines were interspersed with twice as many points to be made, and not just for her own edification. She told us the story of her husband’s death, with more details, mainly to point out how difficult it is first to confront the death of a partner, how so like crazy widowhood is, and then how long it takes to learn how to be a widow. In Labov’s schema, evaluations are not part of the plot, but they are points to be made, or reasons for the tale. They are not following the narrative action, but they do carry meaning. In Misha’s evaluations, I found several types peppered throughout in her story, and I divided the evaluations according to the ones that

50 (The other parts, abstract, orientation, resolution, coda, the beginnings and endings, are comprised of the other 6%.)
Misha made of herself, and her recounting the others (mostly family) who were evaluating Misha. I found that half of those evaluations were those of praise, and the other half was blame. It was Misha who was praising herself, and her relatives who were blaming her. Misha was presenting herself as the “good guy” in the narrative, where crazy was normal for her, and the “bad guys” were the relatives who thought she was crazy.

Within the first four lines Misha introduces the story with abstracts, i.e., the introduction, including the reasons why she is telling the story, the story theme, and a topic for the narrative. She orients us with a summary about her marriage to Kenny, and then she proceeded to tell four clauses of evaluation, which are points to be made in her story. The evaluative lines are evident because the verbs are not a typical narrative past tense, but more a generalized section of statements that tell how her marriage itself was, in general, and how she evaluated the marriage: in spite of its imperfections, she judged that they had a “special love.” Then Misha mentioned important facts by telling the crux of the story.

After two lines of her narrative recounting the event of her husband’s death, she mentioned, in evaluative clauses, (line 16) that she did not know much about being a widow. She immediately veered over to a general statement about how the widows in her church sat at the back of the pews. Her point was that before her own experience of widowhood, her view was that widows belonged with the senior citizens, the ones on the margins of their community, providing food for church functions, and becoming “cranky and bitter” (line 21), which led her to mention her own mother’s widowhood. From that
she generalized again about how she saw other types of widows “that accepted their husband’s death with grace” (line 23), which led her to the specifics of her widowed stepmother, and the implications of the strained relations of various members of her family. By then, through a few more lines of narrative, Misha told us how her family had its usual 3rd row pew, but when she returned after K’s death, others were filling her family’s usual spot. She then looked back at the widows at the end of the pews and the widows “seemed as though they were staring at me” (line 32). She did not feel she belonged with that group, because she was only 41. Even though she did not continue with the narrative about her “place” in her church, I asked her in a follow-up interview about that incident, and what she did then. She said yes, she and her children sat at the back of the church with the other widows and widowers. Misha’s experience is a striking example of the marginalization of widows in a cultural milieu, even to the extent of being pushed to the physical “margin” of her church.

**Labovian Evaluations in Misha’s Story**

The most interesting part of using Labov’s method of narrative analysis, is that I am finding in Misha’s narrative over 200 statements that are not a reporting of events, but about the points that she wants to make within her story. Sometimes Misha’s evaluations are information that explain the consequences of events, her fears, her hesitations, and her determination while she recounts the construction of a new relationship with a fellow

51 I traveled to the mid-west in November 2010 to conduct a follow-up f2f interview with Misha, who provided me with more details about the church etc.
WNer, at the same time she is still grieving for the lost spouse. Other times, her evaluative clauses provide clues to the ways others, mainly in her family, blame her for her crazy actions as a widow, yet another form of marginalizing her. But mostly, those evaluations are about her identity, where she is praising her self for her actions, and I think, not only is she validating her actions as good deeds, but she presents those actions and their consequences as a backdrop for actions that other WNers can do in their performance of their identities.

In terms of Goffman’s remedial interchanges, Misha offers her own remedies when she sets herself up as a person of virtue by keeping herself in a defensible posture with her own remedial rituals. Given that Misha has had a long-standing WN reputation before she created this particular narrative, her story is not new. Since she has had over 10 years’ worth of the remedies of various kinds when in the past, she had revealed her abusive marriage before her spouse’s death years ago, she had laced her erratic widow behavior with deadpan humor and stark realities of the pain she endured. She had been judged wanting by her family, but her narration of that prior victimization after these years positions her in “a viable image of [her]self in the eyes of others” (Goffman, 1971, p. 185). Misha has tempered her “crazy” behavior of her early grief with the wisdom that she has now, in that her candor has been couched in core ethical ideology. She was abused by her husband, traumatized by his death, judged by her family, and subsequently marginalized by her own church. In spite of or because of these guides, Misha offers a lengthy account of a strong image of craziness in grief, as well as its redemption as the years have gone on. Misha carried her own visible stigma, one that the ordinary person is
not willing to do. In Goffman’s words, “[s]he will always be in a position to play herself off against [herself] and often will feel obliged to do so” (p. 186). She replaced the norms that she saw were a sham in her life, with norms of her own.

**Conclusion to the Labovian Analysis:**

There are many types of linguistic structures in the evaluative clauses of Misha’s narrative: some are done by emphasis, others by comparatives, others by parallel structures, and then some are negatives, some are modals, and some are future tense. These references of Misha’s that are things that might have occurred, would have or could have occurred are serving the purpose of her evaluation. When Misha evaluates her events in her narrative, she might also be telling of others in her situation and environment who have evaluated her, where she is showing us how she thinks of them and how they think of her. Further, in her transitions from those evaluations, in the end, she overtly gives advice, with the main repeating “there are no rules,” stated in bold print and capital letters. She is broadcasting as loud as she can to the others in WN. In other words, Misha is showing the others how the cultural beliefs about widowhood are not the beliefs that the widows themselves must follow.

**Reproduction of Misha’s Tale**

Following is the original narrative that Misha posted to the WN General Forum last July after I emailed her to clarify some information she wrote in 2005.

Nancy aka Abxxxxxx asked me for my thoughts on how Widownet taught me to become a widow for her dissertation she is writing. I thought I would post my thoughts here. She asked because of a letter I wrote to a friend that I posted on WN [in 2005]. In the letter to my friend
I told her that when Kenny died, I did not know how to be a widow. For those who do not know me, here is a short version of my story. (But it will probably be long)

Kenny and I had been married 22 yrs. We had 4 children: John, Joe, Judy and Jordon (Kenny’s son from a high school relationship). We didn’t have a perfect marriage but we held on to what we had. It took awhile after his death for me to believe this but I feel we had a special love. Kenny was killed on Mother's Day May 9, 1999 in a plane crash of skydivers that also took the lives of 5 others. I didn’t know much about being a widow. I knew that if you were widowed, you were usually past retirement age and you always sat on the back pews at church with the other widows. You went to every church meeting and every senior citizen function. And when there was a church lunch/picnic you always made alot of food. Usually, you became cranky and bitter ( in the case of my Mother who was widowed in 1996 at the age of 70). Yet there were a few that accepted their husbands death with grace and looked to the future with a positive attitude (my step-mother who was widowed in 1996 at the age of 67).

My family always sat in the 3rd row from the front in church. Kenny didn't always go to church with the kids and me, so I really didn't mind sitting in church without him. The Sunday following his death I walked into church and there were other people in my designated pew. I looked at the back pews and there were all the widows (seemed as though they were staring at me). I was only 41, I shouldn't be one of them.

My Mother-in-law told me 3 weeks after his death that she hoped I would find someone to love me again. A few weeks later my brother-in-law helped me get a job at the local hospital because the job I had did not have benefits. He told me that I needed to plan for my future because no one was gonna want to take care of me. Within just a few months they stopped inviting us to family functions and they only called when they wanted to criticize something I had done or to tell me I was crazy. They also threatened to take my daughter (14 at the time) away from me.

I had bought a computer and had quit my job after 1 month. My days were spent in Yahoo chat rooms talking to faceless people that lived all over the world. They became my friends, because the people I thought were my friends couldn't deal with my presence without Kenny. Kenny and I went out every Friday and Saturday night with 10 other couple to karaoke and linedance. Two months after his death I showed up for Karaoke night and the silence amongst our friends was deafening. If I mentioned his name, they got really uptight. I sat at the table with them drinking my usual Pepsi, but I was so alone. It hurt to watch as these friends danced and hold each other. I felt very uncomfortable around these friends for the first time in 10 yrs. I felt like the fifth wheel. And when I drove home, I was alone. I was always the designated driver, cause Kenny would always have a few two many beers, but now I was just alone, driving, walking into the house, crawling into bed. Tears that I had struggled to hold back in front of my friends, flowed freely. Only his pillow there to comfort me.

I found Widownet in November of 1999. At that time you could read all the Forums without registering. I read and read and then read more. I would stay up all night sometimes reading the posts from other widows and widowers. I found it amazing that there were people out there that knew exactly how I was feeling. Their words read my mind and their heartbreak was my heartbreak. They talked about their journey’s, the grief monster and DGI’s. Some were just recently widowed, others had been there for awhile. They talked openly and honestly. They laughed, they cried, they got really pissed off at their spouses (that was kinda the stage I was in) and they embraced each other. I finally got up the courage to register and tell my story. A whole new world opened up for me on that day. I finally felt for

52 My pseudonyms
the first time since Kenny had died that I did belong. I no longer felt as though I was losing my mind or going crazy. Even though I didn't know these people in the real world, I trusted them with my soul, for they had and were walking the same road that I was.

I lived in Indiana and found 2 others from Indiana. I eventually met both Rob and Karen. Rob was my mentor, so to speak. He pulled me through my first year, kicking and screaming. He answered his phone at 3 am if I needed to talk or was having a meltdown. Karen was my girls day out friend. It was fun just to be with her, having lunch, laughing together, crying together. I relied on both of them alot.

I had my first "date" 5 months after Kenny died. It wasn't because I really wanted to date, but more so because I didn't want to be lonely. I went to high school with Ron and he seemed safe. Divorced, had a job, owned his home, 2 kids and very very bitter towards relationships. We went to dinner a few times and I knew it wasn't right for either of us...we parted friends.

I had been feeling some things that I didn't really understand and was too embarrassed to talk about, let alone tell someone about. And then, there it was on Widownet...a post about "Skin Hunger". God there it was in black and white, details and all. Once again, I felt as though the poster had read my mind. I was so lonely for intimacy, NOT SEX, just intimacy...being held. No more, no less. But my God, Kenny hadn't even been dead a year....what the hell was I thinking? It didn't matter though, because I was going through a stage where I bearly left the house. I took a bath once a week maybe, and stay in the same pj's for days at a time. My days and nights were on the computer. The mail was piled in the corner, unopened. I was oblivious to what was happening to me and to my children. My daughter Jane was still at home. She missed alot of school, she skipped alot of school. Her straight A's went to D's and F's. She wasn't home alot and too tell you the truth I really didn't care. Grief, Anger, Begging, Denial,Guilt was consuming my life and my only reality. In alot of ways I just wanted to die. I wasn't needed or wanted by my family. I just didn't care. I started dating more actively but it was from the internet. I did have a couple relationships I thought might lead somewhere, but I learned that there are worse things than being alone. It didn't bother me to met some guy from the internet. My mother was apalled and told me I was gonna wind up dead....well, what was the downside of that? I didn't fear death, I welcomed it. I had alot of guilt...guilt over the kind of wife I was, the mother I was, his death and the way I was living. I wasn't proud of some of the things I did, but you know what? I didn't give a damn. What's that song? My Give-a Damn's Busted.

In March of 2001 I had the opportunity to drive to St Louis for a Widownet GTG. Oh my God, according to the family I had completely went over the edge. To drive 300 miles to met so-called widow/widowers from the internet was completely insane. My brother-in-law told me I was gonna wind up in a ditch somewhere...ok...I'm game. He sure as hell wasn't helping me.

Thirty people met in the lobby of a hotel in Westport. We had name tags with our screen names from Widownet. It was one of the best moments of my life...seeing these faceless friends from Widownet. I felt as though they had been my family all of my life. I could share my deepest secrets and know they would understand. There was a love between us all...compassion. For the first time since Kenny died I knew I was always going to have the Widownet family with me. There would always be a hand reaching out to me. I would always belong no matter what. It was at this GTG that I met Zach. After dinner I went back to the hotel, heading for my room when I heard my name being called out. Zach and Paul were standing there and asked if I wanted to go have a drink with them. Sure! Why the hell not? But while I was getting in the car with these two men that I had just met, fear entered my head...oh my God...what if they aren't really widowers, what if they are axe murders...but my thoughts quickly dashed as we walked into the nightclub. There was a band, lots of people, lots of dancing and lots of drinking. I was always the designated driver, but this time I could relax and have some fun...afterall, they might strangle me later, so have a good time while you have the chance.

At some point Zach asked me to dance. The music was so loud that I didn't know what he said so I just shook my head no. He was persistant though and asked again a little later when the band was on break. The next song we danced. I had drank just enough wine
spritzers to be relaxed and get really hot while dancing. After a couple dances, Zach asked if I wanted to go outside to cool off. There we were standing outside...chit-chatting. We started talking about Kenny and Babs (his wife that had died 9 months before). Then he put his arm around my waist and told me how much his missed holding a woman. He told me that I looked like I needed to be held and asked if he could just hold me for awhile. I let him. And when we got back to the hotel, said our goodnights to Pete, Zach came to my room and held me, all night long, no more, no less. Well, until about 5 am when he left to go back to his own room, so nobody would catch us...kinda felt like being teenagers again. The group split up into smaller groups and spent the day touring St Louis. Zach, Joanne and I went to the history museum. Although Zach and I tried to hide our infatuation with each other, Joanne caught on pretty quickly. Paul figured it out the night before. The group came together that evening for dinner and then we all went to a night club. There I did things I would have never done if my life depended on it, before meeting these people. I was in a contest where I had to hula-hoop and drink Apple Pucker at the same time. Although I didn't win, I put on a great show and that was worth some laughs. We all went back to Karen's loaded the bathtub with ice, beer, tequila and what ever else. There I had my very first shot of tequila... somewhere floating around Widownet and there is a picture of me, holding my nose and downing the shot.

The next morning our group took over a Denny's restaurant for breakfast. My bags were packed and in the car. I had checked out of the hotel. It was our last time being together before we each went back to our own reality. As we stood in the parking lot waving goodbye to everyone, Zach looked into my eyes that were already filled with tears. I knew that I was leaving someone who could become the best thing in my life. I didn't want to leave. Zach asked me to stay...for one more day. I said yes immediately. Thus the love affair began...after 4 months of him traveling to me and me traveling to him, he asked me to come to St Louis and live with him.

The issue with me doing that was my daughter. She was almost 16 and she was getting into trouble alot. She was rude, hateful, and wished I was the one that had been killed with every breathe. I couldn't blame her for her behavior...I hadn't been there for her. Here almost 2 yrs later I was finally getting it together and trying to step back into being her mother and she wanted no part of it. My brother-in-law had constantly badgered me to let her live with him and his family, so I could get on with my whatever life. I struggled with all the "what ifs". If I forced her to move to St Louis, she would make my life and Zach's miserable. If I left her with her Uncle, I might lose her forever. If I left her with her Uncle, I might lose her forever. The guilt...the guilt I fought so hard to overcome with Kenny's death was now back in another form. Guilt, from being a horrible mother. But with different opinions from my Widownet family, I was able to make probably the most important decision of my life and Jane. I gave complete custody of Jessie to my brother-in-law. Oh, it wasn't easy. Jane hated me, my family hated me even some people on Widownet hated me. Ugle words were said, but in my mind, in my heart, I was doing the best thing possible for Jane. She needed a man around, she needed guidance, she needed discipline, she needed consequences for her actions. In the end, it was the best thing I could have ever done for Jane. Her grades went back to straight A's and she made her family proud of her. After a couple months she started speaking to me again and I drove back to Indiana at least once a month and every special occasion. We talked everyday and I was still very much her mother and a part of her life. Today, Jess is 25 yrs old. She moved to St Louis in 2003, married her husband in July 2004 and they have 2 beautiful children Aydan and Aubry. There are times that I still let the guilt creep in, but I am not kicking myself in the ass anymore. If I hadn't let my daughter go...I would have never gotten her back. Oh, by the way, Zach and I just celebrated our 8th wedding anniversary. He told me when I moved in with him, that he only expected me to clean the john, which I haven't lived up to the expectation very well, but I know how very blessed I am.

I could go on and on with stories from my journey but that is not the point of my writing this. How has Widownet Taught Me To Be A Widow?

Maybe someday someone will write the book "Widowhood For Dummies" or may "Rules for Widowhood". But for now this is what I have learned and this is the top of the list, the middle
of the list and the end of the list:

**THERE ARE NO RULES.**

See the section following the table below to note the list of the parsed lines of
Misha’s story and divided by the categories in it via the Labovian functional analysis.

53 Misha went on at the end for over 40 lines of the “there are no rules” sort, with details as to what she recommends widows do. I left that portion out for the sake of space here, though its entirety is open to the public for reading in WidowNet at this URL:

This table below, is a sample of the Labovian categories of thought in Misha’s narrative, along with the subtotals of the different types of clauses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Clause</th>
<th>Sample Clause</th>
<th>Total #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>For those who do not know me, here is a short version of my story</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Kenny and I had been married 22 yrs.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicating</td>
<td>Kenny was killed on Mother's Day May 9, 1999 in a plane crash of skydivers</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>no one was gonna want to take care of me</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>But for now this is what I have learned</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>you know I always have more to say...good luck and thank you for this opportunity.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Labovian Analysis of Misha’s Story: Spreadsheet in Enumerated Clauses

This spreadsheet is a breakdown of Misha’s tale, by numbered clauses. They are sorted by the various categories of a Labovian analysis. Yellow highlights indicate the “Evaluation” clauses, which are the ways that Misha wants to make a point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line of narrative</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Sub Analysis</th>
<th>sub-sub analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 I thought I would post my thoughts here.</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nancy aka Axxxxxxx asked me for my thoughts on how Widownet taught me to become a widow for her dissertation she is writing</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Reason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 She asked because of a letter I wrote to a friend that I posted on WN.</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Reason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 In the letter to my friend I told her…</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Key Phrase</td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 that when Kenny died, I did not know how to be a widow.</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Theme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 For those who do not know me, here is a short version of my story.</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (But it will probably be long)</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Kenny and I had been married 22 yrs.</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 We had 4 children: J, J, J, and J (K’s son from a high school relationship)</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 We didn’t have a perfect marriage</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 but we held on to what we had.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 It took awhile after his death for me to believe this</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 but I feel we had a special love.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Kenny was killed on Mother’s Day May 9, 1999 in a plane crash of skydivers that also took the lives of 5 others.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 I didn’t know much about being a widow.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 I knew that if you were widowed, you were usually past retirement age</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Line of narrative</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Sub Analysis</th>
<th>sub-sub analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>and you always sat on the back pews at church with the other widows.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>You went to every church meeting and every senior citizen function.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>And when there was a church lunch/picnic you always made alot of food.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Usually, you became cranky and bitter</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>(in the case of my Mother who was widowed in 1996 at the age of 70).</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Yet there were a few that accepted their husbands death with grace</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>and [widows] looked to the future with a positive attitude</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>(my step-mother who was widowed in 1996 at the age of 67).</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>My family always sat in the 3rd row from the front in church.</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Kenny didn’t always go to church with the kids and me,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>so I really didn’t mind sitting in church without him.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>The Sunday following his death I walked into church</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>and there were other people in my designated pew.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>I looked at the back pews</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>and there were all the widows (seemed as though they were staring at me).</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>I was only 41,</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>I shouldn’t be one of them.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>My Mother-in-law told me 3 weeks after his death that</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>she hoped I would find someone to love me again.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>A few weeks later my brother-in-law helped me get a job at the local hospital</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>place</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>because the job I had did not have benefits.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>He told me that I needed to plan for my future</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>(Anti-Ruth story)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>because no one was gonna want to take care of me.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Within just a few months they stopped inviting us to family functions</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>and they only called when they wanted to criticize something I had done</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>or [they called me only] to tell me I was crazy.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>They also threatened to take my daughter (14 at the time) away from me.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line of narrative</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Sub Analysis</th>
<th>sub-sub analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>45 I had bought a computer and had quit my job after 1 month.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>plot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 My days were spent in Yahoo chat rooms talking to faceless people that lived all over the world.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47 They became my friends.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 because the people I thought were my friends couldn’t deal with my presence without Kenny</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49 Kenny and I went out every Friday and Saturday night with 10 other couple to karaoke and linedance.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 Two months after his death I showed up for Karaoke night and the silence amongst our friends was deafening.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 If I mentioned his name, they got really uptight.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52 I sat at the table with them drinking my usual Pepsi, but I was so alone.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53 It hurt to watch as these friends danced and hold each other.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54 I felt very uncomfortable around these friends for the first time in 10 yrs.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 I felt like the fifth wheel.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 And when I drove home, I was alone.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>self</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57 I was always the designated driver,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58 cause Kenny would always have a few two many beers,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59 but now I was just alone, driving, walking into the house, crawling into bed.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 Tears that I had struggled to hold back in front of my friends, flowed freely.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>self</td>
<td>character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61 Only his pillow there to comfort me.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62 I found Widownet in November of 1999.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63 At that time you could read all the Forums without registering.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64 I read and read and then read more.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 I would stay up alnight sometimes reading the posts from other widows and widowers.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line of narrative</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Sub Analysis</td>
<td>sub-sub analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 I found it amazing that there were people out there that knew exactly how I was feeling.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>social identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67 Their words read my mind and their heartbreak was my heartbreak.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>social identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68 They talked about their journey's, the grief monster and DGI's. Some were just recently widowed, others had been there for awhile.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69 They talked openly and honestly.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 They laughed, they cried, they got really pissed off at their spouses (that was kinda the stage I was in) and they embraced each other.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71 I finally got up the courage to register and tell my story.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73 A whole new world opened up for me on that day.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74 I finally felt for the first time since Kenny had died that I did belong.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 I no longer felt as though I was losing my mind or going crazy.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76 Even though I didn't know these people in the real world,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77 I trusted them with my soul, for they had and were walking the same road that I was.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79 I lived in Indiana</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>self</td>
<td>past info</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 and found 2 others from Indiana.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81 I eventually met both Ray and Kathy.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82 Ray was my mentor, so to speak.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83 He pulled me through my first year, kicking and screaming.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>self</td>
<td>praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84 He answered his phone at 3 am if I needed to talk or was having a meltdown.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>plot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85 Kathy was my girls day out friend.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86 It was fun just to be with her, having lunch, laughing together, crying together.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line of narrative</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Sub Analysis</td>
<td>sub-sub analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87  I relied on both of them alot.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>self</td>
<td>past info</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88  I had my first &quot;date&quot; 5 months after Kenny died.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89  It wasn't because I really wanted to date, but more so because I didn't want to be lonely.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90  I went to high school with Ron</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>past info</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91  and he seemed safe.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92  Divorced, had a job, owned his home, 2 kids</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93  and very very bitter towards relationships.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94  We went to dinner a few times</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95  and I knew it wasn't right for either of us...</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96  we parted friends.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97  I had been feeling some things that I didn't really understand</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98  and [i] was too embarrassed to talk about, let alone tell someone about.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99  And then, there it was on Widownet...a post about &quot;Skin Hunger&quot;.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>plot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 God there it was in black and white, details and all.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 Once again, I felt as though the poster had read my mind.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>102 I was so lonely for intimacy, NOT SEX, just intimacy...being held.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103 No more, no less.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>104 But my God, Kenny hadn't even been dead a year.....</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105 what the hell was I thinking?</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106 It didn't matter though,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107 because I was going through a stage where I barely left the house.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108 I took a bath once a week maybe,</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>109 and stay in the same pj's for days at a time.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110 My days and nights were on the computer.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111 The mail was piled in the corner, unopened.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>112 I was oblivious to what was happening to me and to my children.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>113 My daughter Jessie was still at home.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line of narrative</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Sub Analysis</td>
<td>sub-sub analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>114 She missed alot of school, she skipped alot of school.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115 Her straight A's went to D's and F's.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116 She wasn't home alot</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>117 and too tell you the truth I really didn't care.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>118 Grief, Anger, Begging, Denial, Guilt was consuming my life and my only reality.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>119 In alot of ways I just wanted to die.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 I wasn't needed or wanted by my family.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121 I just didn't care.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122 I started dating more actively but it was from the internet.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>123 I did have a couple relationships</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>124 I thought might lead somewhere,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125 but I learned that there are worse things than being alone.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>126 It didn't bother me to met some guy from the internet.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>127 My mother was apalled</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>128 and told me I was gonna wind up dead...</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>129 well, what was the downside of that?</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>130 I didn't give a damn. What's that song? My Give-a Damn's Busted</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>131 I wasn't proud of some of the things I did, but you know what?</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>132 Oh my God, according to the family I had completely went over the edge.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>133 To drive 300 miles to met so-called widow/widowers from the internet was completely insane.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>134 My brother-in-law told me I was gonna wind up in a ditch somewhere...</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>135 .ok...I'm game.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136 He sure as hell wasn't helping me.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>137 Thirty people met in the lobby of a hotel in Westport.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138 We had name tags with our screen names from Widownet.</td>
<td>Complicating Action</td>
<td>plot</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>139 It was one of the best moments of my life</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140 ...seeing these faceless friends from Widownet.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>141 I felt as though they had been my family all of my life.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>142 I could share my deepest secrets and know they would understand.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143 There was a love between us all...compassion.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line of narrative</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Sub Analysis</th>
<th>sub-sub analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For the first time since Kenny died I knew I was always going to have the Widownet family with me.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There would always be a hand reaching out to me.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would always belong no matter what.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was at this GTG that I met Zach.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After dinner I went back to the hotel, heading for my room when I heard my name being called out.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach and Pete were standing there</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and asked if I wanted to go have a drink with them.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sure!</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why the hell not?</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>no reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But while I was getting in the car with these two men that I had just met, fear entered my head….oh my God…</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what if they aren’t really widowers, what if they are axe murders…</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>embedded</td>
<td>worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but my thoughts quickly dashed as we walked into the nightclub.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was a band, lots of people, lots of dancing and lots of drinking.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>characters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was always the designated driver,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>reason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... but this time I could relax and have some fun</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...afterall, they might strangle me later,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so have a good time while you have the chance</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At some point Zach asked me to dance.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The music was so loud that I didn’t know what he said</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td>confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so I just shook my head no.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He was persistent though</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and asked again a little later when the band was on break.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The next song we danced.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had drank just enough wine spritzers to be relaxed and get really hot while dancing.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After a couple dances, Zach asked if I wanted to go outside to cool off.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There we were standing outside...chit-chatting.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line of narrative</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Sub Analysis</th>
<th>sub-sub analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>170 We started talking about Kenny and Carol (his wife that had died 9 months before).</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>171 Then he put his arm around my waist</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>172 and told me how much he missed holding a women.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>173 He told me that I looked like I needed to be held</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>174 and asked if he could just hold me for awhile.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>175 I let him.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>176 And when we got back to the hotel, said our goodnights to Pete</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177 Zach came to my room and held me, all night long.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td>character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>178 no more, no less.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>179 Well, until about 5 am when he left to go back to his own room, so nobody would catch us</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180 ...kinda felt like being teenagers again.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>181 The group split up into smaller groups and spent the day touring St Louis. Zach, Josie and I went to the history museum.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>182 Although Zach and I tried to hide our infatuation with each other, Josie caught on pretty quickly.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>183 Pete figured it out the night before.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>184 The group came together that evening for dinner and then we all went to a night club.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>185 There I did things I would have never done if my life depended on it, before meeting these people.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>186 I was in a contest where I had to hula-hop and drink Apple Pucker at the same time</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>187 Although I didn't win, I put on a great show and that was worth some laughs.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>188 We all went back to Kathy's room and loaded the bathtub with ice, beer, tequila and what ever else.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>189 There I had my very first shot of tequila .... somewhere floating around WidowNet and there is a picture of me, holding my nose and downing the shot.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>190 The next morning our group took over a Denny's restaurant for breakfast.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>191 My bags were packed and in the car.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>192 I had checked out of the hotel.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193 It was our last time being together before we each went back to our own reality.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>194 As we stood in the parking lot waving good-bye to everyone, Zach looked into my eyes that were already filled with tears.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line of narrative</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Sub Analysis</th>
<th>sub-sub analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I knew that I was leaving someone who could become the best thing in my life.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t want to leave.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach asked me to stay...for one more day.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I said yes immediately.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thus the love affair began...after 4 months of him traveling to me and me traveling to him, he asked me to come to St Louis and live with him.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The issue with me doing that was my daughter.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She was almost 16 and she was getting into trouble alot.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She was rude, hateful, and wished I was the one that had been killed with every breathe.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I couldn’t blame her for her behavior...</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hadn’t been there for her.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here almost 2 yrs later I was finally getting it together and trying to step back into being her mother and she wanted no part of it.</td>
<td>evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My brother-in-law had constantly badgered me to let her live with him and his family, so I could get on with my whatever life.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I struggled with all the “what if’s”.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I forced her to move to St Louis, she would make my life and Zach’s miserable.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I left her with her Uncle, I might lose her forever.</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The guilt...the guilt I fought so hard to overcome with Kenny’s death was now back in another form.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt, from being a horrible mother.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But with different opinions from my Widownet family, I was able to make probably the most important decision of my life and Jessie’s.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I gave complete custody of Jessie to my brother-in-law.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, it wasn’t easy.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie hated me, my family hated me even some poeple on Widownet hated me.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugly words were said,</td>
<td>Complicating action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but in my mind, in my heart, I was doing the best thing possible for Jess.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She needed a man around, she needed guidance, she needed discipline, she needed consequences for her actions.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the end, it was the best thing I could have ever done for Jessie.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line of narrative</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Sub Analysis</td>
<td>sub-sub analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>220  Her grades went back to straight A's</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>221  and she made her family proud of her.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>222  After a couple months she started speaking to me again</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>223  and I drove back to Indiana at least once a month and every special occasion.</td>
<td>Complicating</td>
<td>action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>224  We talked everyday</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>225  and I was still very much her mother and a part of her life.</td>
<td>Complicating</td>
<td>action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>226  Today, JJJJJ is 25 yrs old.</td>
<td>Complicating</td>
<td>action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>227  She moved to St Louis in 2003,</td>
<td>Complicating</td>
<td>action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>228  married her husband in July 2004</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>229  and they have 2 beautiful children Aydan and Aubry.</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>230  There are times that I still let the guilt creep in,</td>
<td>Complicating</td>
<td>action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>231  but I am not kicking myself in the ass anymore.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>232  If I hadn't let my daughter go...I would have never gotten her back.</td>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>233  Oh, by the way, Zach and I just celebrated our 8th wedding anniversary.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>234  He told me when I moved in with him, that he only expected me to clean the</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>235  john, which I haven't lived up to the expectation very well,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>236  but I know how very blessed I am.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>237  I could go on and on with stories from my journey</td>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>238  but that is not the point of my writing this.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>239  How has Widownet Taught Me To Be A Widow?</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>240  or may &quot;Widowhood For Dummies&quot;</td>
<td>Coda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>241  or may &quot;Rules for Widowhood&quot;</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>242  But for now this is what I have learned</td>
<td>Coda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>243  and this is the top of the list, the middle of the list and the end of the</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>244  list: THERE ARE NO RULES</td>
<td>M's Point</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>245  No matter what I will always be Kenny's widow.</td>
<td>Coda:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>246  I had to go through the grief, the denial, the anger, the guilt, the pain,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>247  the begging, the pleading and yes even attempting to sell my soul to become</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>248  the person I am today.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>249  CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line of narrative</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Sub Analysis</td>
<td>sub-sub analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>247 I can't begin to imagine losing one of my children.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>248 You change at least 80% of your friends after being widowed.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>249 There is no such thing as normal anymore.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250 Even after being re-married for 8 years, I know that my normal now is never safe.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>251 Angels can be faceless people on the internet.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>252 There may be bad people on the internet</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>253 but I believe the good far outweigh the bad...</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>254 thank you Michael.</td>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>255 Never be ashamed or embarrassed by what you feel</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>256 ...there is someone that has been there, done that.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>257 THERE ARE NO RULES</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>258 Grieving isn't a competition of who hurts the worst.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>259 ...the death of a spouse SUCKS...plain and simple.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>260 When you start to share other’s pain, you are healing.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>261 Date when you feel it is right...hold yourself to your expectations, not someone else's.THERE ARE NO RULES</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>262 One year is not enough time to get over it, hell a lifetime isn't enough time to get over it.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>263 While times heals, the heart never heals.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>264 You carry the scars forever.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>265 Sometimes all it takes is a word, a picture, a song, a memory to make that scar fester up again,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>266 but with time the scab goes away again and just leaves you with the scar.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>267 How long you grieve, does not reflect how much you loved...Dr Phil.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>external</td>
<td>others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>268 I thought about this statement alot.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>internal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>269 This is how I feel</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>270 ...I will always grieve for the life of Kenny,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>271 but that grief will never come closed to how much I loved and still love him.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>272 He was 40 years old when he died.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>273 I was 41.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line of narrative</td>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Sub Analysis</td>
<td>sub-sub analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>274 Now I am 52.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>275 He will never be 52.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>276 He will never catch up to me.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>277 Just as the grief will never catch up to the love.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>278 I would rather be consumed by my love for him, than my grief.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>279 Re-marriage is not replacing.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>280 Kenny and Zach are completely different, there are no comparisions.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>281 Love someone else doesn't require a ring and a marriage license.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>282 Being with, living with someone you love is ok</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>283 ...do what is right for you.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>284 THERE ARE NO RULES:</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>285 What is right for you, may not be the answer for someone else.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>286 We walk this road together, but we each have our own path.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>287 When our spouse died, part of us died also.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>288 I lost my identity and I had to find out who I was again.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>289 I am not proud of some of the things I did,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>290 but I did it the only way I knew how.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>291 I am proud of the outcome.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>292 Don't let other tell you what to do or what you need.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>293 Taking a chance...can be the best thing you ever did.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>294 And if you are thinking the worst....honey you've already faced the worse.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>295 Take little steps,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>296 take deep breaths,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>297 drink lots of water.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>298 Take care of you</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>299 ...love yourself.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 You don't have to date, re-marry or anything to be the person you want to be.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301 Dating can be heaven or hell on earth</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>302 ...learn to speak for yourself</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line of narrative</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Sub Analysis</th>
<th>sub-sub analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>303 ...don't do anything you do want to do just to keep from being lonely.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>304 THERE ARE WORSE THINGS THAN BEING ALONE.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>305 Things have changed since you married the first time</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>306 ...falling in love is much different now</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>307 ...you have fears of losing that person</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>308 and you may question yourself if you are really in love.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>309 Your head may be telling you one thing and your heart another</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>310 ...when your heart and head are in unison, you will know it is right.</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>311 Trust your gut instinct</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>312 ...if you are in any situation, relationship that doesn’t feel right or you see red flags, GET OUT!</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>313 THERE ARE NO RULES:</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>314 Make yourself happy,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>315 take a chance,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>316 go back to school,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>317 volunteer,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>318 walk you own path</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>319 and if you stumble or fall,</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>320 Widownet will be there</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>321 Nancy, I hope this is what you wanted</td>
<td>CODA.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>322 ...if not, your know I always have more to say...good luck and thank you for this opportunity.</td>
<td>CODA.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>323 HUGS</td>
<td>CODA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pie Graph of Misha’s Narrative

This graphic illustrates the kinds and numbers of clauses and their proportion that Misha made in her narrative: Obviously, Misha’s use of the actual facts of the story carried half as much weight as the evaluative use within the facts. The evaluations, points to be made, are combining the praise of self and blame of others.

Abstract: 6
Orientation: 6
Complicating action: 114
Evaluation: 203
Resolution: 3
Coda: 6

Figure 4: Pie Graph of Misha's Narrative—Labovian Analysis
Conclusions of Misha’s Narrative

The Labovian analysis leads to a deeper understanding of the speaker and the audience, a stronger idea of how Misha performed her new identity as a widow, as well as an understanding of how compelling the narrative of a widow can be. Counting the types of statements in her narrative surprised me. I found that there are twice as many evaluative statements as there are of the actual plot itself. We can tell a narrative is so because of the “and then what happened” statements… the actions of a plot. But most of Misha’s story is not the plot. The bulk Misha’s narrative was laced with praise and blame, a clever way to make the points she was sure to make. These evaluative statements served Misha as she emphasized, not the plot, but the ways she coped with grief, and how her seemingly crazy behaviors are couched in her own self-praises, since no one else was doing that for her—quite the opposite, as she was frequently and sternly criticized by others in her extended family. This long narrative is one reminiscent of 10 years ago when her grief was fresh and she was telling the stories of the craziness in her life daily, the agony of all the messiness resulting from the abusive marriage and then the loss of her man. She encountered social sanctions, both formal and informal, from the agency of authority, i.e., her daughter’s school, to the family members who reproved her for her and her daughter’s behavior. However, she frankly did not care about the social sanctions. Formally, conformance to a rule gives evidence of one’s moral state, but Misha was interested remedying her world by making rules of her own, not the culture around her. In the years of her conversations with WNers, she found meaning in her
story telling. After all these years, she comes to WN with “words of wisdom” and tells newcomers (told her story to the “General” Forum, the place where the newest WNers congregate) that “there are no rules”, thus she makes a rule to say that there are none. She manipulates her evidence to advocate for nonconformism in grief.

3) Objects of Desire: Trivia and Not Letting Go...

Metonymy is also Souvenir

...who would not be touched by a text whose declared ‘subject’ is death?

-- (Barthes, 1985, p. 86)

From the case study of one WNer, to a conversation among WNers, I take another look from yet another lens to see what goes on in WN. Folklorists are interpreters of stories, the expressive side of everyday life. The folklife in WN contains informal communication, often poignant, given the core of this community, and at times, even poetic in their everyday talk. In this particular section, I analyze these stories that WNers told about what one WNer called “trivia.” They are also stories of their souvenirs: those supposedly little things that we keep as a longing reminder of a person, a place or an event… widows keep souvenirs, those objects of remembrance that are all that’s left: scraps of the past taking place in the absence of their former lives with their beloved. These stories are more than just expressions of the widows’ past life, however. They also are ways for the teller to make meaning out of the events behind the stories they tell, and find shape out of what that deathly senseless event was. Susan Stewart (2007) articulates,
“the souvenir both offers a measurement for the normal and authenticates the experience of the viewer” (p. 134). Souvenirs for the WNer are objects that are the signs, traces of their experience when their days were normal, their spouses were beside them and death was not a specter.

A special kind of souvenir, metaphorically expressed in language, is the aesthetic metonymy, a trope where a part from one entity is ascribed to a whole from another entity that is closely related or intimately associated with it. Sometimes a special case of metonymy is known as synecdoche, where the part stands for a whole of the *same* entity, and that part has particular significance that ascribes its value, as in ‘strings’ meaning stringed instruments such as violins or cellos in an orchestra. Even though scholars disagree as to whether the two tropes are set and subset or distinct from each other, in this case, the metonymic phrase is a rhetorical strategy (intended or not by the WNers) used in their conversational language to express the souvenir in their larger experience.

**Left His Beer in the Fridge...**

These WNers were not consciously making tropes but their conversations about the souvenirs in their remaining lives are full of metonymy. These conversations are perennially repeated; I first encountered a conversation in WN about toothpaste that started in 2005. I found again another conversation that started in 2010, and it started with the souvenir—toothpaste. The often-repeated second-storying conversations amongst the WNers are evidence of the patterns in the choices of subject matter are
customary to the widows when they have the opportunity to talk freely about the seeming trivial things that are connected to their yearnings about their lost experiences.

Toothpaste? When I saw a conversation in the General Forum in 2005 that had a title that was so unrelated to grief, unrelated to mourning, unrelated to spousal relationships, one that seemed to be so trivial, I could tell instantly that it had to do with letting go and not letting go. First of all spousal grief is about a loss that no one wants. Spousal grief is about having a void and longing for a missing person. Letting go is antithetical to this longing, but the cultural convention is to let go. And sometimes common sense says some objects in our lives need to be let go. Food spoils. Objects accumulate into junk piles unless we throw them in the trash or take them off to the Goodwill Society. However, there are some things worth keeping in the face of unrepeatable experience, and worth talking about. The topic thread of conversation was started with the title, “toothpaste and other absurd things.” In their grief, their loss is tremendous… the life of their spouse, the human being gone, so why are they talking about toothpaste? In there, lie the seeming contradictory details of life and death, about the ordinary, the everyday, and how the gigantic force of death affects life’s trivia and what it represents. These conversations were telling me about things that the WNers have said, about the (seeming) “crazy” things that we will not let go. One person started a conversation thread by talking about how difficult it was to finish a tube of toothpaste that she used to share before her spouse died. She just cannot finish that tube by herself.

54 --except a murderer, maybe.
Three pages (in WN 1 page equals 15 messages) ensued, of talk about what the other WNers say about how they cannot let go of the past:

AA (WN, Jan 2005) started the conversation by talking about this innocuous toothpaste tube they shared:

I finished the tube of toothpaste today. The last tube we ever shared together. It was unusually hard. I don’t know why but just knowing he had used that toothpaste, and now its gone, really hit me. I looked in the medicine cabinet and saw his shaving cream. Something I should get rid of but I can’t. Its just the small things that hit me. Anyone else?

AA finds the association of her spouse with the things that he had, even in the most mundane places like the medicine chest in the bathroom. Finishing the toothpaste tube that they both shared represented a finishing of the bond they share, and it hurts when that representation is gone, too. It is more than the toothpaste tube that hurts, it’s the association with it, the cells of his fingers that might still be there on the tube, and the functions that tube had. She invites other WNers to talk about the small things that are associated with their shared lives.

X says, “her purse… still on the kitchen chair.”

Someone moves it while people eat dinner at that table, but he puts the purse back on the chair where she left it before she died. When X sees his spouse’s purse, he sees is as a symbolic a part of the whole, and talking about the metonymic operation soothes him. She carried her purse often; the keys to the house were likely there, along with her lipstick, her billfold, the grocery list or her nail file. The purse it signifies her everyday life. X was not ready to let go of his spouse’s everyday life.

A writes of her spouse’s cell phone message she burned into the CD. G responds with: “I can’t erase the last message he left for me.” The voice that is left after the man has
died still operates conceptually in a way that this observable fact (i.e, the sound of his voice) is operating as a confirmation of his existence. The metonymic use of this particular signifier places the referent, though gone, still in existence.

B says, "I live in his shirts." Her spouse symbolically wraps her, envelopes her and she is comforted by this trope. It is as Didion expresses in her “magical thinking” about keeping her husband’s shoes. D wrote, “I like to cover my head or shoulders with his best (all worn out!) sweater.” C retorts with, “Crazy? Maybe... but it's my crazy.” The everyday is what B longs for, and wearing her souvenir keeps her wrapped up in her spouse. As Susan Stewart called it, “the memory of the body is replaced by the memory of the object” and in this case, the object is the spouse’s sweater, “saturated with meanings” (p. 133).

F: “had a yard sale today.... watched his stuff disappear...bit by bit...like watching one's world fall apart in slow motion.” F traced her experience in the backward spiral of the past as the pieces were melted away into nostalgia. F’s metonymy reminds me of Paul Klee’s Angel of History which I reinterpreted as the Widowed Angel (see Angelus Novus, p. 301).

E: “he left a beer in my fridge. It's still there.” Locative references are not necessarily focused on location, but about the past actions that were a part of the man who lived, who had a beer, who kept it in the fridge. E is not just talking about the refrigerator, but about the larger reminders of the man who used the beer, and the habits they had when he was still alive, and are still in view when she opened the refrigerator again.

H: “I cannot throw away his business cards. Or his stubs he saved from movies.” The signs associated with his working life, or the signs associated with his pleasures are still
there for her, and she keeps them as souvenirs. These mere substitutions are ironic, in a sense, too, when the souvenir contains both the loss and the treasure, the absence and the *jouissance* at once.

G: “His change box is on his nightstand, his blue denim shirt hangs on his side of the bed post…” It is the incompleteness of the souvenir, only the change box, only the denim shirt and not the man, but the representations are still G’s, and her significations are her substitutes.

J: “I hated throwing out old razors that had his hair in them.” Here is a part signifying a whole, actual part of his body. We keep the baby’s hair from a first cut; why not the hair after he dies?

K: “The songs on her ipod her coffee cup shampoo…” Songs are a common souvenir of memory, a tune, a lyric that was shared, “our song,” the everyday things like the coffee in the morning, the shampoo from the shower, can be compared to the song by Sondheim called, “Losing my mind,” where after mentioning various objects, the next line is “I think about you….” The objects are the remaining bits and pieces left from the chaos of history. All that is left is memory, which plays its own tricks.

L: Gosh this is all so hard. After six years many of his things are gone. Slowly parted with it over time. I still have his suit jacket in the closet. Still have a pair of his underwear under mine in the drawer. I have a chest full of items like his boots, cell phone, papers, wallet. I have two jackets I want to have made into teddy bears. He would laugh knowing I am keeping this stuff. I dont think I will ever get rid of those things. Why should I?”

L continues her possession of her souvenirs. They are those substitutes that keep both her experience of that relationship and what she has lost. This signifies what Stewart (2007) calls the combination of catastrophe and *jouissance* simultaneously” (p. 135).
M: “That last sliver of soap in the shower that she’d used, the last squeeze of toothpaste from her last tube—yeah, me too…"

Another “me too” seconding that is common to the WN message board shares more commonality even in the trivial, which represents the gigantic.

The language in this conversation operates metonymically where the WNers speak of the parts of the whole life that are still there, the treasured souvenirs, even though the widows know full well, intellectually, perhaps that the whole person is gone, irrefutably, irretrievably. But the parts of the whole still exist and signify, not only a constant reminder, but an actual important piece of that life that represents the whole life itself.

The dominant paradigm of grief is a forgetting; it is that we should break away from the past connections, and we should let go of those old bonds left to our relationship when our loved one dies. Real life experience of spousal grief seems quite different, however, according to the WNers’ conversations. The shirt on her chest, the toothpaste in the cupboard, the beer in the fridge, the business card, the coffee cup, all incomplete, all metonymic reminders (object-to-experience) of the life, the experience, the sharing that is not to be forgotten. Even though the souvenir is a sign of a painful memory it is a source of joy at the same time. The metaphorical utterances of the WNers express complex and powerful ideas in very few words, though they are packed with assumptions about complex and lengthy lives.
Reflexivity: Meta-thinking the Journal Entries of an Autoethnographer

Positioning is Hard

When I go to WN these days to look at the data, I am positioning myself in this project as a researcher. In early April 2011, I was reading for something that was said in 2005. On the way, I glanced through the “Beyond Bereavement” forum to see what was said about a research question I asked of the WNers’ the week before. While there, though, I was distracted by other current thread topics, and a new one came up from the day before. Thus, at the same time, I subconsciously wavered between being in my subjective research position, and my familiar old role as member of this online community, when I continued to post responses to threads of conversations as a member. I made that move, though, with hesitation, always. Both identities are knocking their heads together sometimes. As I read one of the posts that day, for example, after a second’s hesitation, I dropped my researcher identity and re-situated myself as a regular member, and responded to an old timer (widowed in 1999). She told us that her daughter’s husband just died, and although she hadn’t been regularly posting at WN for a while, she felt the urge to come back and talk to fellow members. I posted a response to her to commiserate with her, to empathetically wish I could do something, but as we often say, there is nothing else except to tell her why we understand what this pain is, especially when her daughter repeated the same theme that we had when we first grieved. Another generation, and so it goes. It washed over me again, as it does occasionally still,
at the thought of a new widow, then of my own widowhood, while it brought my old memories along, and the waves washed again, as if it were 10 years ago. Now it is a special grief, for the grief of others. I go through it too, in the midst of analyzing in this dissertation. Reading about the WNer who watched her husband’s objects bit by bit having her “whole world” disappear in her yard sale brought me to tears as I examined how it fits in this dissertation. I was afraid to figure out whether those tears were for her or myself, missing Allan yet once again. The grief seems to never end. And when I “position” myself as researcher, the subjective me widowed still has that loss.

Deconstructing the Disconstruction: Journal Entry

I am wondering if this is saying that no matter what the experience is, the void, the levels of pain, of misunderstanding, the levels of marginalization, the thoughts are yet left unfinished. There is no more room for this project, but I did have one idea I wanted to ponder while I contemplated my analysis.

One of the ideas I had is about a term that I thought I could find, a word of my own. I am not very good at making words up, but this one is just as uncomfortable as the subject here. I was thinking of how deconstruction seems to be a “fit” with grief, in that we look at the pieces of the construction of our lives together. Yet that is not my word, and it doesn’t fit, quite. Another word popped in my head, and impulse is not the deliberated ideas, so I considered the word “disconstructed.” It doesn’t exist yet. I’m exploring it here, at any rate. The “con” of the construction sounds like a social relationship, one with another. The “struct” of the construction has the sense of piling up.
Construction is a piling up together, building a shared life in this social construction. In fact, social construction seems redundant. Who constructs alone? What of construction without the togetherness? Has anyone thought to what the end of that might be? How does the construction of a shared life happen, and what is the “end” of it? Is it unconstructed? I do not mean the deliberate de-structions of marriage, as in those people who are choosing to end the marriage unions, and doing so deliberately in divorce. I can see a deconstruction of a marriage as an end result being a divorce. It was constructed but it is being taken apart. Deconstruction makes a little more sense than destruction.

A marriage—or a lifetime commitment—that is severed—by… not anything else but death of the “Other”? This is not caused by a “de-” which implies that someone makes a deliberation in this attempt. No, I am thinking more about the marriages of those who find that a partner has died, and destruction will not fit. Rather, a “dis” is in a sense passive… in the telecom industry, a disconnect is a passive sense… something that was once connected but not now. Something that no one, yet, has figured out what the cause is, but … then … there is a cause somewhere… and the disconstruct of a lifetime partnership happens, when someone dies… and someone else is left to live… yet construction, deconstruction or disconstruction implies a sense of control over the “struct,” but…

Maybe this particular situation can be called in another sense: I call it “disconstruction”—much like a dis-connection. That implies that it was connected before. Disconnection will not work here, because we are still connected, even though Allan is dead. This is not deconstruction, which is a kind of deliberate taking apart of the
construction that was built in the first place, but more like a construction that was
painstakingly built, sometimes over years and years of building, but death disconstructed.
The construction is disconnected. Shorthand: disconstruction. As one of the WNers’
“sig” (short for signature) said over and over again, “control is an illusion.”
Disconstruction is an uncomfortable word. Sounds, feels uncomfortable. Too much
hissing.

**Conclusion**

The dominant paradigm tells us to forget about our past bonds, to “let go” and to
“move on,” as the DGIs tell us. But as the long lasting community that WidowNet has
been, as this analysis has shown, there is ample evidence that the bonds with the deceased
spouse do not break, nor does the widow “let go” nor does the widow forget. The
emotions might change, and relationships might grow, new people are added to one’s
“forever changed” (WN) life, but the dead are still in the stories that are repeated over
and over, repeated more than the traditional paradigmatic theory would allow. The
stories of the WNers have helped each other gain a sense of their particular experiences,
saw similarities in their loss, and helped each other learn how to be widows in their
community of practice.

This chapter analyzed how widows negotiate their identities through give and take
conversations with each other. Analyzing the narratives brought me to conclusions that
are discussed in Chapter 5, along with the implications for further study. Chapter 5 also
includes appendices that contain helpful information about grief-related websites, glossaries, etc.

One last quote here from Tina (from UK) who in 2005 quoted a poem she said was in WN “moons ago”, so no one is sure who said this, but it condenses what WNers think of WN:

*Friends Without Faces*

We sit and we type, and we stare at our screens.  
We all have to wonder, what this possibly means.  
With our mouses we roam, through the rooms in a maze.  
Looking for something or someone, as we sit in a daze.  
We chat with each other, we type all our woes.  
Small groups we do form, and gang up on our foes.  
We wait for somebody, to type out our name.  
We want recognition, but it’s always the same.  
We give kisses and hugs, and sometimes we flirt  
In PM’s we chat deeply, and reveal why we hurt.  
It’s true we form friendships, but why, we don’t know.  
Though some of these friendships, will flourish and grow.  
Why is it on screen, that we are so bold.  
Telling our secrets, that have never been told.  
Why is it we share, the thoughts in our mind.  
With those we can’t see, as though we were blind  
The answer is simple, it is as clear as a bell!  
We all have our problems, and need someone to tell.  
We can’t tell “real” people, but tell someone we must.  
So we turn to the ‘puter’, and those we can trust.  
Even though it is crazy, the truth still remains.  
They are Friends, Without Faces and odd little names!
Chapter 5
Conclusions of this Study

he was a handsome man

and what i want to know is

how do you like your blueeyed boy

Mr. Death

e.e. cummings, 1951

So this is what happens when margins generate their own centers

Chaudry, 2000, p. 99

Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril.

John Dewey, 1925

Introduction: The End is the Beginning

T. S. Elliot (1942) told me “to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.” This ending chapter tells of the results of my findings and implications for further research, but that is not really the end of this whole project. Or, I should listen to Elliot more carefully to understand that the dialectic end IS a beginning. It seems as if this project is the construction of a new identity, and a beginning of a new direction. In the beginning of this, I set a goal to write a book. Then, by coming back to graduate school, I set out to do it via the dissertation process. Well, this is the “end,” but
there is so much that is coming out of this process, and so much going forth from it. The dissertation is not a book, but it is the foundation of the book that I still aim to have published. It feels like yet another fork in the road. I also have tentative ideas for further research that can come of this project, as well as a bundle of other helpful information that comes as a result of this study. I sang Elliot’s poem in a chorus a few years ago, more than once, and because of that I feel like I have a close relationship with that poem. “Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning… Every poem is an epitaph. And any action is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea’s throat, or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.” I hear the music of it, more than the words, and the words are actions for me. I feel their illocutionary force.

Get it Done Already…

In this chapter, I am placing the member checks that I have gathered after I had collected and analyzed data. My fellow members agree with the conclusions that I have made, that we who have grief over the death of a loved one do not agree with the dominant ideas of grief. In that sense, I am “stemming the tide with a teaspoon,” but I have plenty of teaspoons. I have evidence that people do not “get over it,” though as Lather (1997) said, there is “that certain power that outside forces have over our lives” (p. 207) subduing us with injurious speech, silencing us with averted faces, clumsy advice, and dominant beliefs that are not congruent with the actual experience of grief. If I were a structuralist, I would be immobilized with the notions that nothing could be done until the “structures of society could be changed but the structures prevent us making any
changes” (Willis, 1980, p. 186). But I do not believe it works that way. I would rather believe that in this poststructuralist world, society can and does change, and in one way through the speech acts that happen each and every day, both to good and bad ends, both in felicity and in injury. There is possibility for action in a cultural level, first by knowing that there is more to this world than ideology would have it. Negotiating change is shown in the WN community of practice. And that change happens in multiple levels, not just one individual, or two in dialogue, or a few, but a world-wide community of practice that is approaching 20 years old. We may be seeking and negotiating identity in a subversive way, by talking only to each other, and acting in our changed identities, but this community of practice, anyway, wants it to be “bigger” than just among ourselves. This binary split between grievers and non-grievers is not the intention here, but more a perspective of the differences in the perceptions of the experienced grievers and the perceptions of grief that non-grievers who do not have the experience. This plays into the idea of the importance of experiential knowledge. The grievers have learned from their experience, and it is the non-grievers who also need an education into what is involved in communicating with the grievers. This is not to say that grievers all “get it,” because the grievers too have been influenced by the dominant cultural power, which has produced a conflict between what the griever thinks she should do or feel, vs. what she actually feels and experiences. The member checks shed more light into the insights from this project.
Member Checks: We are talking about Us. MetaTalk about WN.

In this ongoing process of researching the socially constructed identities in WidowNet, I have had several opportunities in my research for follow-up that I describe as “member checks” to ensure that my research findings accurately reflect other WNers’ perceptions. I determined that I would combine this element of qualitative practice with a common practice of some of the WN community. But often the researcher here was a member there, and the talk was a mix of informal friendship blended into a deep discussion of who we are at WN and what it has done for us, and how we feel “apart” as widows. Positioning is arbitrary. When I used the member checks to get feedback from my fellow WN participants, most of the feedback I received was an affirmation of the findings of my study. However in those member checks, I received insights that I had not found in my research alone.

This common practice we call in WN is the “GTG” or get together, as was described in Chapter 1. My attendance at GTGs began with a drive to Chicago maybe four months into my widowhood. Since my first GTG in 2001, I have attended perhaps over 20 weekend GTGs in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, St. Louis, Fort Wayne, Kansas City, Phoenix, and other places, including one I hosted myself in Columbus. At some point when I was studying qualitative analysis, it occurred to me that the GTGs would be a great venue for doing my member checks for the dissertation. This became a great opportunity to have various random WN members all at one time and place. Thus I arranged to conduct meetings within a GTG at several locations. I am including three of them here, one in Cleveland, one in St. Louis and the third in Lexington with a total of 36
different WN members. One of the insights that I have found through the GTG attendance is that members of the WN community find an added and lasting dimension of companionship, not only through the writings to each other in front of the computer, but in our face-to-face gatherings. For those of us who repeat attending GTGs, they seem to be a lot like a class reunion. Not only do the WNers enjoy each other’s company from the common experience, they also have a kind of “built-in” empathy for each other because of the common experience. They also have expanded ideas of my own in my research when we took the time away from our visiting to focus together on this project.

**Member Check: Cleveland: Jan 2009**

The GTGs that I had arranged in advance for a discussion of this dissertation transpired more than once: the first, in what I call the early check in my dissertation. We (14 of us) gathered in Cleveland, for a weekend in January of 2009; some of us stayed at the home of our hostess, “Marge” (pseudonym), and some stayed at the hotel for a weekend GTG that consisted of Friday afternoon-evening, Saturday, breakfast, lunch, an outing then dinner/dancing, and a final breakfast on a Sunday and then the goodbyes. On Friday evening of that GTG, 10 WN members, three men and seven women, sat in Marge’s living room. The discussion was recorded with my notes, and I told them about some of the interpretations I was finding at that point in my analysis where I had begun my data collection and designing a list of themes to analyze. They were listening intently and nodding in agreement. I asked for input, but nothing new came of my list at that point, beyond the fact that they were affirming my studies, my sampling and my research.
design. Rather, we were drifted into talk of WN the way one gossiped about the town. The discussion became serious when I then asked what WN has meant to them. From that one question, the discussion ensued for nearly two hours, where my collaborators and I (I was an active participant) continued to tell stories of the ways they have benefitted from their participation in WN. and the continuation of our stories seemed to be a three-dimensional version of what we were doing in WN all the time, anyway. In that situation, it was a collaboration of seriousness, a community of fellow sufferers. Everyone could feel the depth and compassion that seemed palpable in that room air. It wasn’t just me alone in my computer, when I feel that way in a WN conversation. This same subject of conversation seemed closer than a WN discussion, when one sits in front of the monitor and hears the keyboard rather than voices. The 3-D conversation added the depth of physical sensory input and output for all of us together, not just isolated me. It was an added energy that seemed tangible in the room. I could see it in the tone of our voices, the gestures of moving arms, and in the looks on our faces that were added to the embodied words we said. It was a physical and emotional sharing in an added dimension. In their affirmation, I understood that my interpretations were not wrong, and they had the opportunity to volunteer additional information that I had not covered in my findings as yet. In our discussion that evening, we were not focusing on this added dimension of our togetherness, but rather using our discussion to compare WN to 3-D support groups, and found their online WN experience quite fulfilling despite the lack of “face time.”
Member Check: St. Louis Nov 2010

In a later member check, after my Labovian analysis, I had traveled to Misha’s location earlier last year, in November 2010, to talk to her about her church and her experience with the stigmatization of the widows there. I needed to know more about that marginalization, so we had a conversation one afternoon, face-to-face, where I asked her if there were any spoken rules about who should sit at the end of the pew, and her response was no, “it was just a feeling. My usual seats were filled already with someone else when I got there.” I asked her what made her feel she should sit at the back. She told me it was the widow’s “place,” even though those women were old, and she did not even feel like she was a widow. I discussed with her about the possibility of cultural beliefs and the differences in her own experience, she agreed. I also attempted to ask her about those dark days when her daughter was alienated, she deflected, and we went back to the marginalization at church topic. With a few more questions I asked, she told me did not stay long at that church after Keith died, and the church itself has dissolved, as its population joined with other branches of the denomination. It was an old church in the center of an urban district of a town in the Midwest that was declining. She told me that there were perhaps 300 members before it dissolved. Misha, though, found her community in WN, and has become a prominent participant through the years since her first husband died. She is still happily married to Zach, a fellow WNer, has a full life as a grandparent now, with a good relationship with her now grown daughter, and has since pursued her career as a phlebotomist. She sees her life now as good, and continues to be a WNer as well, though much less prolific there. I felt I learned more about her
marginalization via her church membership, but we did not get to delve more deeply into her narrative, alas. I asked her how she has changed since her early days of widowhood, and Misha answered thus:

I have become more insistent on doing what matters (not what I am suppose to do or what is expected). I don’t get involved in trivial matters (gossip). I believe in living and being happy for me not someone else. I try to tell and show those that matter most just how much I love them and what having them in my life means to me.

**Member Check: St. Louis: Mar 2011**

GTGs work like this most often: First, someone starts a thread (posts the beginning of a conversation) to the WN GTG Forum. In this case, someone started a thread in July of 2010 reminding us that it had been a long time since there had been a GTG in St. Louis (STL). She said,

March 2011 will be 10 years since the first GTG in St Louis. Just wondering if there is an interest and who wants to help. St Louis GTG’s are always lots of fun with all the different things to do. In 2004 we had the largest GTG ever with 104 people from all over, including the UK. In 2005 we were blessed with a visit from Michael G. the founder of Widownet. So let me know and we’ll start planning.

And so the plan commenced, when the WN posters started with the “yeah me too” seconding remarks. Soon the thread developed into enough interest that someone called the local hotel to ask for a block of rooms at a discount rate under the name of “WidowNet” and then people started reserving their rooms. That’s usually how GTGs begin. The list of WNers who were planning to go was posted, and so the planning commenced. Someone else who lived in STL helped the initiator with the restaurant reservations, and noted several points of interest to tour on Saturday. Twenty pages (300 pieces of dialogue) and several months later, the three-day STL GTG happened in March.
2011. Breakfasts in the hotel restaurant, day trips to tour the Budweiser brewery or the St. Louis Arch, etc., chit-chat in the hospitality room before and after, and dinners at nearby restaurants both Friday and Saturday clinched the friendships into deeper dimensions.

Sometime into that GTG thread when we were still planning, I posted to the WNers that I was coming and asked if they would be willing to help me with this dissertation project by reserving a group discussion for some time late Saturday afternoon. Most responded with positive answers. No one complained. When we were getting close to the date, there were over 30 who let WN know they had reservations and would be attending. The group was a mix of old timer WNers who have attended many of the GTGs, and others who attended their first GTG.

During the course of our WN GTG, at 4 pm that Saturday afternoon, I met some WNers at the hospitality room with my laptop and my microphone and the proper IRB consent forms. Fifteen others came too, and we gathered around a huge round table with the laptop’s recording device in the middle. I first passed out the consent forms and 15 people signed them. Of the 15, 10 were women and 5 were men. I began the session by describing this project and telling them about my major themes that I interpreted. I told them what the title, “how to be a widow” meant, and explained what I mean when I say we construct our new identities as widows through our conversations in WN. I talked to them about how the dominant view of grief theory reflects the cultural beliefs of the “DGIs” and how I see the differences in our telling of our experiences, and how we react to the DGIs. I talked to them about how I interpret the widow as stigmatized. I invited
conversation about that, but all I received at that point were smiles and nods of agreement. I also told the group about how I found Misha’s phrase, “I didn’t know how to be a widow” in 2005, and how she had responded by creating a new thread to the General Forum. I explained how I interpret that phrase, “how to be a widow” and how these identities are different from each other, and different from the stereotypes, from what the cultural beliefs of us are. Misha especially beamed in agreement, and had nothing to critique. She was proud that I was using her story in my project. I then explained to them what my findings were for all those themes. I explained to the group how I was delving into the 2005 General data, and how I was looking for themes in our conversations, such as key words that indicated identity, normalcy, craziness, and the DGIs. I told them how I view the WNers’ personal experience stories that are in contrast with the major Freudian theories of grief. I also showed them how I see us as a community of practice. I asked for feedback but there were no objections, so at that point, I had nothing to edit from them. I felt that my interpretations from my findings were reaching a good measure of credibility from their point of view. This member check provided me with the opportunity to summarize my preliminary findings, and explaining that aloud to the WNers helped me understand better that my work is an interpretation, not a certain or objective “truth.” I told them that this work is not mine alone, but something that is written by all of us, that I am quoting them extensively, and it makes this a collaborative effort. This reinforced my notions of co-participation, when no one objected or added to those statements. It seemed to me a co-creation of
understanding went on in that room when I explained more details of what I was doing in this project.

We then had some discussion of Misha’s experience in her church, of how she felt she was assigned a new “place” – in the back of the church with the old women – who were widows. This prompted an interesting discussion, then, of widowed men’s experiences vs. those of widowed women. Karl, a WNer who was widowed several years ago, brought out the differences between widowed men and women and how they are treated in church. Karl has since remarried—to a widow who met him at the Cleveland GTG—is known and loved for his quirky and original combination of seriousness and comedy, and often the dark humor of widowhood that only “insiders” would love. He was still wearing a fancy wide-brimmed red and purple hat that had fuzzy feathers around the brim he had purchased earlier in our afternoon tour. It was interesting to watch him in that silly hat speak so seriously about his widowhood, where he talked about how the widowed men in his church community had more free food, and more women approached him with offerings beyond the food. The discussion ensued in an animated conversation about the contrasts between the widowed men and the widowed women. It was a fascinating contrast to Misha who had spoken of the back of the pews for the marginalized widows in her church. This is one theme I have not discussed in this project, though it too would warrant further research. Widowhood is genderized in many ways.

Another part of our discussion that ensued beyond the validation of what I have interpreted so far, was when we discussed especially the idea of stigma. The women told
more stories about lowering of status in a coupled world. One particular lesbian widow mentioned how she has been silenced that there is no way she can discuss her widowhood unless she is talking to us at WN or to fellow lesbians, but not with the general public. As she described it ruefully, “no ‘widow card’ for me. Lesbian widows get no sympathy” (WN, 5/2011). This subject too was not dealt with in depth, and is aching for further research. Certainly the pain of grief is more deeply burdened with the added load of the marginalized status in the first place. The men brought up the differences between the widow and the widower. Rather than finding disconfirming evidence in the member checks, I have found even more grist for the mill, and topics of thought beyond this dissertation.

**Final Member Check: Lexington, April 2011**

One last member check I submit happened in Lexington, for six of us, three pairs of re-coupled widow/ers, four of us, veteran WNers. We had a weekend together the end of April, 2011. Tom and Yvonna (pseudonyms), both caregivers, who were both widowed in 2000, had met in WN chat room, were regular contributors to WN, and remarried to each other in 2001. They have had continuing friendships with fellow WNers, but are not active posters in WN anymore, though they are still members and occasionally read for news of other WNers that they know. We are still in touch with our Facebook accounts, which seems to be a most popular place to connect with all its features such as photos, videos and the like. When Tom and Yvonna decided to move across the US to another location, it was WN community knowledge, as they posted
regularly at that time. We all monitored their experience of buying and selling houses, of moving furniture and horses and dogs across the country, and these are good examples of how we as an online community are still a community in spite of the geographical distances. Tom and Yvonna now physically live about three hours away from me now.

Rocky & Joni flew in from the Midwest for that April weekend. Joni is widowed twice, first a caregiver, then survivor of sudden death to a former WNer. She joined WN after her first widowhood. In her second marriage, she wed John, who joined WN in 2001. John met and married Joni in 2004 and he died in 2006. Joni is now partnered with Rocky, who was also widowed, in 2008, though he is not an active WNer. Joni & Rocky have been together since 2009 where they met via an online dating site called “Match dot com,” the same way I met Bill. They had told me their story of how they met, how they dated, and had fallen in love. They too came to Tom & Yvonna’s as guests for this weekend as did Bill and I.

Bill and I joined Joni and Rocky to spend the weekend at Tom and Yvonna’s home in the countryside of Lexington for the weekend, so we were the third couple of that weekend gathering. I am now newly married to Bill. He was a caregiver before he was widowed in early 2008. Bill and I met through match dot com, started emailing for a couple of weeks, getting to know each other online, then met one morning at a coffee shop. That was the beginning of our dating, and we knew pretty soon that we were a match. We married a little over a year later. Bill has been a very good editor and sounding board for me in this project.
The six of us spent time in that get-together touring a horse show that some of us have done in past years, and the friendships that the six of us share were strengthened yet again with this visit, as we continue to enjoy each other’s company. We all have been to other GTGs as well, some of us at the same ones, but this is the first time Bill and I had met Rocky in person. However, Joni and I have visited Tom and Yvonna several other times and in other places around the US, as well as the conversations we have had over the years in WN and in WN chat rooms. Tom is a WNer whom I visited several years ago, and when I talked to him then about this project in terms of a critique of Freud’s ideas of grief, he was very interested. He and Yvonna and I have talked deeply both then and now, about the aspects of WN, and how it is so relevant to our understanding spousal grief. That earlier visit, I had explained how this traditional idea of grief is believed to be something we should “get over with” and grief has bonds that we should sever before we start with other new bonds. At that time, Tom told me, “well, if this theory is right, then we would have friends, only one at a time.” We laughed then, not just at the absurdity of the theory but the ruefulness of it as well. I mentioned that to him this weekend, but he had forgotten his earlier remark. He smiled and commented approvingly when I told him I would quote that.

On Saturday evening of this weekend visit, the six of us dined at a quiet restaurant, and Tom and Yvonna initiated a thoughtful conversation about our mutual widowhoods, and our connections to WN. They have been very supportive of my dissertation project for a long time, and wanted to talk about it. Four of us have been active in WN, but Bill and Rocky have not. However, we all shared the common
experience of widowhood, and we all talked about that in our dinner conversation. We talk about WN as if it were a town that we live in, and mention various other WNers that we have had contact with, one time or another, very similar to the town chit chat we do in physical neighborhoods.

One point that Tom made in the course of the conversation is that he thought it would be interesting if there were more discussion comparing the widowhoods of sudden death vs. the widowhood of a caregiver, i.e., the one who has had time to experience the process of dying before death, as compared to those widowed who experienced the trauma of the sudden death of their spouse. We touched on that aspect a bit but we didn’t delve into it very deeply. At some point, someone said, “dead is dead; we are all widowed.” I told Tom that this comparison would warrant further research, since we could have discussions for hours about those differences, and I would make a mention of that in the later chapters in my dissertation.

Yvonna and Tom have been very happily married for 10 yrs. The point she wanted to make was that she sees grief differently now, because of the length of her widowhood, with the 10 years’ time that has passed. Her grief has not been forgotten, but instead is this: “I don’t grieve for the past anymore, but I grieve for the future.” She explained that this time in her re-marriage-after-death experience, she knows how it can end and she knows what the pain can be, and for one of them, the pain that will definitely be, unless they both die at the same time. The conversation continued. Even before widowhood, for caregivers who have a definite understanding that their spouse will die, and soon, even though has been expected and imagined, the experience is not, and cannot
be foreseen with the force of the actual experience itself. Bill called it “anticipatory grief,” but he emphasized that the expectation did not begin to match the actual spousal grief experience. The widowed, however, *do* know the experience, though they may try not to anticipate the pain that certainly would come again in some future. Instead, with this kind of knowledge, we talked about how we do not spend our days dreading the prospect, but instead, knowing the certain future, that someone will die, widows try to live being more aware of and more appreciating each day of life that we do have right now.

It is important to note that in exclusive discussions among the widowed are not uncomfortable, or guarded, when one of us talks to another widowed about our dear departed. There is a distinct difference between a group of widowed and non-widowed, vs. an all-widowed group. Often the non-widowed are avoiding the talk of the deceased for fear of causing the widow even more sadness. Or, the non-widowed gets uncomfortable for a number of reasons, their own fear of death, for example, and the widow shields his or her talk. Not so in an all-widowed discussion. Talk is free, and comfortable, whether the discussion brings tears or not. Just being around other widows and talking about our spouses, either of their deaths, or of when they were alive, alleviates the discomfort of other situations, and gives us the comfort of making meaning in our talk.

One comment that I broached to Yvonna that weekend was how surprised I was at the wonderful levels of cooperation and support that I have been given when I told the WNers about my project. I told Yvonna how qualitative researchers expect that their
change of status brings a modicum of shift of dynamics, and I was wondering why I
seemed to be an exception to the common case. Yvonna quickly and easily gave me an
answer. “Well, it’s not like those who just joined us to tell us they wanted to write about
us. You have been a long-time member, and people know you and trust you.” Her
comments humbled me and at the same time strengthened my sense of responsibility in
this project. It also reminded me of the early responsibilities of ethnography, in that
when the ethnographer first chooses her field, she should be going through the rites of
passage to gather “entry to the tribe.” In this case, my entry to the tribe (at a high price)
was there before I became an ethnographer. I already had the rapport. I just needed the
rest that it takes to write a dissertation. This final member check discussion at the
Lexington weekend has led me to put together the conclusions, and ideas for further
discussion.

Disconfirming Evidence

There have been only a handful, if that many, of imposters in WidowNet that I
know of. When there has, WNers have quickly sniffed out the deceptions. One or two
wanted to be in WN only to write a book about widows. One made so many mix-ups in
her story that WNers called her out on it, and she left soon. We had plenty of gossip
about it in WN about them, but no real answers. But that is pretty much the extent of the
challenges to the credibility of members in WN. After all, who wants to be a widow? I
think that this online community is one of the more secure online communities, because
non-widowed people do not want to talk seriously that much about death.
I have interviewed one particular former WNER, Frederica, (widowed in 2002) who had joined WidowNet for a short while, in the span of a few months. I knew Frederica personally, and when she became widowed, I recommended WN to her, which she joined. She also joined in for lunch at the Columbus WN GTG that I hosted in the summer of 2004. However, she dropped her WN membership very shortly, within a few months of affiliation. As shown in Appendix C, Krebs’ (2008) analysis of social networks shows how a matrix of members in a social network are distributed. Frederica would be considered on the periphery of this network at WN. However as Krebs explained, social network members who seem to have “low centrality scores for this network” does not mean they are isolated; in fact people are members of many social networks, sometimes overlapping. From knowing Frederica in other social networks, I can verify that she is central in other kinds of networks where she does feel comfortable.

Today, after nearly nine years of her widowhood, as a result of some of our mutual friends’ introductions, Frederica has met, fallen in love with and recently married to “Bob” the end of April 2011. I asked her if she could spare some time in her busy preparations, to talk to me about what WidowNet might have done or not done for her and why she left. She sent me an email, in the spring of 2011, and a portion of her explanation is following:

I shied away from Widow Net, thinking that my issues were too complicated and unusual. I was using all my psychological reserves to hold the family together and put food on the table. And I didn’t want anyone to know how close to the edge I was at times. In hindsight, I think that loss of identity would have been an easy discussion point on WidowNet, but interestingly I was unable to include being a widow in my new identity. I had a lot of inner healing to do first. This took many hours of therapy and meditation.
All of what Frederica has said about her grief resonates with other WNers’ discussions. However, Frederica’s disuse of WN tells me that she and other women do not find a cyberplace like WN the “be all and the end all” of their widowed lives. For Frederica, WN was not a recognizable space; she did not recognize herself in that space. Her reason was that she thinks her situation is too complex. I cannot know whether others would have the same reason, or what reasons there might be, just that some do not recognize themselves in WN or other online communities. This happens in 3D communities, as well. At the same time, Frederica’s message to me for this study, and other times, clearly expresses that her joy this moment with her new marriage does not diminish her widowhood, nor does it indicate that she has forgotten her beloved deceased spouse. Instead, she is expanding her bonds, and has made room for one more in her heart full of loves, which includes Bob, her children, his children and her deceased spouse.

New Understandings From Research

Music in the Round: Revisiting Research Questions

Just as I did as an autoethnographer, I craved from the start to be more like a member of the choir than a soloist. Using the latest and emerging approach to the earliest form of qualitative tradition (Patton, 2002, p. 84), i.e., ethnography, I wanted to, and I believe I did “connect the personal to the cultural” as Hayano (1979) described this form of inquiry. From the beginnings of this project, I have been curious to find if my own experience as part of a culture would add to more understanding, so that I might
illuminate a way of life, more than just my own individual experience. Since the “binary” between the observed and the observer has been questioned in the postmodern critique of science, I take the liberty of taking an emic perspective, but using and describing the various methods of inquiry in my research. Sometimes I have been uncomfortable with the extensive “I” but other times I had to undo myself and focus into more of the intellectual exercise of analysis of the culture of all of us in WN.

Nevertheless, it is I who am coming to conclusions about this project. It is not an easy task, because first it seems that there is so much more to be described and analyzed than the limits of this project allow, and second, I never wanted to leave a party or end a journey. I remember my first trip with my Gram when I was four. I was away from home for four weeks in New Jersey. One of my earliest memories is crying with regret when Gram drove me back into the driveway of my Ohio house after that trip. This project too has been my journey, and it is hard to end it. However, I can say these things about my findings in conclusion. First of all, I have come to a new appreciation of the power of story to do many things. Story is one of the oldest and most familiar ways to express our experiences and make meaning out of them. Second, telling and listening to stories connects us to each other, moving our emotions, our values and our interests in compelling ways, most especially when we are identifying with others, and being moved to take action from expressing the experiences. Stories of death can be some of the most powerful to those who are willing to listen, though it takes courage to do so. In this culture, people are afraid of death, and do not wish to talk about it. Those who have had the experience of surviving the death of their loved ones, though, are quite willing to tell
the stories about it, and the ones who are most willing to listen are the others who have shared that experience and know how powerful and devastating it is. Further, digging through the stories that I have been listening to for 10 years and analyzing them has drawn me to deeper insights from this study, much more than I expected. As Jacques Derrida (1995) argues,

the narrative is genealogical but it is not simply an act of memory. It bears witness, in the manner of an ethical or political act, for today and for tomorrow. It means first of all thinking about what takes place today. The organization of the narrative follows a genealogical detour in order to … more particularly to denounce, deplore, and combat it (in The Gift of Death, p. 35)

As a folklorist, it seems odd that I choose an online community as my field. Folklore has been traditionally a practice of groups that have a sense of its own identity, but ironically in this case, in this online group that found each other came together for the opposite notion: the central idea of identity itself is in question for the WNers. The rest of the world has an idea, whether correct or not, of what this identity of widowhood is. However, the group itself, who are all widowed, questions the very central notion that holds them together in the first place. When they do try to explore what their identity is, and try to analyze it, they do not come with ready or certain answers, but instead they come with many tentative answers. From the patterns of this analysis, the conclusions are not that there is a stable and clear identity of widowhood, as thought by the general culture, but the opposite. The identities are many, even though strongly connected to the
fate of death, still constructed and still in the sense of “becoming.” I believe this is so because identity is a social relation, as I have learned from Butler, Erickson, and many other scholars. I conclude that the identity of widow is strongly connected to her relational experience with her dead spouse. As each individual’s life experience is different, so then, are his or her identities. All I can do is interpret them from their expressions, their actions, and their performances.

The narratives of WN bear witness to Derrida’s claims, and have been the power and driving force of this project. As to the narrative analysis, using qualitative methodology, I reached and found a far deeper understanding of what I thought I had already known as a member.

From these stories, One of the most primary themes in the analysis of WN has been the discussion of how the DGI is a metonym for how much the so-called DGIs do not have the experience to treat widowhood efficiently.

**Answering My Questions**

I first asked who the widows are in WidowNet, which seemed at first a question nearly impossible to answer in the anonymity of the Internet. However, the question seemed to bend and mold into another perspective, when I stopped trying to figure out who would go to the Internet and rather just figure out who were the ones who are already there in WN. Identifying the complexity of that question “who are the widows” as I have found in my data, I know that the widow is a much broader construct than the traditional definition of the term: that no matter what legal status or gender of the person,
the widow has lost a life partner to death. This is not to say that we have a common experience beyond those factors. In my data, I found quite the opposite follows. This leads me to the identities of widows and how they perform them in WN.

The cultural belief about widowhood is quite stable and fixed, in that it is circumscribed by a woman, conjoined by a legal marriage, who has buried her husband, and soon we shall forget that and go about our business, so as she should “move on.” Moreover, the concept of widowhood is inextricably entwined with cultural beliefs and psychological theories about grief. Prevailing theorists and clinicians of grief and loss, even though challenged with newer views of loss, are still “not well accommodated” as grief theorist Neimeyer (2000) argues. However, in the lived experience of widowhood, as told by their narratives in WN, that concept of “getting over it” makes no sense, and instead the widow does not want to nor will not forget about her spouse. With this experience of spousal grief, the relationship is still maintained, but within the prism of memory and forgetting, agonizing and coping, and other oscillations in the recursive experience of grieving the death of a life partner. The trouble is that the prevailing theories “continue to contribute to diagnosis, treatment, and outreach efforts and may influence the bereaved’s personal construction of her… grief experience” as psychologist McCabe (2003, p. 6) argues. From the critical examination of the data in my research, my constructivist argument can concur with McCabe, Neimeyer and other theorists that allow the relational dimensions of grief that actually reveal the experience of grief.

I studied how the WNers respond to each other in their conversations, how they work with, through, and against the dominant institutional powers of psychology which
filtered into popular cultural beliefs about widowhood. This analysis engendered a powerful perspective of how their interaction was enactment, of how their enactments in their narratives of grief are tales of undergoing something “outside one’s control and finds that one is beside oneself, not at one with oneself.” The speech acts of the WNers are possible do to what Butler (2004) called “apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am” (p. 28). The new Wner comes to the community with unknowingness and brings epistemological and ontological questions. The WNers that have been in the community for a time have figured out those same questions in their insider dialogue, and have come up with “remedies” as Goffman (1971) called them. These remedial interchanges have epistemologically brought the Wner into another concept of a constructed widowed “being,” not consistent with the traditional beliefs, and not at all totally at peace, but they do come to a conclusion that they are more comfortable with these remedies of WN where the experiences contrary to the cultural beliefs have been enacted in the narratives. The WNers believe that grief does not come to an “end” but more the griever comes to a sense of coping with the death in a different but relational way with both their deceased spouses, and their cohorts in WN. These “ways” that the WNers live, and construct their widowed identities are not a unified and consistent concept as the dominant theories might hold, but instead, as particular and unique as each individual’s lived experience is performed.

It takes lived experience rather than theory to understand the concrete weight of an irrevocable human loss. Dewey (1938) says, “every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (p. 38).
When the grief experience has the force of losing a human being to death then that experience of loss can be at least the value of the human being who has died. Who among us can measure a value of a human being? How can this value be diminished within a few months, as the proposed changes in the draft of the DSM IV would argue? The force of a human loss is rests on the widow’s shoulders, and that concept seems unimaginable. The widow has attested to that fact, that this experience is unimaginable. Not only is this force of experience more powerful than a theory can explain, it is also not measured by time, either. In the force of this grief experience as Rosaldo (1989/93) described it, the narratives of the WNers have brought a dimension of learning to the community as well. Supported by Dewey, Wenger, Austin and Butler, I found in my data analysis the force of learning in the WN community of practice.

Relearning about Learning: the Metaprinicples of Education

One of my final research questions was to ask if WNers learned from each other through the site as a community of practice. Wenger (1998) argues, “education, in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state... [it] is not merely formative – it is transformative” (p. 263).

There are several educational consequences to this study. Although not traditionally thought about, widowhood is a learning experience, no doubt: people do not—and need not—prepare, nor even have any idea what spousal grief will be like. This grief is experiential, and in the community of practice, it becomes experiential learning.
At the risk of introducing yet another scholar in this late stage, I tip a hat to John Dewey, because, as he did, I see learning as a process where this experience is a transformed into knowledge. Dewey (1938) argued that “every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences” (p. 39). This experiential learning process was produced through the speech acts of the WNers in their community of practice. With experiential learning as a social process, this emphasis relies on adaptation and is continually recreated through the experience, rather than the more formal ideas of knowledge as an entity that is transmitted. As Lave and Wenger argue, “legitimate peripheral participation provides a framework for bringing together theories of situated activity and theories about the production and reproduction of the social order” (p. 47). As shown in John Dewey’s model of experiential learning, what the griever learn is through their experience. What we can learn, though, is kindness and empathy, listening to the enactments of the uniqueness of experience.

When Joan Didion, one of my long-time favorite authors, became a widow, she explained it in a way that verifies my own experience, and in very similar words of the WNers (yet in her elegant way):

We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect this shock to be obliterative, dislocating to both body and mind. We might expect that we will be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss. We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who believe that their husband is about to return and need his shoes. In the version of grief we imagine,
the model will be ‘healing.’ Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself (p. 189).

Didion sums up what the WNers have been saying for years, yet the dominant paradigm expects us to “get over it,” and “move on.” However, in our learning to be widows, we claim we do not. The void still exists, for me, even though Allan has been dead for 10 years. For this “becoming” in widowhood does not have a finality, even when we have made peace with the death, in the sense of finding meaning again after death, and we seem to have no more tears.

Widows’ stories will not end as long as death continues… and not all want to hear them. Stories that widows dare not tell to others for fear of being “morbid” or ostracized or “too sad,” do have an outlet, after all. Some turn to therapy, and the lucky ones have found the clinician who does not hold to dominant theory, or prescribe according to the DSM. Grief stories need to be told. WNers, as all spousal grievers, do have their hearts broken, over and over again, but in those stories, a new meaning and a new identity might slowly come again, and do so in many forms: finding peace in aloneness, finding friends who have had the same experience, or finding another mate, or changing careers, moving to new locations, or any number of changes in the lives that WNers describe as “forever changed.”
Methodological Conclusions

Working through the ruins of the stories of life after death required organized methodology just to make sense of and recognize patterns in the devastating stories. Using a research design helped me sift through the chaos of the history that widows (not excluding myself) went through anyway in WN. Using these organized methods deepened my understanding and dug me out from under the emotive language that I had to work through to make sense of Allan’s death, then to make sense of this dissertation project. I used three methods of analysis, the conventional qualitative thematic analysis throughout the WN community of practice, then a Labovian sociolinguistic analysis on one case study, and finally a literary analysis of dialogic metonymy in one conversation in WN. Here at the end, in the study of my methods, I found that the triangulation of methods gave me a broader perspective in my interpretations than I would have if I had used only one method.

First of all, with the qualitative analysis, generating themes brought out in *bas-relief* the continuing patterns of conversations through the 15 or so years of WNers’ conversations. I found that even though after a few years of talking about grief in WN, of the 4,000 signed on, not that many grievers stay for as many years as I do. However, quite a few do, are “centralized” in the network, as Krebs (2008) would say, but at the same time, are “boundary spanners,” i.e., are “bridging connections to other clusters”; in other words, old timer WNers are active contributors in the General Forum, where they give promise and advice to newcomers, and at the same time can be found in many other Forums in WN, talking to old friend WNers, about all sorts of things.
Using the qualitative methods of analysis, I also found more themes than I could use within the limits of a dissertation. I found a much stronger answer to the question of identity by looking at the many ways the WNers had to say about their identities, and from the close reading of those performances in their narratives, the WNers showed me how many ways there are to perform not only one’s identity, as I have said in an earlier section.

Second, using Labovian sociolinguistic concepts to shed more light on Misha’s grief, I found that using the categorical parsing of her narrative helped me see more than just a close look at her story, but beyond that, I was able to find how much and in what ways she was defining her meaning and her identity in the ways she was trying to make sense of the continuing action in her story. It was not Labov alone that gave me all the insight. I found the “what” of Misha’s narrative from Labov. But I also relied on Goffman’s (1971) “remedying” to see why Misha used twice as many evaluative clauses than the actual plot of her story, and saw how Misha found her own way of gaining meaning rather than relying on the cultural beliefs of her family and neighbors. She found sense in her grief through her narratives with WN, interacting over years remedying her “craziness” which became a justification for reassessing the crazy into what might instead be viewed as a normal grief practice. Granted, Misha’s story is more extreme than others in WN, but the patterns of the “who am I” and the “am I crazy” questions happen to most all of the WN grievers.

Third, using the analysis of the practice of metonymy in a singular conversation related to the WNers’ souvenirs showed me how poetic everyday conversation can be,
and how poignant at the same time. Moreover, the analysis of the narratives of the things they keep as signs of their relationships also showed how powerful the loss of an intimate partner is to the griever. Susan Stewart (2007) expressed this power when she said, “an irrecoverable distance arising between the object and its given context of given… to produce a representation with no referent—each sign as a postcard from the land of the dead, and on the other side, the longing mark that is the proper name” (p. 173).

Finally, using the method of reflexivity in journal entries that afforded me the process of examining my methods, and examining my experiences as well. Looking inward as my work gave me a meta-interpretation; that is, self-reflective process helped me regard the value of the methods I was using, and another layer of the prism of the triangulation (quad?) of methods. But I would rather echo Laurel Richardson when she renamed triangulation to “crystallization,” so we can see more than plane geometry: we could see light in “waves and particles” (p. 478), which in turn illuminates the always reminder, that my work is Haraway’s term, the partial, perspectival and situational interpretations. This inward portion of my methodology broadened my understanding in my interpretations, when I was questioning myself, because by virtue of my writing, I could make sense of what I was thinking. The variety of research methods in this dissertation informed my epistemological stance on the performance of identity, the experiential and relational levels of spousal grief, and how different my interpretations of grief are from the dominant paradigms of grief and loss.
Implications from my Research: Some Advice for the Non-widowed

When the work seems done, it is not, after all. Pointing out the problems in analysis always brings that proverbial “Oh yea? Well, what are you going to do about it?”

As one of the WNers, my friend “Joella” said to another WNer, when she told the story of how she had constructed a different relationship with her sister after her husband’s death (over eight years ago):

My sister and I didn’t have much of a relationship until “after” E died. At first she listened to me intently, now I think I have to agree she thought I was “over” it...except...I sat down and told her I’ll never “be over” it and I’ll still need to talk about it and will she be there to listen when out of the blue I need to talk...she said I didn’t give the impression I wasn’t over “it” so she didn’t know and yes she would still listen. I’m learning, better late than never, unless you tell “them” what is going on in your head and heart “they” won’t know.

Those who have experienced the death of their partners have some advice for you who have not had that experience, and do not know what to say… the best answer to all of this is to say exactly what the truth is, say, “I don’t know what to say.” The widow does not know what to say either, and while s/he is faced with this devastating and unbelievable, unknowable and unimaginable experience, she herself has no answers, so those who have not had this experience should not be giving advice especially when that advice is peppered with platitudes. Likely, though, she wants to talk and most likely she’ll tell some stories: the next best advice is just be willing to listen. No need to advise.

This “top ten” list of some practical advice can be helpful when you are confronted with the death of a friend, and you feel you have an obligation to say something to his spouse or partner:
1. Please do not say, “I know just how you feel.” It is perfectly okay to say, “I do not know what to say.” The widow does not either, and the bold truth is much better than a false platitude.

2. The best thing is to let the widow know that you are willing to listen. By talking about his or her spouse’s death, or life, or past fullness, or the present without absence, s/he is in search of meaning, and trying to say something about it shows signs of that search, but not signs of asking for advice. Just let the griever talk. Often that’s enough. The added benefit is that you find more about your friend, in the first place. Just listen. The “mmms” and “ahs” and “I see” work, if you feel an urge to say something. That will indicate you are listening.

3. Sympathy is stronger than advice. Kindness is better than pity. But please avoid the platitudes such as “it is God’s will” or “this too will pass” or “it could have been worse…” Consolations do not fit by trying to explain the metaphysical. Your faith may not even be the same as his or hers. Please do not use this as a moment of religious conversion. The whole idea of “moving on” is unthinkable to the new widow. Their focus is on the past, and that is what grief is.

4. Please do not rush the griever in that process. Do not ask if they are ready to “move on.” That concept of moving on does not make sense to a new griever. Grief takes time, and needs its own space and time. Please do not try to stop the widow’s children who are grieving too, to stop crying, or “be strong.” Grief needs its own power, and not to be forcefully overcome by will power.
5. Please be aware that the griever might have a lack of appetite, or is sleepless, or has a lack of concentration, or is not sociable, a lousy housekeeper, or cares little for the social manners or other normed behavioral signs. Grief affects energy, affects coping ability, and affects recovery. They are not the same as depression, though depression could be just a part of this process. Please do not advise the griever as to how to “overcome” or “remedy” these “ills.” Grief is not an *ill*, but an *experience* that takes a long time, much longer than expected, and the griever needs to let this experience happen. Be patient.

6. Please do not advise the widow that the time for grieving is appropriate or not appropriate… do not tell them it’s been “3 months…” or “6 months”… or whatever time frame you are thinking it “should” be… There is NO time frame that meets the widowed “criterion” (except for the dominant theories). Instead, the experience of grief is so strong, and the very fact that it is an experience to be had, has no time table, and this path is in a direction of its own. No advice from a non-widowed will help.

7. Tell the griever about WidowNet. Ask them if they’ve googled it. Even googling “widow” will get the griever to WidowNet, a place where the conversations are by and for the widowed only. The widowed who find it think of it as an “oasis.” That is the place where the widowed can say, “oh so THAT’s what this feeling is all about!”

8. Please remember always and say so, that “I don’t know how this feels, but I wish I could do something”. The very act of saying that you don’t know what this is, is ironically comforting, because the widow too, does not know what this is. It is an
affront for the non-widowed to give so-called advice to the widowed, who have
actually experienced this.

9. Please remember that memories last for the rest of their lives for the widowed. There
are birthdays, holidays, death days, Sundays, and evenings, that are always difficult,
even years after when others forgot. Grief never goes away, just changes.
Sometimes memories are laced with smiles rather than tears, but the memories
themselves are not to be thrown away. Milestones are still there, and if you can
remember, the griever will be most comforted to have that shared memory. Send an
extra card, or call.

10. Respect the griever’s urge for solitude, or quiet; but be aware that this can change
quickly. Call again soon. Please do not wait in some sense of “respecting privacy.”
The griever has changeable feelings, minute by minute. Please do not avoid those
who are in grief; their loss is deep and unimagined; your avoidance only adds to that.
Often, widows say, “I lost my spouse, but that’s not all… I lost my friends, too.”
Make that phone call to the griever to go see a silly movie together. And if the griever
thinks it is too much, then allow it, and say “next time, okay?” And make sure there
will be a next time, soon. Please do not exclude the griever in the activities you had
before, with the griever and partner before s/he died. Often the widow is lost and left
out in the “partnered world.”

This dissertation adds to an abundance of literature lauding the connection
storytelling and learning, though perhaps a paucity of learning about grief and death.
However, in this project I hope to add a bit about how we could learn from the stories
that come directly from grievers. Death is a powerful and forceful event, and perhaps the most negative. In our current culture, we do our best to elude being uncomfortable; the negatives are avoided: wakes no longer include the bodies in the parlor the way they used to do in days of yore. The “funeral homes” were invented to put distance between the living and the dead. Children are “protected” from the death of their grandparent. No one wants to talk about it, for fear of making the griever—or themselves—sad. The griever is indeed sad anyway, and talking about it really does bring a measure of comfort to the griever. We are indeed distanced from and do not know anymore how to deal with death.

As Joan Didion extensively quoted (pp. 57, ff) Emily Post’s 1922 *Book of Etiquette*, I am happy to say that the book still exists, is in print and is now in the 18th edition (Harper Collins, 2011). I would especially urge people to have read Chapter 46, “Loss, Grieving and Condolences,” where nearly 30 pages of the book specify details about arrangements, what to say, do, etc. This edition even adds a section on what to do with online memorial sites and condolences, which many funeral homes have added.

An elementary, middle school or secondary teacher could lead discussions and stories about death and grief when someone in the class has lost a loved one, a grampa, maybe or a dear friend. Online self-help groups such as WidowNet and others that are listed in the Appendix. More death education classes could exist in health sciences and medical fields such as nursing and social work.

Finally, another WNer who said some profound things to us summarized these guidelines:
Grief programs and literature give voice to the thought that there is no "set time" to grieve. Yet, in spite of those very words, most people indicate by their reactions that there is, in fact, a timeline that is assumed proper and expected. I felt this early on in my widowhood. I think it makes grieving much harder because we learn to keep silent. We live in a quick fix society that will not accept that some things cannot happen quickly or be healed. That does not mean that we do not learn to live with it. Our society is good at talking...not so good at listening, and you see it in those words.

The greatest thing you can do for a widow is listen. We speak about financial loss, loss of friendships, divorce, losing a pet and other life changes and those topics are easily accepted. Yet, people squirm when a widow mentions her husband.

And finally, I question anyone teaching/writing about grief that has not experienced grief themselves. I had no idea what grief was. It was merely a concept. And I had no idea about the variables in grief. Dad’s death affected me greatly but losing my husband is totally different. Grief is not easy to hear or to bear. But it teaches us if we are willing to learn. It has taught me to look at all people differently. Do not shun the widow. Listen to her. Learn from those who are struggling as much as from those who are coping. Some of the greatest love songs, poetry and literature were written out of deep pain. We are awed from the honesty of their words when we listen in retrospect. Yet when we are faced with it full on, we try to pretend it is not there at all. How much we need to learn.

**Implications for Further Research**

While considerable subject matter has been covered in this project, much of the analysis has spawned ideas for further research. Some of these ideas and a short commentary are outlined below.

The member checks not only affirmed my interpretations, they led me to major conclusions. They also influenced me to come up with ideas for further research. From the St. Louis member check discussion, I realized that I could study the differences between the male widowed and the female widowed, and how they are genderized, from cultural perspectives, from the outside powers that influence their identities. From the quick quote that WNer Bart mentioned, I realized I could write about the “skin hunger” phenomenon of the widowed, and how they are or are not willing to talk about it, online or off-, within an interactional conversation in a group or on a one-on-one interview.

From the various GTGs that I have attended, I have considered the articles that could be
generated about the added three-dimensional relationships that have spawned as a result of the online community. The ongoing friendships: e.g., the WN friends from across the country who have been ongoing traveling companions.

As well as these possibilities already mentioned, all of the other aspects of WN not covered in this dissertation have engendered additional ideas for further research. These are but just beginning thoughts for fuller research ideas.

From the Lexington member check several further research ideas came as a result, but one in particular I want to discuss here, and that is what Bill called “anticipatory grief,” whether it is truly related to grief after death, and how those differences might be experienced. This topic has been covered in research under the dominant frameworks of grief and loss principles, but I think that more could be done theoretically in terms of experiential and relational loss, as regards to something more than the actual death event. I would like to look at some sociocultural factors that might include the length of time as caregivers (or not), other kinds of past losses that might be a part of a griever’s experience as well.

**Just a Final Peek into More Forums in WN**

The Forums in WN bring lessons to learn, jokes to share, advice to give and take, heart-warming stories to cry over. WidowNet has 49 Forums, and some or other WNers inhabit each one. And some are telling stories in front of differing digital hearths. Some WNers stay in one Forum, build relationships with the others who also stay there. For example, in the Widows AND Widowers Forum, there is an ongoing topic that has been a
running conversation for nearly a dozen oldtimer WNers who have become friends in conversation. They call it “The Hangout,” and they add some topic subtitle with it, and a continuing conversation goes on for maybe about six or seven pages before it’s full and a new one has to get started. When the new Hangout starts, someone opens the conversation with song lyrics or a poem title, and then the conversation continues. The Hangout has become a metaphorical coffee shop where all sorts of conversation goes on, from the weather, warning each other of the tornadoes, sharing a song title that makes them feel good, or chit chat about the grocery, the pet antics or the cleaning to be done. These conversations are allowing the WNers who have become friends to find subjects of interest that are separate from the intensity of grief, but still in a safe environment where the widow does not have to be “on guard.” When Colleen started a new thread of conversation with a Pablo Naruda poem, Brigit answered her with:

Thanks for the flit, I really love getting to read poems and hear songs I never would have read/heard without my WN friends. I just stopped in to catch up and say “hi” and wanted to thank you for the flit. Waves and hugs to all...

And friends they are, and friends they consider themselves to be, even if it is from their social construction of the digital hangout only. The WNers in this group discussion of the everyday share a multiplicity yet are codifying their relationships from the deepest pain to ordinary conversations. Once the bonding began with sharing the most vulnerable parts of ourselves, WNers are continuing to communicate making group meanings, and learning how to be a widow. In WN, the widows are in a learning journey with their

55 Due to limitations in database capacity, and in the interest of file management, certain segments get “full” of data and so data needs to be sectored in another “area.”
changed identities, their changed lives. The alteration of the participants’ relationships with this increasing participation in WN improves the widows’ reconstruction of their identities. They learn that the craziness and the fears and the isolation are part of grief.

In those 49 Forums of WN, topics of conversation are those in the General Forum that first describe the consequences of widowhood. But when it finally dawns on us that there is something else besides grief to talk about, most often, the first time that WNers venture beyond the General Forum to the “Beyond Bereavement” Group, where the Forum mainly used is called “Beyond Bereavement,” and enough of the threads of conversation reside there so that the stories and the friendships fill up the rooms, and Mr. G. builds new ones each year.56

Other Forums abound in the WN community. Sometimes the WNer, if a woman, sits in the Women’s Forum and the conversation there is just women’s talk. It could be about menopause or makeup; match dot com or mementos, hair or nails, or the latest cosmetic item, from the serious to the silly. Sometimes, if the WNer is a man, he can go to the men’s “locker,” that is supposed to be for men only,57 and talk about things these

56 Due to the database “space” limitations, and data management issues, data needs to be categorized and archived. In the Beyond Bereavement Forum, for example, a new Forum each year is created and named by its year number, and the older ones are archived to a “read only” category. Other Forums that are used the most have the same feature.

57 This Forum is meant to be for men only, but it is violated often by women intruding and saying something. I confess that I read there sometimes, but I do not post there. The same is true of the women’s Forum, though the men are much less prone to violate the rule.
male WNers are interested in: sometimes sports, sometimes car engines, sometimes trying to figure out whether he wants to find another mate or wants to say something about his kids and how a man can be bringing them up alone. Sometimes the WNers Forums are for military widows; sometimes widows without children; sometimes WNers who talk of a spiritual interest, will go to the Christian Forum, or the Jewish Forum, or the agnostic Forum to talk of things mystical. I could pop over to the “Critter” Forum to see the discussions about the pets people have had, their relationship to their spouses, keeping their pets after they died, or what they still have now, or what dear pet has died.

For instance, Amilie told the story of her Calico kitty to us:

> My calico cat mourned for My charlie for 4 weeks. She would pace thru the rooms looking for him and crying. She would stare at his wheelchair, then curl up in it. She would sit in the middle of the living room staring at his easy chair and cry. She always slept on his window sill at night while he slept and that is where I still find her. She has finally stopped looking for him. It broke my heart to not be able to explain why Charlie was not here. I fully believe that our pets feel the loss too. (WN 2006)

Others who have pets come to the Critters Forum, too, and commiserate, tell their stories that are similar to AM’s, which validate AM’s story. Not all the stories in this Forum are about the pets’ mourning, but there is a place to talk about the pets that are having their relationships with the WNers. One, Hazel, I call her, started a story-telling thread by saying “tell me about your animals” and then proceeded to talk about her 20-year-old cat that lived with her and her 6-year-old dog. Another tells of her six cats, how they relate to each other and to her. Then another chimes in with the story of her three dogs, and how their behavior changed at the death of her spouse. Soon the stories were not just about the animals, but about how the WNer copes with the loss, how she relates to the pets still
living and how they all mourn together. The WNers leave that thread of stories with more insight to how their pets are living with them, pre and post death.

I have on occasion gone to the Handi-person Forum where people visit there with various fixit problems and others will advise and solve problems, whether it might be a computer software problem, a car problem, a furnace problem or advice on what appliance is a better deal. One WNer even asked for some guidance on growing an avacado tree. An active WNer, “Bob,” who also is known for his sardonic humor, created a new thread in that Forum, called “Eleven Step Guide to Being Handy Around the House (humor)” and then listed them thus:

1. If you can't find a screwdriver, use a knife. If you break off the tip, it's an improved screwdriver.
2. Try to work alone. An audience is rarely any help. Dogs are okay though.
3. Despite what you may have been told by your mother, praying and cursing are both helpful in home repair ... but only if you are working alone.
4. Work in the kitchen whenever you can ... many fine tools are there, its warm and dry, and you are close to the refrigerator.
5. If it's electronic, get a new one ... or consult a twelve-year-old.
6. Stay simple minded: Get a new battery; replace the bulb or fuse; see if the tank is empty; try turning on the "on" switch; or just paint over it.
7. Always take credit for miracles. If you dropped it while taking it apart and it suddenly starts working, you have healed it.
8. Regardless of what people say, kicking, pounding, and throwing sometimes DOES help. Also, see #3 above.
9. If something looks level, it is level.
10. If at first you don't succeed, redefine success.
11. Above all, if what you've done is stupid, but it works, then it isn't stupid. Yes, these are funny, but all the more so because they're TRUE. (Bob, WN 2008)

Another WNer, also a male, added to the list in kind by saying,

What about #12, If your living room is a pathetic mess, get out the leaf blower!

Others laughed with them, because the WNers know the “pathetic mess” is something that we might acknowledge its existence, but in the ennui of grief (one more aspect of its experience), WNers sometimes do not give a fig about it. This is an example of how the
everyday normal chores are still around, even with the void, but those chores seem less important than the loss of their loved one.

Related to the Handy Persons Forum is the Business and Trading Post Forum where WNers are talking about items of their interest that they may want to buy or sell. I have also done what many WNers do, and that is to add a favorite recipe or a new recipe to the Recipes Forum. I have seen many a kind of recipe that I have never heard of before, and most of the others who bring them are informing the rest of us as to foods we haven’t tried before. There is also a knitting Forum where the knitters share kinds of yarns and patterns, a “creatives” Forum where poetry is shared and even written by the WNers. All of these Forums can be viewed as “legitimate peripheral participation” in the community of practice, where the WNers are giving advice, not only for grief issues, but they evidence how these cyber friendships develop in their construction of widowhood, teaching each other how to live again, doing ordinary things like repairing household items, cooking meals, and telling tales about other ordinary matters in their newly reconstructed lives. They are repairing each other in this teaching and learning how to be widows in a myriad of aspects of their changed lives.

Then there are the “seasoned” WNers who have been widowed five years or more and talk in that Forum\(^{58}\) about how their grief is changed, or how it stays, or yet still mark milestones (the 10 year, or the 8 year, and the grief monster arises again) in this life-changing experience. The Seasoned WNers might be having old friends’ kinds of

\(^{58}\) The particular Forum is called “Seasoned” for WNers who have been widowed 5 years or more.
conversations, or marking these lengthy milestones, a phenomenon far longer than anyone would expect. For example, Polly said,

Five years ago today (April 15), we got the diagnosis: pancreatic cancer. Twelve days later, my Richard died. Can't believe I will soon be a seasoned widow. (WN, 2005)

Bob responded,

Time flies, and yet it doesn't. Last weekend marked 6 years for me and I'm still amazed to think that SIX years have passed. When I say it, six years sounds like an incredibly long time, but it's not. A lot has changed in that time, but it was still only yesterday, still all too vivid, and we're forever changed by it.

The cultural conviction is that after five years of grief, one is expected to have forgotten the pain, and in turn, forgotten the death, severed the bonds, and “returned” to the former life. However, in the experience of the widow, nothing has been forgotten, even though the pain may dissipate, it does not disappear, nor have the memories been forgotten nor bonds severed. Even after years, the memory is still there, and the life changes are still comprehended, constructed and discussed. The relations of the community of practice may not have evident teaching, but the learning is, and the relations are not so clearly delineated between the “newcomers” and the “oldtimers.” The informality of the relationships show more of learning than teaching, of sometimes giving sometimes taking advice. Even when WNers are active after five years, there is evidence of a long-term grief that exists, even though concomitant with many of the affects, early deep pain has diminished. Yet lessened pain does not mean having forgotten, having gone, or the bereaved having “moved on” whatever that means. The idea of the relationship has not diminished, and identities are not the same after the death of a partner. And yet, after a long time, oldtimers still help other oldtimers learn what to expect.
There is another kind of discussion worth merit, and could be room for further research. Many of the WNers who still consider themselves widows are remarried, and bring pertinent discussion points to their separate forum in WN. Some of the re-married WNers have “recoupled” (as Mr. G names the Forum) to other WNers.

One (and only one) particular Forum has had a “checkered history” of flaming in WN because of passionate political views. This too is not discussed in this dissertation. This subject could be a book in itself, to describe one way that WNers have made their first ventures into the world beyond grief, through stepping into their discussions of politics, but within a “safe place” of fellow grievers in WN. Mr. G. has metamorphosed the former Forum within the WN message board into a separate message board of its own with a separate URL, due to the history of emotionally charged discussions regarding political events and people. The members of that forum discuss news events related to politics, both national and international. The Forum is called called “Intelligent Expressions of Clashing Viewpoints” or IECV. The few WNers who are there for discussion have stayed, some for years, to discuss various aspects of politics, while others will avoid it, and yet others have stayed away in frustration. It seems as if WN as a community is not that far from the 3D world, in that not all are interested in politics. Needless to say, with political discussions in WN, the tempers have flared, and many cool-down periods existed in its history. The only people allowed to join this message board are recognized WNers from the other Boards. They may not create new pseudonyms in the IECV Board.
There are so many factors covered in WN talk about this experiential process called grief, its force, power, its effects, and consequences. The experience of the life together before s/he died, the depth of love and commitment, the experiences of blandness, arguments, conflicts, resolutions, compromises, all come in amounts of time, space, length, breadth and depth. These qualitative factors of behavior, of experience are impossible to universalize, impossible to measure, and are impossible to predict. And the enactments of this experience are a relational fictive that we can live with in our telling and retelling.

Encore: On to the Book

These WN stories are not ending in the finish of this project. The first thing I shall be doing beyond this research is to revise this dissertation into a book that the WNers want to see. The book needs to be written, as I desired from the beginning, even before I thought about WN as a field to study. It was the interest in this conflict between what I thought grief was and what I was experiencing grief to be that I wanted to write about. I started with the book idea before this dissertation, and it is the impetus for my return to graduate school, because I wanted this to be a scholarly endeavor, one with credence. That keeps my ethical responsibilities as my constant, because this work is not just for myself, but as the member checks have shown me, for my community of grievers who also want this perspective of grief to be known. The perspective is based on something a WNer, Janie, said (quoted in Chapter 4): “There is a quote I like: ‘Grief is not the process of forgetting, but of remembering with less pain.’ I am trying to remember with less
pain.” Janie’s comment is the embodiment of the lengthy experience of spousal grief. I resonate with Janie’s remarks knowing full well that it is like my grief, and the same sentiments so many other WNers hold over the years of our online community.
Coda: Benjamining Widow-Angel of Chaos

"Angelus Novus"

Figure 4. Angelus Novus

Some of my affinity to the work of Walter Benjamin (1969), I save for the book project. However, his “Angelus Novus” stays with me. I studied some of Benjamin’s work, and when I found that this Klee angel is his favorite painting, I was influenced by it.
for a number of reasons. This painting is one that I have known about since I worked on Lather’s (1995) book, *Troubling Angels* and have never forgotten. I again came across the *Angelus Novus* several years after my widowhood, when I studied Benjamin. Klee’s angel haunts me, and the moment I saw this again, I could relate this piece of art to my own and widowhood in general. I interpret the painting as the widow who is facing the debris of history, not looking forward, because she sees no progress, no order, as she had been promised it was before. Her world as she knew is blown to bits. As she faces the past, she is being blown by the force of the grief debris of her catastrophic history that would be behind her if she would turn around and “move on.” Instead, around her is the disarray of her history, those broken bits that are the pieces of her relationship, of the house that used to be a home, of cultural promises of “loving forever” that came with her diamond. The scrolls of a so-called “Enlightenment,” the adult, the rational, (the Freudian “get over it already!”) history are so tightly wrapped around her head that they are giving her a headache, like too-tight, old-fashioned rollers in her hair, which would make her all organized and in its proper place. I interpret these curls of Enlightenment as the norms that the dominant view of grief do to her only she sees debris of the pieces of her history. That history she sees is not the progress she was promised, and it makes no sense to her. However, her eyes are open, only after the fog of early widowhood has begun to lift, and she is getting to a point of awakening… not about to turn her back on that catastrophe, but at least with those eyes turned sideways: one side of her mouth is higher than the other, as she begins to smile. *Angelus Novus* is on her way to think about something else, finally. Perhaps her side-long glance is going past the scrolls of
dominant thought about grief and making that smile that says, “I know better… I’ll pick up the pieces, someday, and keep them. But I’ll go on…. Someday. She is being driven “by that storm of chaos, irresistibly into the future to which [her] back is turned” (Buck-Morss, p. 95). The widow angel, just might have a promise of hope, and from the WN point of view, after spending some time with her fellow sufferers, she does see a glimmer of hope, and she has a half-smile with something to add that can change her grief.

*Dal Segno Al Coda…*

Even though is it time, I do not want to finish this; while I still construct it, it seems I am still attached to Allan. This dissertation is my metonymy. I will always think of Allan, always. Finishing this dissertation is a sort of like putting all his socks into a bag and giving them to the Salvation Army. It’s like closing the dictionary that he left open just before he died. It’s like giving all his belongings away. It’s finishing yet another piece of my heart. Ending this dissertation is a little like closing yet another door in my grief. Yet I must; it is time. I will not end my grief by ending this project. I will not stop thinking about him just because I shall end this project. I won’t even need to promise that, because even now, ten years after his death, I think about him every day, and not just while I am writing this project. When I finish this, I shall go off to the Unitarian Church scatter garden, where most of his ashes are, and I will sit on the bench and talk to him about it. And I will cry, even as I am while I write this, but that is okay. I am sure that if he has any awareness, he would be very proud of this endeavor. I just
wish I knew. He was such a cheerleader for me. He is the source and the catalyst of this project.

Yes, the quote at the front of this chapter is relevant. Allan had blue eyes, and was such a boy… although we shared our careers as English teachers (he took care of the 8th graders and I took care of the college kids), and over and over, we carried deep and intimate conversations about our favorite writers (his was Wordsworth; mine Didion). He was great as an 8th grade teacher… he spent so much time with them that he had their sensibility, their humor; he had a genuine savoir-faire. He would tell jokes that weren’t otherwise that funny, but his contagious laughter as he told them would make us all laugh at his delight. That quoted e. e cummings intended the poem to be Buffalo Bill… but it drew me to Allan, and even nearly 10 years after his death, I read this poem and I cry… not just a tear, but the deep chest heave of the grief monster. The GM still rears, maybe not as fiercely as the early days, but as deeply as then… and even in my new marriage with Bill… “To make an end is to make a beginning,” T. S Elliot reminds me, “and the end of all our exploring… will be to arrive where we started…. And know the place for the first time.”
Appendix A: Other Websites Related to Grief

When one googles “widow” the top search out of the over 40 million results is WidowNet. In 1993, Mr. G, the founder, looked for a website that focused on widow/ers, but found none, so made one. Thus, it is the first of all grief sites online. Today, however, there are myriad other sites related to spousal grief, and other kinds of grief, as well.

Post WN Online Communities and More

A number of “offshoots” online communities have arisen from WidowNet, and for a number of reasons. Three that I can tell are not well known. One is an intended separate site for widowed from WN who have re-coupled, and was started by a couple that had met in WidowNet, and married. When I was remarried, I was invited to join them, though I had not heard of it before that. It is called “Remarrieds.net”

Remarrieds.net

Another website online community for widowed is called “Griefs Journey” and created by another WidowNetter who wanted to continue in her own way, to bring newly widowed to her site. It is a message board similar in structure to WidowNet, but GriefsJourney has the tone and the personality of B’s (the administrator). She is an active member there, writing every day, and in her inimitable sense of humor. Besides the message board, she has added web pages that are resources for other topics related to
spousal grief. There are a handful of old WNers who are regulars there plus quite a few others have found this site and are not WNers. The URL is Griefsjourney.com

Other Websites Related to Grief

This is a (partial) list of sites that are related to spousal grief and other kinds. Other websites exist that are related to grief, not necessarily just spousal grief. Here is a list with some commentary:

- **http://health.dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/Health___Wellness/Support/Mourning_and_Loss/Loss_of_Partner**  This is a “Yahoo Group” site with a running list of links to groups that have lost a partner. Each link has its own short description. WidowNet is on top of that list.

- **http://www.griefnet.org/**  GriefNet.org site that includes all sorts of grief besides spousal grief. Over 50 email grief support groups through this site. The site allows for the creation of separate groups within other web pages.

- **http://www.widowedamerica.org/**  established in 1980, Widowed Men and Women of America (WMWA) is a non-denominational, non-profit organization of the State of Colorado based in Denver. With a current membership of more than 500, WMWA sponsors events to encourage its members to make new friends and share in social activities. The average age, ratio of employed to retired persons, and number of members varies in each of our seven Links giving each one a distinct personality.

- **http://kidsaid.com/**  (a site for kids and grief)
• http://www.americanwidowproject.org/ This is the website for military widows. It allows one to share their story but it does not contain a message board.

• http://www.inspiringword.net/movies/death.htm This is a site with inspiring photos, videos and sounds with various Christian quotes attached. (note the music accompaniment)

• http://www.widowsquest.com This is a blog for young widows and widowers by a young woman who was widowed in 1999

• http://www.youngwidowsandwidowers.com/ This is mirrored to the site above.

• http://www.memory-of.com/Public/ This is a website that will give lessons on how to create a memorial website.

• http://widowsbreathe.com/?id=1 This is a site by a widow that does life coaching and support for widows.

• http://www frontrangeliving.com/family-health/survival-guide-for-widows.htm An article of advice for widows that is placed in a Colorado magazine website. In it there is a list of websites (shown here) useful to widows.

• http://www.aarp.org/relationships/grief-loss/ Another article about grief and loss, which is full of links to other useful related topics, on the AARP website

• http://idfpm.com/smf/ “Intelligent discussions From Progressive Minds” This is another offshoot from WidowNet where WNers from the political discussion Forum decided to branch off to their own site after numerous personal attacks for political views. This site contains a reasoned political discussion Forum as well as other
Forums that are branching off grief, but the subject of spousal grief always is included.

- **http://www.ywow.org** YWOW is a community of younger widows and widowers that provides a safe environment to men and women who have lost their spouses much too early in life.

- **http://www.widowdating.co.uk/** A dating site for the widowed.
Appendix B: Links to Resources for Further Internet Research

- **Association of Internet Researchers**: [http://www.aoir.org](http://www.aoir.org) – includes link to the Association’s ethical guidelines, giving questions that researchers should address before designing research using data collected via the Internet.

- **Virtual Methods**: [http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/virtualmethods/vmesrc.htm](http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/virtualmethods/vmesrc.htm) - site based on ESRC seminar series, containing archive of presentations with thematic index, list of useful resources, and advice on good practice in virtual methods.

- **Pew Internet and American Life Project**: [http://www.pewinternet.org/](http://www.pewinternet.org/) a non-profit, non-partisan “fact tank” research organization based in Washington DC is devoted to Internet research. It is full of current statistics for all about the Internet, its social life, its technology and other aspects of Internet. It contains data tools, information from experts, and reports trends.

- **Emerald Research**: [http://www.emeraldinsight.com](http://www.emeraldinsight.com) Global publisher of research w/ impact in business, society, public policy and education. This is a journal that is international, refereed, aiming to describe assess and foster understanding of the role of wide-area, multi-purpose computer networks such as the Internet.

- **Internet Research Task Force**: (TRTF) [www.irtf.org](http://www.irtf.org) A non-profit that promotes research of importance to the evolution of the Internet by creating focused, long-term Research Groups working on topics related to Internet protocols, applications, architecture and technology.
Appendix C: Krebs Social Graph of Online Community

Krebs (2008) Social Graph of Online Community: As discussed in Chapter 2, the make-up of an online community has a typical “shape”, where the most active members (see center of graph) are fewer than the “lurkers.”

Figure 5. Krebs’ Social Membership Points Graph
Krebs (2008) argues, in his research, that there are three distinct “layers” of membership: represented by the blue, green and red nodes encircling in the OC (online community). The blue nodes are the “lurkers,” those attracted to the OC, but not committed enough to participate actively. The green nodes have a few connections to the OC, where they might identify with it but not fully connected, rather to their own local groups. The inner, red nodes are those who are the active members, involved in the OC. Krebs argues that those who are the most active are in overlapping networks. They are the ones who stay and build the OC. (Note the outer edges of the graph, which indicates the off-site friendships.) For a fuller explanation, see www.orgnet.com/community.html.

Figure 6. Krebs’ Graph of Core Members of an Online Community (Cited with permission of owner.)
Appendix D: Glossary of Digital Terms

The following table is a partial list of terms used in online communities that relate to more traditional terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offline Vocabulary</th>
<th>Online Vocabulary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talking</td>
<td>Posting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrupting</td>
<td>Cross posting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking off topic</td>
<td>Thread drift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading, watching, listening/not speaking</td>
<td>Lurking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses, rooms</td>
<td>Boards, Forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting</td>
<td>Logging in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking, strolling</td>
<td>Surfing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knocking, walking in</td>
<td>Registering, logging in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking away, leaving</td>
<td>Logging off, turning a power button</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker/Teller</td>
<td>Poster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletin board</td>
<td>Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grouping category</td>
<td>Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue, conversation, discussion</td>
<td>Thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listener</td>
<td>Lurker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>emotions, icons that show emotions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix E: Definitions of Acronyms in WN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BF</td>
<td>Boyfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIL</td>
<td>Brother-In-Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.O.B.</td>
<td>Battery Operated Boyfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRB</td>
<td>Be Right Back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>Bull Shit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTW</td>
<td>By The Way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRS</td>
<td>Can't Remember Shit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>Dear Daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DF</td>
<td>Dear Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGD</td>
<td>Dear Grand Daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGI</td>
<td>Don't Get It</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGS</td>
<td>Dear Grandson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DH</td>
<td>Dear Husband or Dear Heart)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIL</td>
<td>Daughter-In-Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>Dear Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOD</td>
<td>Day of Death/Date of Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DS</td>
<td>Dear Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DW</td>
<td>Dear Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DX</td>
<td>Diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JK</td>
<td>Just Kidding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JMHO</td>
<td>Just My Humble Opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KILY</td>
<td>Know I Love You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAIP</td>
<td>Live And In Person (GTGs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDR</td>
<td>Long Distance Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOL</td>
<td>Laughing Out Loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIL</td>
<td>Mother-In-Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIP</td>
<td>Minor in Possession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMG</td>
<td>Oh, My God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OT</td>
<td>Off Topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTOH</td>
<td>On The Other Hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAR</td>
<td>Post and Run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>PORCH Head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROFL</td>
<td>Rolling on the Floor Laughing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROFLMAO</td>
<td>Rolling on the Floor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RX</td>
<td>Prescription medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RX</td>
<td>Prescription medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F&amp;S</td>
<td>Flounce and Snit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIL</td>
<td>Father-In-Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTFAGOS-EFF</td>
<td>this is a game for soldiers*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FWB</td>
<td>Friend With Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FWIW</td>
<td>For What It's Worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GF</td>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM</td>
<td>Grief Monster (who lives on Grief Mountain, but wishes it were a peaceful meadow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS</td>
<td>Grandson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTG</td>
<td>Get Together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HG</td>
<td>Hand Grenade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTH</td>
<td>Hope This/That Helps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IM</td>
<td>Instant Message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMO</td>
<td>In My Opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMHO</td>
<td>In My Humble Opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF</td>
<td>Safety F#$% (FWB: The Un-Coy version)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIL</td>
<td>Sister-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO</td>
<td>Significant Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thx</td>
<td>Thanks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIA</td>
<td>Thanks In Advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIC</td>
<td>Tongue In Cheek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TMI</td>
<td>Too Much Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TMS</td>
<td>The Mad Scotsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTFN</td>
<td>TaTa For Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WN</td>
<td>Widow Net</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTF</td>
<td>What the Eff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTH</td>
<td>What The Hell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WYSIWYG</td>
<td>What You See Is What</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;G&gt;</td>
<td>Grin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;S&gt;</td>
<td>Smile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


334


