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[https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/pentaris\\_bridegroom1.pdf](https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/pentaris_bridegroom1.pdf)

# Memorial video tribute and the enfranchised grief of a gay widower

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### Abstract

Doka (2008) introduced the term 'disenfranchised grief' to refer to the form of grief that lacks social recognition. This paper argues that disenfranchised grief can find recognition and support via online communities, and it introduces this as enfranchised grief. Media and communication technologies have been widely used to communicate death and dying, while a vast number of the population, globally, has access to the information. Numerous deaths of celebrities have been covered by the news and Internet sources with a global effect, as those have also initiated mass feelings of grief and remembrance (i.e. Princess Diana). Video platforms online have been widely used to upload and share memorial video tributes of loved ones. Yet it is important to remember that the video sharing online has multiple roles to play, besides the commemoration of the deceased. This article will focus on YouTube memorial video tributes, but not in large. It explores gay widowers and the sense of belonging that the bereaved gain from memorial videos. Gay widowers may adapt to the same social role as their counterparts, straight widowers, but with higher challenges. Using the case study of Bridegroom YouTube video, this article will expand on how YouTube memorial video tributes may serve as the mean for a sense of belonging and acceptance of the role of the griever. With this exemplar, the form of enfranchised grief in the online communities is suggested. This article draws from a content analysis of a ten-minute long YouTube video and concludes to the communal character of YouTube commemoration.

### Introduction

Death in contemporary society is largely influenced by mediated cultures<sup>1</sup> (Sumiala 2013; Walter 2008). Whether personal or not, death is accessed immensely by a global audience. Media and communication technologies have widely

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<sup>1</sup> Mass media is communication that includes newspapers, television, radio, internet, magazines, etc. This is an important force in modern cultures. In sociology it is largely introduced as mediated culture. In mediated cultures, media not only reflects but creates culture as well (Sumiala 2013; Van Dijck 2007).

been used to communicate death and dying<sup>2</sup> (Sumiala 2013; Pentaris & Yerosimou 2014; Sumiala & Tikka 2011), while a vast number of the population worldwide has access to the information. With his ‘The Pornography of Death,’ the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer (1955) broke into the public conversation and underlined society’s denial for engaging in a conversation about death. The death of a loved one has remained behind closed doors, and bereavement is yet considered a private matter alone, however publicly communicated. The technological revolution in the twentieth century led to the elimination of geographical barriers in communication. Information has now become a lot more accessible, by a lot more people, and from a lot more different locations. Digitalized age and the technological revolution have offered new grounds for death talk when others are not available. Death is now a subject communicated largely in books, films, television, radio, internet, newspapers, etc.

*It is now possible, if one wants, to see death - its causes and outcomes - everyday. Television in particular has meant since the 1950s onwards death has been catapulted into people's living rooms and become one of the primary ways through which people encounter mortality of the human condition (Woodthorpe 2010, 284).*

The content of death talk in the media is not always accident-focused; there is more information available besides outcomes of conflict and accidents. The demise of celebrities has always drawn the attention of the media, such as Princess Diana in 1997, or Michael Jackson in 2009. Additionally, for a number of individuals the internet and the media has become part of their grieving process, as they go forth reconstructing a new reality without the deceased, and becoming emotionally available for future relationships (Kastenbaum 2007; Jakoby 2012). Further afield, there are numerous websites to provide all the necessary information on loss and grief, such as e-how.com that suggests ‘how to grieve.’

This article makes a case for online video platforms, and focuses on the role of memorial video tributes in the grieving process of a gay widower, Tom Bridegroom’s<sup>3</sup> partner. Since its development, YouTube, and video sharing in general, has been introduced as the ‘new thing of the internet’ (Burgess & Green 2009, 46); the opportunity for anyone and everyone to broadcast themselves around the world, show off private videos publicly and watch public videos privately. YouTube has been used largely over the past eight years in order to communicate death and memorialize the loss of a loved one, as well as provide space for friends, family members, and non-friends to post comments and ‘like’ others’ comments. In the face of this technological outburst of communication a number of gay-rights and social issues, such as House Bill 444 regarding civil partnership and social recognition in the State of Hawaii – USA, have found grounds of being communicated to a global audience. This communication came with social recognition and acceptance; qualities that are not necessarily found in local communities.

The question that this study merely touches upon is ‘How do those characteristics contribute to the grieving process of gay widowers?’ As suggested by the gay psychotherapist Michael Shernoff (1997b), widowerhood is a new experience in someone’s life. The role of a widower is influenced by social and personal factors, which will affect the individual’s experience of grief. Gay widowers face greater challenges than their heterosexual counterparts (Wayment & Kemeny 2004; Hornjatkevyc & Alderson 2011), which enhances the importance of this study. This paper shows via the analysis of Bridegroom that video tributes on YouTube may as well serve as a ‘sense of belonging’ for gay widowers, which takes us from the theologian Kenneth Doka’s theory of ‘disenfranchised grief’ in the local society, to a form suggested here; ‘enfranchised grief’ in YouTube memorial video tributes.

The form of disenfranchised grief highlights both the cast of the needs of a gay widower, and the intensity of the impact of the loss of the spouses. Theologian Kenneth Doka (2002) suggests the typology of disenfranchised grief into

<sup>2</sup> E.g. public mourning, public dying, and the depiction of dead bodies in the media

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Lee Bridegroom accidentally fell off a rooftop and died on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011, in Los Angeles, USA.

the following categories. In all the types of disenfranchised grief he refers to lack of recognition of the relationship, lack of acknowledgement of the loss, the exclusion of the griever, the circumstances of one's death, and finally the personalised ways in which individuals grieve. All the above areas might cover many different and variant occasions. A gay widower may be experiencing this form of grief due to a mixture of these typologies. It is common that lack of recognition of the relationship with the deceased might be the reasoning behind lack of recognition of the loss. The griever is framed in an exclusive environment with limited social supports, where he becomes psychosocially unable to respond to the significant crisis he is experiencing (Shernoff 1997a).

The next sections of this paper will discuss the theory of 'disenfranchised grief' as introduced by Kenneth Doka, with a special focus on gay widowers. Later on, the key characteristics for understanding video sharing in YouTube will be discussed. Finally, results and conclusions are elaborated, based on the methodology chosen for this study.

### **Widowerhood and Disenfranchised Grief**

Widowerhood is a unique experience in one's life; a significant event that introduces the widower to a 'new crisis.' It shifts views, develops needs for (re)construction, and displays a new social role that one has never had adequate modelling and direction to it (Howell 2013). The loss of a spouse puts the individual left behind into a mourning period, which will be ideally supported by formal and informal systems in the society one belongs to (Kastenbaum 2007). However, when the widower is facing lack of acceptance and recognition of his past relationship, how is his current social role as a widower understood and accepted? Michael Shernoff (1997b, 1) suggests that "...widowerhood needs to be viewed as both a social and intrapsychic phenomenon." For one to experience widowerhood, he will firstly have gained insight of how love, intimacy, and commitment feel like. When you lose someone you have committed yourself and your life to, the grieving and mourning should be allowed to happen without any limitations or social structures (Wayment & Kemeny 2004; Jakoby 2012).

Research shows that the experiences of gay widowers are differentiated by their heterosexual counterparts (Wayment & Kemeny 2004; Fenge & Fannin 2009; Hornjatkevyc & Alderson 2011). The psychotherapist Michael Shernoff (1997a; 1997b) suggests that lack of social support among gay widowers may lead to social isolation instead of supported bereavement. Nonetheless, when exploring the delimitations of the social role of a gay widower in the contemporary society (Shernoff 2013; 1998), disenfranchised grief becomes evident (Doka 2002). Disenfranchised grief is in general a term that describes grief that is not being acknowledged by the society, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned. Examples of this sort are suggested by the theologian Kenneth Doka (1984) and include stillbirths, miscarriages, loss of a lover/partner, loss of a teacher/coach, loss of a co-worker, incarceration, and gay grief.

Disenfranchised grief has four dimensions; sociological, intrapsychic, political, and interactional (ibid.). The socio-political dimensions suggest sympathy for victims of 'above reproach.' This is generally guided by class, race and ethnicity. The intrapsychic dimension refer to individual consciousness and personal reconstruction, while interactional dimensions also suggest 'empathic failures.' In addition to the few examples provided above, developmental losses might as well be disenfranchised. According to Kenneth Doka (ibid.), as we age in life and we move on from childhood to adulthood several transitions occur from one stage to another, and we experience a range of losses during those transitions.

Disenfranchised grief may enfranchise in different cultures however, or sub-cultures (ibid.). The latter may be accepting of the lost relationship and grief, but the larger society is not. All grieving experiences however – all grief – will become disenfranchised at some point. At any stage, disenfranchised grief has certain risks or complications. Those are intensified reactions, problem of ritual, concurrent crises, inability to participate in dying process, lack of social support

(Doka 1984; Shernoff 2013). While grief is intensified the social supports are lacking with disenfranchised grief. Inability to openly experience and express grief intensifies the feelings, assists with future crises, and deconstructs the meaning of ritualised representation of grief.

All these complications are referred to throughout the text, as Bridegroom is a case study that contradicts the complications of disenfranchised grief within the larger society, with remedies within the online world<sup>4</sup>.

### **Understanding YouTube: internet video sharing**

Established in 2005, YouTube became instantly, if not the most, one of the most successful internet sites, although not the only video sharing site. 'Online videos existed long before YouTube entered the scene. However, uploading videos, managing, sharing and watching them was very cumbersome due to a lack of an easy-to-use integrated platform' (Xu, Dale & Liu 2007, 1). Its features allowed for user-generated content to be uploaded and shared worldwide; something unique as opposed to its counterparts, such as GoogleVideo, ClipShack, etc. An additional disparity with the counterparts was the speed for video-sharing, not only in terms of technological speed but with reference to eliminating geographical barriers in communication as well. In 2006, YouTube was sold to Google and within one year the video platform became the fourth most visited internet site worldwide (ibid.). Nowadays this is the third most popular site globally (Van Dijck 2013).

As opposed to other video sharing platforms, YouTube provided the opportunity for user-generated content, the opportunity for the users to have a profile page and allow users to subscribe with other users' profile pages. Additionally, this became an interactive video exchange process, as users can comment on videos, like or dislike them, and report them as inappropriate to the administrator. It is the architecture of the YouTube platform though that shapes and leads the user's choice as well. That is due to linked videos, the rankings of the videos, popularity, and therefore the user becomes prone to watching the suggested videos based on his/her history (ibid.).

One of the greatest characteristics of YouTube regards the 'publicly private and privately public' as suggested by the anthropologist Patricia Lange (2008). A number of scholars suggest that media and communication technologies "may be eroding the boundaries between 'publicity' and 'privacy' in fundamental ways" (Weintraub & Kumar 1997, xi). YouTube supports this suggestion. It provides opportunities for publicizing personal experiences, while at the same time it personalizes public experiences as well. An example to demonstrate the latter could be a celebrity death. When Michael Jackson died in June 2009, a massive coverage by the media occurred. His death, funeral and the aftermath of his death were all subjects of YouTube video contents. His funeral was attended by over half a million people, and the service was streamed online in real time. That video was then uploaded on YouTube and the grief for a well-renowned person globally, yet non-known by everyone, became private for people in the UK, or in India. This might also reflect on Kate Woodthorpe's (2010) final point if reversed. Media and communication technologies, such as YouTube, provide the opportunity for people to 'sell' their personal experiences for financial gain, or further ahead towards social solidarity for a humanistic cause, such as Bridegroom. Shane Bitney, the gay widower in this study, shared his grief with the wider public, while he suggested solidarity and unification on the grounds of the rights of gay widowers. The YouTube video became the milestone of his campaign on gay rights in partnership before and after death.

The privilege of commenting and showing liking, or disliking for the video shared has shifted the mere communication of a message through a video, into an interactive video exchange experience, which for this matter refers to 'death talk' (Gorer 1955) and interactive process of grieving beyond the local society. This interactive exchange is coloured by

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<sup>4</sup> Also see Boellstorff, Tom. 2010. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

the two strands of the visibility of death in the contemporary media, as suggested by the sociologist Tony Walter (2008), which are fictional and factual death in popular culture, and public mourning. The second strand that informs the categories of 'memorial tributes' and 'celebrity deaths' can be explored from two different perspectives: referring to spontaneous shrines (ibid.), and videos that reflect permanent memorials. Sociologist Margaret Gibson (2007) suggests that such tributes/memorials of public mourning create a virtual community of mourning. Examples of such communities include sociologist Tony Walter (1999), who argued that cultural institutions in the society, including media and communication technologies, were taken by surprise by Princess Diana's death and how the wider public engaged with a mediated mourning culture. The internet therefore may be seen as a new vision for community, where same values such as belonging, individualism and collectivism, social solidarity and social support can all be found but in a different context, structure and nature. Memorial videos on the YouTube platform are communities of that nature. Viewers and users engage with a publicly shared private experience.

### **Memorial YouTube Video Tributes**

It is suggested that video tributes are closely associated with the American culture of grief (Wahlberg 2009). They have become part of the funeral home services in the United States first, and then expanded worldwide. Video tributes in the US gained grounds for business via memorializing war heroes, and according to the Memory Lane Productions website (<http://www.memorylanepv.com/>) this became a promising business very quickly. Embedded in the American culture, generating video tributes led to a category of non-professional contributors.

YouTube memorial video tributes go beyond commodity, and also reflect social aspects on the online world (Xu, Dale & Liu 2007). Memorials are tributes that are expressed through social and ritual aspects of the society. These memorials take the form of public sites, which perpetuate in the society. Wahlberg argues that virtual memorials on the other hand differ from traditional ones in dedication;

YouTube offers an alternative culture of commemoration where private loss finds articulation in video tributes made in memory of loved ones...On YouTube...the commemoration is virtual and the posted message not necessarily engraved forever...Web memorials often represent cultural expressions affected by personal trauma (Wahlberg 2009, 218).

Memorial video tributes on YouTube are a liberation of private practice and a representation of grief as a response to a loss into the global realm of the internet. As mentioned in the introduction, this is the process of experiences of death and dying becoming privately public (Lange 2008). Nonetheless, the private character still dominates the tribute. Tony Walter (2009), sociologist of death, highlights the influence of media coverage and virtual tributes on the dying and death of the British celebrity of TV shows Jade Goody<sup>5</sup>. He suggests that death that is communicated via the media may not reflect the real experiences. The media can only portray death in a non-realistic form for the audience. 'The media typically deal in death at a distance, not the deaths audiences in advanced industrial societies are themselves likely to face' (ibid, 2). Richard Johnson (1999), sociologist and technology scientist, suggests grieving for the death of a person you never met includes inauthentic reactions to the loss. Therefore, the experience of dying, such as YouTube videos of Jade Goody, death itself (e.g. 9/11 of the World Trade Centre, or the London Bombings in 2005), and the grieving process (either users-generated video tributes or memorial tributes from media sources and for celebrities that have died) are all absent in the public realm, nonetheless privately experienced.

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<sup>5</sup> Jade Goody was a TV show persona in the UK and internationally. She had entered the TV show Big Brother in England, and later on in India, until her doctor announced her diagnosis of cancer live on the TV show. Ever since, and until her death in 2009, Jade's story was covered largely by the media in the UK.

There is a trend to use memorial video tributes in order to bring the public attention to the private loss and share responses to loss. Communal attention is sought over individuals who have similar experiences and have a similar portrayal of death caused by, for example, cancer or AIDS. The issue with this trend is the victimization of the deceased in the video. 'The cause of death makes the subject of the video tribute a victim, and as a victim she or he is represented as a symbol of problems of a more general, communal concern' (Wahlberg 2009, 220). David Campbell (2004) argues that images never exist in isolation, and so is for videos; tribute videos do not exist in isolation, they are developed and governed in a context that is not private, but has a public affect. When personal grief becomes publicly available, there are risks for its generalization. The audience will connect with the cause of death or the comments of the living, but not necessarily with the deceased.

Most video tributes on YouTube are entitled 'In memory of X,' 'In loving memory of X,' 'Funeral video tribute' or 'One last goodbye for...'. The loss and grief are instantly suggested by the title. The commemoration of a deceased is expected by the audience. The background music that colours the developed content of the tribute video - images and video clips - also manifests within the audiences' approach to the content (Pentaris & Yerosimou 2014). A series of family pictures and short family videos are embedded in one video tribute. These commonly comprise the history of the deceased; his or her story starts from childhood or birth even, and goes forth until the last moments preceding death. This narrative depicts not only the story of an individual, but also the impact that the individual's story has had on the living. Also suggested by Wahlberg (2009) and Mosco (2004) virtual memorials have a dual meaning for the people who are generating them, a sense of place and a sense of community. Both these are depicted in the comments of the video analysed for this study.

## Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methodological techniques were employed for the purposes of this study. The single method used was video content analysis. This method has two main goals; to draw inferences about the text surrounding the video, and to obtain documentary evidence about the message in the video, the sender and the receiver of the message (Hanjalic 2004; Boellstorff et al. 2012).

A single YouTube video – Bridegroom; entitled “It could happen to you” on YouTube – is used in the current analysis. That video has seen large public display (number of views 4,942,536, accessed 7<sup>th</sup> of September, 2014), while its message was transitioned into a documentary film, produced by Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, and later on, a humanistic cause towards advocacy for LGBT<sup>6</sup> rights was initiated by Shane Bitney Crone and supported by Love is Louder (<http://www.loveislouder.com/>). All the above constituted to the reasons for selecting this video for analysis; public acknowledgement of its content and its societal effect for improving the acknowledgement of gay widowerhood. The commentary section of the video was coded into categories and subcategories based on disenfranchised grief, communal place, social supports, and social acceptance. These categories fed back to the analysis of the video, which then was segmented in different sections, according to the appeal of the content, as well as its character. The latter kept the categorisation in the comments area informed and vice versa. In detail, the ten-minute video was broken down to nine segments of one minute each and one of one minute and thirtysix seconds. Each segmented piece of the video was transcribed before analysed the content into the previously formed categories. The video has been analysed without its background music on, as it is suggested that background music results to the emotional reaction to the content of the video (Pentaris & Yerosimou 2014), however watched both in mute and sound.

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<sup>6</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

“One of the specific anxieties which has arisen in relation to use of the internet for social research is indicated by the prominent debate over the ethics of online research” (Hine 2005, 5). Video content analysis is a very unique and multidisciplinary method of research (Buchanan 2004), which however poses ethical issues. Information that is available online does not automatically become subject of research (Hine 2005). Online content analysis poses ethical questions in relation to how the content will be analysed and used (Buchanan 2004). Critical in this process is the avoidance of causing harm to the individuals, who have contributed to the video and its interactive content. To avoid potential harm to the indirect research participants of this study (Wimmer & Dominick 2013) further communication was established with YouTube users who commented on the video.

In relation to how the outcomes of this study may be used ethically, each person uploading a video on YouTube shall first create an account. During the latter process the user is obligated to agree to the terms of use of personal information online and how this information may be used by other users worldwide. The latter constitutes the equivalent of a consent form, and in these terms has the content used for this study been shared online. Therefore, the discourse produced by its usage may as well be used ethically (Hine 2005) for further discussions and research (Buchanan 2004).

The external validity and transferability of this study is limited due to single data use. Nonetheless, this is an internally valid study, which sought to understand the social role of gay widower, and its place in the online society and in relation to the offline community.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Bridegroom and Enfranchised Grief*

Memorial videos on YouTube generate a communal space and create a place for shared feelings, emotions, experiences, condolences, as well as compassion between people from around the world. Adding to Wahlberg's suggestion of the sense of place and the sense of community via YouTube memorial tribute videos, one more is recommended in this article – the sense of belonging - which opposes the dimensions of disenfranchised grief; lack of acknowledgement of the grief and the 'right to grief,' as well as the social isolation of the griever.

Drawing from examples of gay widowers, the recognition of the expression of emotions to a loss is limited as it is commonly related to the levels of recognition of the lost relationship when the deceased was still alive. YouTube video tributes enhance the sense of belonging, especially for all individuals who find it hard to engage with their feelings of loss and the grieving process. As I suggest in my conclusions, online communities offer good grounds for gay grief to be enfranchised. Enfranchised grief is an aftermath of media and communication technologies in association to the possibilities for socially accepted and openly acknowledged grief. In other words, enfranchised grief refers to openly recognized by online communities grief, however not the exact opposite from disenfranchised grief, as the former intersects with distorted social identities as well. Online users have the freedom to choose how they will present themselves and that might not match reality at all times.

The thesis of enfranchised grief is perfectly illustrated with *Bridegroom*; the YouTube video and the later documentary in 2013<sup>7</sup>. However, it is important to look at the social role of a gay widower, the expectations that are set, as well as the importance of the social supports that the griever can find in the society, in order to frame this third sense.

### *Bridegroom*

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<sup>7</sup> The documentary entitled 'Bridegroom' was released in 2013 by Linda Bloodworth-Thomson. The documentary is not subject of analysis in this paper, but merely reference to enhance the thesis. More information on this can be found at <http://bridegroommovie.com/>

The case study of *Bridegroom*, titled 'IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU', is used in order to underline the meaning of the sense of belonging and to highlight its importance to the bereaved. The video depicts a story of two young same-sex partners, told by the one left behind, Shane Bitney Crone (YouTube 2012). Shane begins the video with the song 'Beautiful Boy' by Coleen McMahon in the background by asking an existential question from his viewers 'what if tragedy struck the one you loved?' He introduces himself, then his partner Tom, their life together for six years, Tom's accidental fall from a rooftop and death, and finally the aftermath of his death that concluded in Tom's relatives not allowing Shane to attend his funeral, or being part of the memories created for Tom after his death. According to Shane, a big part of his exclusion from the ceremonies of his partner has been Tom's family that disapproved of their relationship. The video contains messages by Shane, which commemorated their deep love for each other. Additionally, in the video Shane videotapes himself as he is experiencing intense feelings of grief, communicating with the memory of Tom in this unique way. He is doing so on camera as he is not allowed to visit the burial grounds where Tom has rested. The video is not only a commemoration of the deceased partner, and a tribute to a loving six year long relationship, but also a cry-out of the griever to grieve; a call for attention due to lack of opportunity to express his grief, and an attempt to gain strength from social support systems in the community – in this case global e-community – as to reconstruct his reality in good terms.

The video has approximately 4,7 million views and over 95,000 likes (accessed 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014), and attracted over three hundred comments within the first week that it was posted. The comments now exceed 31,500 (accessed 26<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014). The video was followed up by a documentary in 2013, created by the producer Linda Bloodworth-Thomson in the memory of Tom. Viewers have commented on both, the video and the documentary, and embrace Shane's grief and accept the loss of a loved one by raising a place for belonging and a sense of freedom in expressing emotions of loss:

*I just came to read the comments and am overwhelmed at how much positivity this video has received. Usually, any video I watch that supports gay marriage has an outpouring of trolls and cruel comments. It is clear that we are heading closer to love and further from intolerance. Thank you for this inspirational video!* (Comment on *Bridegroom*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM> , accessed 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2014).

*Shane. Hang in there, you have millions of supporters that will always be there for you. I know Tom was your one and only. He still is by your side. We all love you and we will fight along your side to end this inhumanity.* (Comment on *Bridegroom*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM> , accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014).

*I don't know both Shane and Tom personally but it broke my heart after watching this video. So sorry about your loss Shane. I hope you find the strength in you to carry on living your life to the fullest. I'm sure Tom will want you to. What the two of you share is very special and not many people, gay or straight, have that kind of love. Be strong and continue to do what you are doing to promote equality. The community is behind you!* (Comment on *Bridegroom*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM> , accessed 24<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014).

The content above is striking to an open call for social belonging. Shane is reaching out to expressing grief to an audience that can accept it and acknowledge his new identity of being a griever and a widower. Going back to Malin Wahlberg's suggestions about a generalized communal sense of virtual memorials (2009), how Shane was treated after his partner's death, has led to equality and diversity issues, which are also included in the commentary. The personal experience of an individual who has lost a loved one is seen as an international tribute to the right for grief and bereavement<sup>8</sup>. It also allows for death and grief to be distinguished from the concept of sequestered death, described by researchers and theorists in the field of death studies (Cook & Shelagh 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Also watch the documentary 'Bridegroom' released in 2013 by Linda Bloodworth-Thomson.

*The social role of widowhood*

Widowhood is one of the societal roles, which may be associated with elderly, however the latter is not always the case. The death of a significant other, a spouse in particular, leads to an involuntary change of social roles (Baarsen 2001; Howell 2013). Along with grieving, the person who stayed behind also grieves for the loss of his social role and identity of being a spouse and a partner (Martin-Mathews 2011), or in the case of Bridegroom a civil partner. Shane found himself out of a loving and committed relationship with his life partner, into a new reality where his partner is missing, and he is denied any connection to his memorial service, as well as visitation to the burial grounds. The detachment from the loved one has come with unexpected feelings of disapproval by others, which led to the disapproval of the social role of the widower that Shane is employing now and the loss of Tom as a partner.

Gay widowers have to adapt to a different role but with higher challenges than their heterosexual counterparts (Wayment & Kemeny 2004; Fenge & Fannin 2009; Hornjatkevyc & Alderson 2011). The lack of recognition of the previous role they used to have makes it significantly hard for them to shift into a role that should be an extension of the previous one. The gay psychotherapist, Michael Shernoff (1997a), in his book "Gay widowers: life after the life of a partner", argues about the lack of social supports. Losing a spouse is a crisis by itself, but having to prove the relationship first in the socially constructed community in order to have the luxury to prove your new role as a widower has tremendous negative effects on the bereaved individual and connotes an add-up crisis, as well as complicated and disenfranchised grief (Shernoff 1997a; Baarsen 2001; Doka 2002; Bonanno et al. 2005; Lund et al. 2008-2009).

*'I'm just shocked... I really Don't understand why people like Tom's parents act like they did. That's one of the reasons, the fear TO NOT BE ACCEPTED, EVEN BY OUR PARENTS makes us take bad ways.'* (Comment on Bridegroom, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM>, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014).

"Disenfranchisement can occur when a society inhibits grief by establishing 'grieving norms' that deny grief to persons deemed to have insignificant losses, insignificant relationships, or an insignificant capacity to grieve" (Doka 2002, xiii). Not all losses are well recognized by the society, and not all social roles are accepted by the same society (Shernoff 1997a; Doka 2002).

*'I really... I don't know how people do this... I don't know how... I don't know what to say, I really don't think that I can do this anymore... I can't...'* *'I know I have said it a million times, but my life without you [Tom]... it just feels so meaningless'* (Shane's comments in IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM>, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014).

Gay men face a variety of issues when their spouse dies; the major one is the challenge of recognizing their own loss (Doka 2002).

*'I was warned Tom's father and uncle had planned an attack should I show up [to the funeral and burial ceremonies]'* *'I wasn't mentioned in the funeral program or obituary. I was the most important person in Tom's life... and they were trying to erase me from existence'* *'And to the government Tom and I were mere roommates'* *'I had no legal right to any information on Tom's death'* (Shane's comments in IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM>, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014).

The death of a spouse does not necessarily indicate the acceptance of it. Part of a successful acceptance of the given death and loss is the socially recognized loss of the spouse (Lund et al. 2010).

In the contemporary society social roles are constructed in certain ways and particular expectations are held by all members of the society. The socially accepted aspects of the behaviours publicly displayed are by no means the true and honest expressions of the members of the community or society (Balaswamy, Richardson, & Price 2004; Kastenbaum

2007). Gay widowers adapt themselves to specific regulations and norms on how the grieving process should be held and whether there should be a grieving process for the bereaved (Shernoff 1997a; Baarsen 2001). In their work, social scientists Lorraine Green and Victoria Grant (2008) illustrate how and why gay bereaved people may experience disenfranchised grief and what the needs are for further empirical research in this subject area. Gay widowers experience oppressive feelings through their grieving process (Bonanno et al. 2005; Lund et al. 2010), whilst their social role is not established. The importance of recognition of one's role and status lies upon the recognition itself and its determinant positive impact on the griever, psychologically, emotionally, and socially. Shane is commenting in the video 'They were trying to erase me from existence... I just wanted to love him [Tom]' 'I need to fight for what is right... for what I believe in. Maybe that's why this has all happened. To inspire me to want to fight for equality.'

As discussed earlier, due to lack of recognition of the relationship, and to later extent the loss of the spouse, the bereaved individual may find it even harder to accept the fact that he is a widower because the social norms do not allow him to feel this way (Doka 2002). The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1979) explains the necessity for freedom in grieving emotions. She displays the grief cycle but at the same time keeps in mind how important the honest expression of one's feelings is to the grieving process, and in the long run to the person's well-being. Grieving and mourning are both rights for everyone, and as such should be treated with no possible delimitation or denial (Becker 1973; Parkes, Laungani & Young 1997).

#### *The importance of social supports*

As discussed already in this paper, the absence of recognition of the relationship and marriage of the two spouses extends to the cancellation of the new role as a widower, and also increases stressor factors during bereavement (Shernoff 1998; Balaswamy et al. 2004; Wayment & Kemeny 2004). The process of mourning and grieving become non-significant and the bereaved individual gets affected on a psychological level, as he is 'not allowed' to express the feelings that will help him reinstate himself in a more functioning state (Doka 2002). In other words, "...grief is exacerbated by the lack of social recognition of the relationship, of the loss, and of the role of a widower" (Shernoff 1997b, 3). Not much opportunity is offered to gay widowers for overt expression of grief (Shernoff 1997a; 1997b). Of course this is not a universal statement as opportunities differ ethnically, religiously and culturally. Nonetheless, the social norms are affecting the process, but not in the benefit of the gay grievers and mourners. 'Losing a loved one is devastating enough, but to then be rendered legally insignificant only makes the pain worse' writes Shane in his video, and he goes on saying that 'After some time, I finally got to see Tom again. I quietly made my way to Indiana [Tom's burial site]' (Shane's comments in IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR9gyloyOjM>, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014).

Research has shown that covert sexual orientation leads to lack of understanding of the grieving process by other parties (Siegel & Hoefler 1981; Fenge & Fannin 2009; Lund et al. 2010; Hornjatkevyc & Alderson 2011) and that even when sexual orientation is overt others may fail to conceptualize and articulate the relationship and the loss, as well as the meaning that the loss has for the bereaved (Hornjatkevyc & Alderson 2011). Social recognition and social supports are crucial during the grieving period. Numerous studies have underpinned the importance of family systems' and friends' presence in the lives of the bereaved (Shernoff 1997a; Shernoff 1998; Richards, Acree & Folkman 1999; Doka 2002; Balaswamy et al. 2004; Wayment & Kemeny 2004; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter 2005; Breen & O'Connor 2011). Lack of social support may lead the griever into complicated processes and complicated grief (Doka 2002). With media and communication technologies however, individuals have found themselves different forms of social support, if not local and physical. Shane found social support in the online community that watched his video and interacted with its content.

Of course one can argue that online communities promote alienation of social identities. Viewers and users of YouTube memorial video tributes make their own decisions on what identity they will be carrying in that platform; whether that is their real name or merely a nickname (Snickars & Vonderau 2009). It has been supported that unreal social identities online may lead to the illusion of companionship without the demand of friendship (Mosco 2004). On the contrary, the demand of friendship is present when there are social expectations. In this case, Shane is not building on social expectations, but for an audience, which will listen and allow for him to be bereaved.

Social supports are of great importance when someone is going through the process of grieving. Family system, friends, workplace, communities one belongs to, etc. are key sources for someone who is dealing with the loss of a spouse. Lack of acceptance of sexual identity by one's family is the most determinant loss in relation to social supports (Bowlby 1997; Doka 2002).

## **Conclusion**

Communication of death via media and communication technologies knows no boundaries. With a YouTube commemoration, the grieving process is transformed into an online memory, where a global way of grieving is promoted. Death is no longer a private matter but it transforms its meaning and enters a public space where grief takes the stand of a publicly shared experience but in multiple different ways and interpretations.

YouTube memorial video tributes underline all three; sense of place, sense of community and sense of belonging. From the vantage point of disenfranchised grief (Doka 2002; 2008) this paper suggests that grief is actually enfranchised via media and communication technologies; YouTube videos here. The grieving norms, framed by society, are now being influenced by a new technological reality, while bereaved individuals find new ways of adapting to their loss and bereavement. Media and communication technologies, in this case YouTube, provide freedom of choice and opportunity to grievers. This opportunity may offer a supportive environment, within which grief may be expressed freely and the role of a gay widower may be expressed openly. This becomes a supporting community that provides a sense of belonging for the bereaved individual, as well as the loss itself.

Of course one can argue that the aforementioned characteristics of YouTube suggest alienation of social identities. According to Snickars and Vonderau (2009), viewers and users of YouTube memorial video tributes make their own decisions on what identity they will be carrying in that platform; whether that is real and depicts their name, or if they are made-up nicknames. This dimension of video sharing and communication of death in YouTube enhances what Mosco (2004) suggests as the illusion of companionship without the demand of friendship. The descriptive content of the memorial videos is the current example for this, as there are no demands from the people commenting on a video to revisit the site, or recommend or engage to a conversation in posts.

Commemorating death via YouTube promotes experiences of death at a distance, nevertheless the significance of social connection via such communication only enhances the sense of belonging. Gay widowers are highly challenged in their new social role. The loss of a gay spouse or partner is commonly accompanied by feelings of social isolation and lack of acknowledgement of the loss. Video sharing and its interactive content via the YouTube platform fills in the gaps of social belonging that a gay widower may be experiencing in the offline community. It provides opportunities for developing a supportive network that will most likely ease feelings of isolation and abandonment.

Online communities create support systems and enhance the quality of the experiences of a gay widower. However, further studies to identify the density of social relationships developed via YouTube interactions, as well as cultural differences in relation to the degree of disenfranchised or enfranchised grief in the offline and online communities respectively, should result in a greater understanding of enfranchised grief via YouTube and online communities.

### Biographical note

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