



Review Article

Adapting to change: A review of social perceptions, expectations and adjustment among widows

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Abstract

Widowhood is an irreplaceable phase of human life. Widows face many difficulties in their lives. They had to battle against life for an identity and a comfortable life, and they had to adjust to their new life and sacrifice many things. Widows felt that society was against them in many aspects. Studies explain that widows had adjustment issues after the death of their spouse. For each community, the impact of widowhood is different. The current study is essentially a review article that includes 17 open-access studies, employing a basic review process. The studies have been summarized and critically evaluated in the relevant sections of the study. The purpose of this article is to understand the factors and conditions associated with widows. The challenges and recommendations are also mentioned in the relevant sections of the article. The study also discusses the social perceptions, expectations, and adjustment issues faced by widows, which constitute the main aim of the research intended by the authors.

Introduction

Widowhood is the marital status that a woman gains once his or her spouse has died.^[1] It causes many significant implications on the social and psychological well-being of an individual. It has

numerous important effects on a person's social and psychological welfare. Widowhood and bereavement are two distinct terms with distinct meanings. Bereavement can be defined as the circumstances or mental condition that results from experiencing the death of a loved one, in this case, a spouse.^[1] While widowhood lasts longer than bereavement, the former is only temporary. Being a widow can be a very wearisome time in life, with various psychological and social challenges.

The late Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) noted that psychological problems might result from the loss of a loved one. He coined the term "grief work" in his key paper, *Mourning and Melancholia*, published in 1917, and noted that the loss of a loved one could occasionally lead to melancholy and that there is significant psychological work to

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be done to lessen the consequences of grief. In 1973, Lopata released a paper titled "Widowhood in an American City", which details the experiences of older widowed women in Chicago, Illinois, and explains both the psychological effects and the social repercussions of losing their husband.

Social perception

Social perception is the process through which we seek to understand other people.^[2] Every person strives to comprehend society and individuals from their point of view. "Social perception is the first step in determining someone else's intentions and psychological makeup by analyzing their gaze patterns, bodily movements, and other kinds of biological motions".^[3] In widows, social views strengthen and amplify their intra personal feeling of stigma. Guilt and self-blame soon follow, and they are heightened by overt and covert blaming by society. The survivor isolates themselves and avoids social interaction out of self-protection.^[4] According to the study, widows frequently hold a pejorative opinion of society and hold themselves responsible for their spouse's passing. Through analyzing widows' perceptions of environmental support during the bereavement crisis, it was attempted to uncover elements linked to the unfavorable resolution of the crisis.^[5] He conducted the study utilizing 132 widows who have been grieving for 13 months. They discovered that healthy interpersonal connections are more sustaining than unhealthy ones. Considering this negative consequence, the widow concluded that she had unmet needs and required external motivation.

Expectations

Expectations are individualized ideas about potential future events. Expectations are created by combining people's experiences and information. Widows are frequently required to exhibit purity and fidelity to their husband's memory. Widows anticipate leading respectable lives in society. Additionally, they anticipate help from friends and family. A narrative about widows and unmarried women is included in an article that Sarah Lamb created. Many of the widows she spoke with emphasized the value of employment and opportunities. Many of them experienced disparities in access to opportunities and resources. She provided a clear explanation: "relatively few

single women whose stories I heard, told of seeking value, identity, and place not through either marriage or children but through work and independence, though not living in or being dependent on any other person's household—thereby resisting the idea that marriage and household are the only possible meaningful identities for women". This makes it apparent that widows demand respect and unwavering support. Widows who seek employment encounter numerous challenges because they have likely been out of the workforce for some time, which means their marketable skills may be rusty, outdated, or absent. Employment seems to be related to a successful adjustment to widowhood.^[6]

Adjustment

"Adjustment is a process by which living organism maintains a balance between its needs and circumstances that inference the satisfaction of these needs".^[7] A person and their interactions with the environment are both involved in adjustment. Each human being has some wants that their environment must meet. If the environment can meet those demands, the individual will adapt and then further adapt to the environment. A study was conducted on widows to examine bereavement-related emotions, support networks, economic position, and alterations in the structure of families and social networks. The research indicates that indifference and loneliness are two key issues widows deal with.^[8] They have a severe financial and emotional dilemma. Even though they receive assistance from their families and friends, the connection with the husbands' family has drastically changed. From many calls to no contact, it changed. One study which focus on the connection between depression and widowhood added to our understanding of the traits and occurrences of depression that influence adjustment.^[9]

Theoretical perspective

Bereavement theory

"According to traditional bereavement theory, adjustment following a major loss is facilitated by coping resources, such as emotional stability or instrumental support, or by working through the loss. It is interesting that following the loss of their spouse, the depressed-improved respondents

showed considerable evidence of resilience despite an absence of coping resources and despite showing little indication of working through the loss”.^[10]

Dual process model of bereavement

To understand how people, adjust to bereavement, Stroe be and Henk Schut created a conceptual model in 1999. This model was initially created with widowhood in mind. A description of the Dual Process Model (DPM) of coping with grief: Loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented coping are two different types of coping mechanisms”.^[11]

Need and significant

By losing of spouse, the widows face many physical, mental and social difficulties. Widows must fight against these obstacles to gain their identity, independence, financial stability, affection and respect from society. If the family, friends and society get to know about the perspective of widows, then it can create a drastic change in the life of widows.

Method

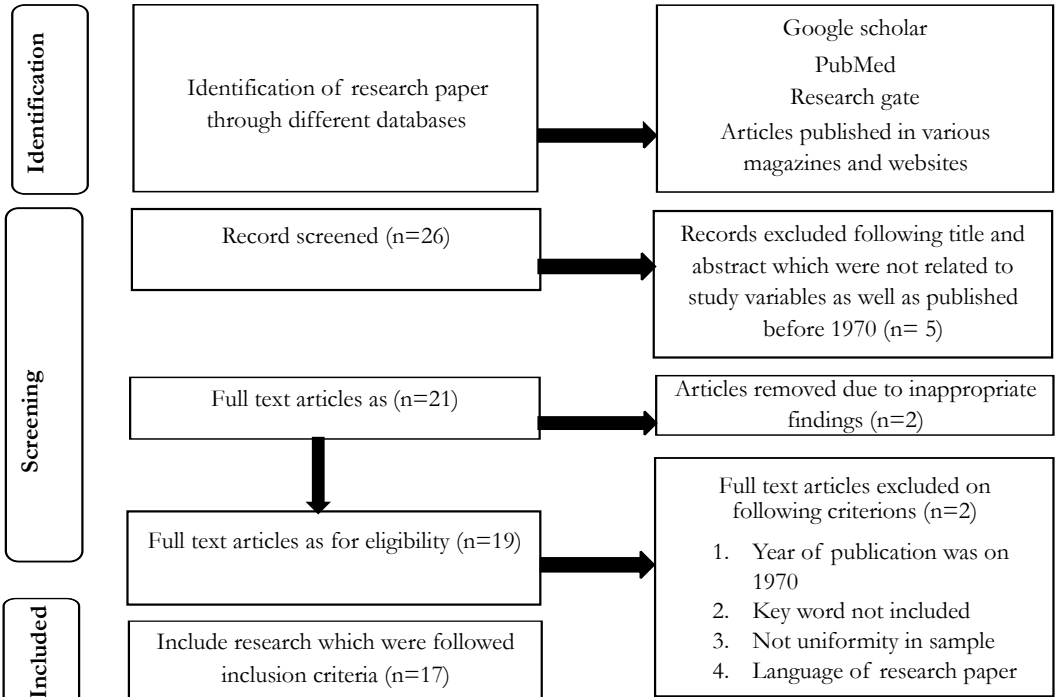
Search strategies

Researcher searched authorised journals, articles and papers using Google Scholar and Research Gate Pub Med by searching keywords such as social perception of widow, adjustment of widow and expectation of widows. The review was done by systematically analysing the journals, articles, and research papers.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria: The research paper in this study included only those which focused on widowhood and their different socio-cultural factors. This only paper or article included in the present study is in English language, and both review papers as well as empirical papers are included for better understanding and research papers included only those published in the year between 1970 to 2019. **Exclusion criteria:** Research papers excluded which were not available in the English language and which were published before 1970. Apart from this researcher also excluded which not fulfil the criteria of keywords in reference to the present study.

Figure 1: Record Identifying Through Data Base Searching (N= 26)



Review of literature

Findings from the previous researches indicated that suicide survivors obtained higher scores in some areas, and non-suicide survivors scored high in other areas. Non-suicide survivors experienced worse physical health and were more worried, anxious, distressed and obsessive-compulsive. They also showed more emotions of personal inadequacy and inferiority and performed less adequately in the position of parent.

In addition to having greater physical symptoms and performing less adequately in the social-leisure role, suicide survivors also reported higher levels of concern, remorse, and animosity towards their partners and/or children. Eight survivors of suicide and ten survivors of non-suicide out of the 40 individuals were classified as having an unsatisfactory overall adjustment, or 18 (45%) of the subjects. Demi concluded that there are 3 factors which determine the adjustment to widowhood. Those are 1) suspecting the spouse's death, 2) role changes, and 3) ambivalence. The widows who believed their spouse might pass away, underwent fewer role changes, and acknowledged and communicated their ambivalence towards their spouse demonstrated the most satisfied adjustment.^[4]

Another study was conducted to explore the mortality rate in both men and women. Even after adjusting for several demographic, socioeconomic, and behavioral factors, the mortality rates based on person-years at risk were substantially higher for males who were bereaved than for those who were married, but they were roughly the same for widowed and married females. The mortality rates of bereaved men who remarried were much lower than those of those who did not, but there was no discernible difference between widowed women who did and did not remarry. The result shows that living alone was linked to higher mortality than sharing a home with someone else, according to multiple regression analysis, which also revealed that moving into a nursing home or other chronic care facility was associated with higher mortality than any other residential change or staying the same for both sexes and independently of other factors.^[12]

Another study discussed several elements and difficulties faced by widows in their work, such as

the grieving process, health issues related to widowhood, economic issues, indicators of successful widowhood adaptation, overcoming loneliness as a developmental issue, and helping the widow. Based on multiple studies it's clear that widows face financial problems. Widows try to adjust to their financial difficulty by seeking employment. Studies show that widows failed to keep their former standard of living after the death of their husbands. Employment appears to be correlated with a good adjustment to widowhood; nevertheless, widows who seek employment confront numerous challenges because of their long absence from the workforce, which may have left their marketable skills rusty, out of date, or absent. Some of the workplaces took advantage of the situation. The first six months after a loss, they had the largest excess over anticipated age-specific mortality rates. Depression and post-traumatic stress disorder are found too great in widows. Schizophrenic patients in hospitals are more frequently widowed than married. This developmental process's first phase is characterized by a sense of shock or perplexity in which the freshly bereaved person feels numb and may not accept that their spouse has passed away. During this time, which typically lasts from one day to two months, restlessness and aimless activity may alternate with dulled stupor. The amount of effect increases significantly at the conclusion of this phase. The widows try to overcome the loneliness caused by the death of their spouse. Service initiatives are required to aid widows in their transitions to new lifestyles and, most importantly, in the development of practical abilities.^[13]

Studies conducted on "Social Support and Adaptation to Widowhood" suggest that social support can regulate the adjustment of widows in the phase. Various types of support have been examined in these two groups. Overall, well-being and psychological well-being are analyzed. For analyzing overall well-being in the crisis-loss phase group, they used emotional support, and in the transition-phase group, they used intimacy support, contact support and emotional support. For analyzing psychological well-being in the crisis-loss phase group, parental support and widowed-friends' support were used, while in the transition-phase group widowed-friends'support, neighbors' support, parental support, children's support and married-friends' support are used. The result shows

that recent widows generally receive far less support from their network contacts than widows in the transition widows. Crisis-loss-phase widows tend to withdraw psychologically from people, especially those who might make them face the truth of their situation. As a result, it is less surprising that the intensely grieving widow does not communicate meaningfully with her children, and as a result, the children's support is ineffective. Support from family members in general, and children in particular, may become troublesome as the widow moves through the transition phase and seeks to build a new independent life for herself. It is necessary to offer the bereaved the proper support, encouraging healthy psychological adjustments to widowhood.^[14]

Further, one study explored that widowhood appears to be a more emotionally upsetting situation for males than for women. In widowhood, women and men experience various losses and stresses. One of the main advantages of marriage for women is financial stability, and financial stress appears to be the main cause of vulnerability for women after widowhood. For men, the primary advantages of marriage may include improved social connections and having someone to handle home duties. Strains related to household management appear to be the more important mechanisms. According to the 'findings', widowed women are less likely than their counterparts who have never been widowed to lack a confidant and, if they are fortunate enough to possess one, to derive less positive emotional effects from it. Men and women may experience distinct strains from widowhood, and gender differences may develop in these strains' emotional impact.^[15]

Research titled "Being a Widow and Other Life Stories: The Interplay between Lives and Words" this article examines life stories as creative actions of self and culture-making rather than merely as narratives about the past. It examines the life narratives of elderly women in West Bengal, India, with a particular emphasis on that of a childless widow. The life stories of widows and older women in West Bengal are fascinating not only for what they reveal about the lives of women in India but also because they serve as a way to reflect on the relationship between life and language, the methods by which women construct and represent their lives through life stories, and the importance

of their telling. By describing the experiences of widows, the writer shows the difficulty that the widows face. Widows had to give up on all the pleasures life had till the death of their husbands. She was not allowed to get remarried, she had to follow a strict vegetarian diet, she could only eat rice once a day, and she had to give up most jewellery and other types of decoration. She kept up her own cooking and sleeping arrangements while still residing in her marital house after her spouse passed away. The author included a number of stories of widows to transform the lives of widows in society and for a great change in attitude towards them.^[15]

Studies which used cross-sectional analysis, found that marriage was linked to a better health profile than widowhood. Although results were less consistent for health behaviors, this similar pattern was typically apparent for fruit and vegetable consumption, smoking, and, to a lesser extent, physical activity. Married women generally had better physical and mental health than women who were widowed. Women who had recently become widows (bereaved within the last year) reported significantly greater rates of depression and worse social functioning, general mental health, physical functioning, and general health than widows who had been widowed for longer periods. The result given that this appears to be a period of elevated risk for negative mental health outcomes, these findings do not eliminate the need for programs and interventions that support women who are grieving the loss of a spouse by strengthening their social and emotional support networks. In addition, women who struggle with this transition may be particularly vulnerable to long-term negative effects on their physical and emotional health.^[16]

Another study examined the capacity to recover from the grief and maladjustment of widows. The result of the study is turning out like half of the participants (45.9% of the sample) show stable low depression. They showed adjustment to the loss rather than the defensive denial. They had been married for an average 44 years and got comfort from the positive and nice memories from the decade. The finding says that the participants were not strongly connected. However, during the first six months of bereavement, the majority of individuals felt emotional pain and longing. A subset of respondents had recovered from

depression; these individuals were either in an unhappy marriage or had a spouse who had previously suffered from a medical condition. This group of people is termed as a depression-improved group. This group shows occasional grief symptoms. They were coping with the situation successfully, and they did not need any clinical support. The final group is known as chronic grief group. These participants show the symptoms of depression in their life. They become stressed following the loss of their spouse. They face emotional difficulty because of the death of a healthy spouse with whom they were having a healthy relationship. The other group participant showed a successful adjustment throughout the 6 and 18 months of bereavement. Nevertheless, this group were searching for the meaning of life. 10% of participants improved their mental health after the loss of a spouse. The study concludes that individuals adapt and manage life through their coping systems.^[19]

Another article outlines some of the abusive behaviors that widows experience and explores some of the potential causes of these behaviors. The article covered many geographical, religious and local practices which widows must face throughout their whole lives. It described Indian views on widows and the widowhood of different cultures. By this study it's clear that widows got abused in their life and they had to struggle to live. Some of the major harassment and abuses are like how aggressively it is done; shaving or cutting the hair often results in injuries on the scalp. Rags or rough clothing is put on instead of the widow's clothing and jewellery that she wore while her husband was still alive. As an alternative, the widow might be forced to spend weeks in filthy, unwashed clothes, be confined to one room, get little to no food, and, in some circumstances, even be forced to drink the water used to clean her husband's corpse. She turns into a target of group rejection since she is perceived as dirty, contaminating, hazardous, and a bringer of bad luck. Widows are deprived of their liberty, the resources to lead fulfilling lives, and the chance to contribute to the social and economic advancement of their families and communities. In many societies, widowhood-related practices are still tolerated, many of which force widows into lives of great poverty and marginalization, and their children into lives of unrelenting labor and misery. Some of these

practices are life-threatening and mentally damaging. These customs include cruel funeral rites, robbing widows of their inheritance rights, denying them custody of their children, ownership of land, livestock, or other material things, as well as financial abuse. Widowers do not experience these types of practices.^[18]

Another study explored 11 studies in total to understand the psychological disorders in widows. They compared the commonness of the mental disorder of widowed women with non-widowed women. They studied to which extent the widows feel these psychological problems and symptoms.^[19] From the 11 studies, 4 of them examined the presence of two mental disorders in the widows. In these investigations, 3481 widowed people and 4685 non-widowed controls were compared to determine the incidence or prevalence of major depressive disorder and anxiety disorders. 8 studies were discussed about Major Depressive Symptoms in the widows. Out of the 1051 widows, 184 widowed individuals (17.5%). Five distinct studies with a total sample size of 772 widowed people looked at the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). 91 widowed people (11.8%) were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and like MDD, PTSD prevalence decreased over time.^[20]

Findings of one study show that close relatives respond to the surviving spouses' growing demand. Children may be crucial in helping widowed people deal with acute stress at six months. However, older widower parents may not require as much assistance from children in the future as they did in the beginning. During the widowhood, widows need active support from the society and livelihood. Thus, practitioners may be able to lessen some of the burden felt by close family members and foster positive and supportive connections between ageing parents and adult children by providing support for the financial as well as housing repercussions of widowhood.^[20]

Particularly over time, only a small percentage of widowed adults meet the requirements for clinical depression. Even though they may miss their spouse and feel sad, widowed people move on with their new lives and find fulfilment. People who have been widowed also suffer societal repercussions. Widowed women discuss changes

in friendships frequently. They claim that their married friends have abandoned them or avoided them, leading them to seek out other widowed ladies for friendship. Men and women alike—including the widowed—believe that men experience poorer outcomes after becoming a widow than women. Women face identity struggles more than male widowers. Social support influences the coping of stress during widowhood.^[1]

In one of the studies researcher explained how society treats widows and the gender differences in widowhood. They conducted and analyzed four focus-group discussions, seven in-depth interviews, four interactive activities, and 32 widowed and divorced women, as well as 25 other community members in Oromiya, Ethiopia, to comprehend the experiences and difficulties faced by such women. Findings show that women were subjected to significant levels of sexual stigma in the society. Participants' anxiety about social stigma and the measures they took to avoid it further marginalized them in their community, had a detrimental effect on their social, economic, and health support networks, and ultimately had a negative influence on their overall well-being. Women's sexuality got new importance and was depicted as uncontrollable, unpredictable, and so threatening to the community when they divorced or became widowed. In summary, it was believed that the sexuality of widowed and divorced women needed to be regulated or restricted^[21].

The study was conducted on the topic "Marital status, widowhood duration, and gender and health outcomes: a cross-sectional study among older adults in India". The result shows that women who were widowed as opposed to married had lower health outcomes. While males who were widowed within 0 to 4 years were more likely to develop diabetes than married men, widowhood, in general, was not linked to any outcomes for men other than cognitive capacity. In addition, "compared to married women, women who had been widowed lately or for a long time were more likely to experience psychological distress, poorer self-rated health, and hypertension. However, women who had been bereaved for 5 to 9 years were not. Widowhood has the potential to have a detrimental effect on health, gender, the length of widowhood, and the nature of the outcome are all important factors to consider".^[22]

They were finding from other studies which focused on widow's perception of their marital relationship characterised by widows who spoke of their marriages with words like intimacy, respect, trust, open communication, admiration, friendship, compromise, fidelity, and love. The widows who described their marriages as being marked by dishonesty, infidelity, harshness, and dominance were the ones who defined the second sub-theme. The same women reported having persistent emotions of anxiety, control, embarrassment, shame, and impotence, as well as a decline in self-esteem, a rise in social isolation, and unrelenting criticism. This study qualitatively demonstrates that widows' perceptions of their past marriages are a significant factor influencing their day-to-day jobs in the first six months after their spouses' deaths. The findings imply that one factor influencing the widow's restoration-focused daily tasks is their marital connection. The transferable links between the meaning of jobs and the meaning of life are supported by this finding.^[22]

A study conducted on "The Association between Widowhood and Cognitive Function among Chinese Elderly Peoples". They studied the connection between widowhood and cognitive function, conducted a longitudinal study to evaluate the relationship between widowhood and cognitive performance, and further investigated the impact of widowhood duration and gender differences in this relationship. The gender-specific results showed that the connection between widowhood and cognitive function was only statistically significant in men and was stronger in men than in women. The study's most significant and unexpected conclusion was that the length of a widow's widowhood did matter in the association between widowhood and cognitive performance. The lengthier duration of widowhood may cause a clear reduction in cognitive function, and the rates of cognitive decline vary depending on gender. Men experienced cognitive decline in the early stages after spouse bereavement, whereas women did not. Men were more likely to struggle with issues such as not being able to do housekeeping, not having enough careers, and having depression symptoms that could interfere with their cognitive performance.^[23]

Conclusion

Widows' social perception, expectation and

adjustment have been observed by reviewing the research. It has been researched how widows view society and what they anticipate from it. Additionally, look at how they are adjusting to becoming widows. Six articles explored the social perception of widows in this manner. According to that research, widows only receive a modest amount of social support, and society does not view them as survivors. According to a study on widows' rights, widows have encountered abuse from society. Widows experience difficulties in both the workplace and in society. Recent widows receive less support from society than older widows, according to a study's findings. The gloomy aspect of society that a widow experienced was described in the life stories of widows. The expectation of widows to live a life with an identity was discussed in three studies.

They currently have financial hardship; therefore, they look for work to help them survive at this difficult moment. Widows anticipate favorable social treatment and financial security. The majority of studies indicate that widows experienced adjustment issues. According to studies, widows experience physical and psychological issues when their spouse passes away. According to a study, widows experience financial difficulties, while widowers struggle with household chores. The effects of widowhood on a person's physical and mental health. Widows endure changes in their social relationships, as noted in the book "Encyclopedia of the Life and Human Development". The transition into widowhood is difficult for the widowed mother as well. The conclusion drawn from the context is that widows experience difficulties in their day-to-day lives as well as health, physical, mental, and social issues. Recent research on widowhood and other aspects of widowhood, such as a spouse's chronic illness, social standing, level of education, etc., have not been conducted. Less evidence supports the study carried out in India. More research on this subject is necessary, including community, society, and cultural variations. In order to raise society's awareness of widows' needs and provide more programs for their welfare, we must help widows.

Future recommendations

While conducting researcher author found that evidence for widow parenting is not available in many studies as well as this area of research need more studies in area of employment difficulties

facing by women as well as what are the different coping mechanism widow women use that is also should be a research interest for further studies. Studies of this area is not universal in nature means not from every corner of the world is doing research in this area which also pave a way for further research to look after this.

Limitations

Researcher found that while conducting research and reviewing research paper author found that most number of studies conducted on similar types of sample and not much research available on variable like social perception and expectation and along with this researches in Indian sample is very less so these type of finding further suggest to take these area or domain of research to explore by researcher.

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