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IMPACT OF WIDOWHOOD CULTURAL PRACTICES AND LOCUS OF CONTROL ON PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT OF WIDOWS IN ANAMBRA, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of widowhood cultural practices on perceived social support of widows. 185 widows purposively drawn from 16 Local Government Area in Anambra State participated in the study, with ages ranging from 26-90 years. Data collection was through the aid of a questionnaire consisting of widowhood cultural practices scale, the locus of control scale and perceived social support scale. Result indicated that widowhood cultural practices have significant effect on the perception of social support of widows; widows who experienced lenient form of widowhood practice have more positive perception of social support than those who experienced harsh form of practice. It was also found that widows with internal locus of control have more positive perception of social support than those with external locus of control. The length of widowhood and age of widows were also found to affect perception of social support by widows. Thus, it is suggested that a cultural reorientation that enhances acceptance of widows should be encouraged. This would reduce the prevalence of practices that dehumanize widows and reduce them to psychological wrecks. Also, assertiveness training and other psychological buffers should be made available to boost the self-esteem of widows and make them relatively psychologically independent.

KEYWORDS *Widowhood; cultural practices; social support; locus of control*

Introduction

"My husband died on his way to Lagos from Onitsha in a fatal motor accident. The news of his death got to his relations first. They came in the evening that same day and took me home without telling me why. It was when we got to our home town that they told me my husband

was dead. I had only one clothe with me. My children were small and I had no access to them. From that day till the day he was buried I had no access to water, chewing stick etc and I ate once daily. I was stinking and dirty all over. I was made to perform all manner of rites including taking an oath at a shrine to prove I did not kill my husband. It was a devastating experience for me. By the time I went back to Onitsha, they had taken away all our belongings including our family car". (Anonymous).

"I lost my husband 10 years ago. He was a great trader. We loved each other even though he had a second wife. He died of typhoid fever. I was asked by Umuada (daughters of the kindred) to remove my dress except the wrapper. My plaited hair was loosened out immediately. I had to sit with the corpse till the following day when the corpse was buried. I was then confined to the kitchen and had to wail at cockcrow every morning and late in the evening. Throughout the period of confinement I had no access to water for bathing. After 30 market days, I was led by a group of umuada precisely at 3 am in the morning, holding a knife to the village stream where I bathed and was led back immediately. This first stage meant that I could come out to the sitting room. I was barred from going to any public function including market for a period of one year during which the final cleansing was done". (Anonymous).

The experiences narrated above are typical of treatments meted out to women who lost their husbands in most African societies. From time immemorial violence against women have been a phenomenon that is almost regarded as a norm in most societies, the paternalistic nature of the world we live in represses women and torture them psychologically and physically. There exist harmful cultural practices that sort of dehumanize women and reduce them to second class citizens. In some cultures, African in particular, women are considered as properties acquired by men, they can be seen but not be heard.

One of the cultural practices that violate the right and personal dignity of women in the African cultures is widowhood practice. Cavallo and Warner (2002) define widowhood as the phase of marriage following the death of one of the partners. More contemporary definitions however, want to consider as widows only people who do not remarry at the death of their partners. Irrespective of definitions, the state of widowhood can be considered

as one of personal loss, encompassing everything from the immediate psychological impact of the loss of a partner to the material deprivation of an income, a home, or of unpaid contributions to the domestic economy.

It is worthy of note that the experience of widowhood is deeply gendered, it is a condition shared by both men and women, but differences in experiences along gender line has made it more of women's problem. This is because widowers are more likely than widows to remarry and remarry faster, with a corresponding shorter period of being widowed; their numerical presence in the society seems insignificant to be considered a problem. In the words of Cavallo and Warner (2002), the loss of a wife rarely altered a man's status, while the loss of a husband invariably and irrevocably brought about a change in a woman's life. This reflects the patriarchal nature of the society we live in: heavily tilted against women.

The focus of this paper is on the woman as a widow. Research has shown that 86% of widows are women, half of all marriages end with the death of the husband and only one-fifth end with the death of the wife, and also, about 14% of widowed men remarry, while only 5% of widowed women do so (Matthews, 1991).

Widowhood, though a predictable life event still has devastating impact on the lives of people when it occurs. The death of a spouse can be one of the most stressful of role transitions. Reactions to bereavement can be diverse both in onset, intensity and duration. Emotional reactions may include sorrows, misery, emptiness, loneliness, denial, and loss of appetite.

The cultural view of widowhood in Africa is to say the least derogatory to women, the treatments meted out to women on the loss of their husbands leave much to be desired. There may be slight differences in the treatments from one area to the other, but the underlying assumptions are quite similar.

For instance, among the Igbo people of Anambra in Eastern Nigeria, widowhood cultural practice include amongst the following:

Confinement: The widow is not allowed to fetch water, cook, and go to market or social gathering. This may last up to a year, thereby forcing the widow to depend on others.

Defacement: This includes scrapping of hair with razor blade to make the woman unattractive.

Disinheritance: This denies the wife the right to inherit or own property. In-laws force the widows out of her home, leaving her with no means of support for her and her children.

Mourning Period: The widow is forced to wear black or white and made to go through routine crying.

Ritual Cleansing: This is done to sever the link between the living and the dead

Dethronement: A widow is made to sit on the bare floor or mat signifying an apparent fall in status.

Ostracism: The widow is seen as defiled and capable of defiling others, as a result she may not be allowed to touch or receive hand shake, and in some cases her hands are padded.

Oath Taking: The assumption here is that a woman is culpable in her husband's death, so to prove her innocence she has to take an Oath.

Naturally, when people pass through negative and harrowing experience like widowhood they require a lot of social supports from those around them and the network they have formed over the years to enhance effective coping and management of the situation. Research has shown people who lack effective social support find it difficult coping and adjusting in widowhood.

Social support is the hallmark of the African culture, everybody is expected to be his brother's keeper and as such offer psychological buffer in times of need. With the loss of a spouse, it is expected that the social network of the widow will spring into action to cushion the impact of the loss by offering love, support and much needed practical help and advice. And these tend to give comfort and reassurance. Social support expected in widowhood is seen in four categories: emotional aid, material aid, information and companionship.

But how do widows perceive these supports? The cultural practices eroding the dignity and self-esteem of widows can be counter productive in this wise. A widow that is confined, dethroned and

disinherited may not see any support around her. Thus, the perception of social support by widows may be a function of widows' personality and other demographic considerations. The big question then is how far did widowhood enable a widow to assert her own identity and chart her own waters in life, and how far were these choices constrained by the society in which she lives?

Methods

Research Design: This is a survey research that adopted the ex-post facto research design. None of the variables were actively manipulated in the cause of the study. The dependent variable is perceived social support while the independent variables are widowhood cultural practices and locus of control.

Participants: 185 widows purposively drawn from 16 local government areas of Anambra State using the snowball sampling technique participated in the study. Age range of participants was between 26 and 90 years with a mean age of 49.8. On years of widowhood, 124 widows (67%) were between 1-10 years of widowhood, 14% between 11-20 years while 19% were over 20 years. 37.8% had only up to primary education, 31.9% had up to secondary education while 30.3% had above secondary education.

Instrument: Data collection in this study was through the use of a structured questionnaire containing three scales and a demographic section. The first scale is the widowhood cultural practices scale developed by Anikwenwa (2004), it is a 10-item scale structured in Likert format with a coefficient alpha of 0.77.

The second scale is an 8-item social support measure adapted from Broadhead and Gehlbach (1988) Duke-UNC functional social support scale, it has a reliability coefficient of 0.67. The third scale is Rotter (1966) locus of control scale, a 16-item scale that yielded reliability coefficient of 0.40 on revalidation.

Statistical Analysis: Generated data was analyzed using the One-ANOVA and t-test for independent means.

Results

The table 1 indicates that widows who experienced lenient form of widowhood cultural practice have significant positive perception of social support than those with harsh experience, $t = 1.65$, $df = 162$; $P < .05$.

Table 1: Summary table of independent t-test showing the strength of widowhood practices on perception of social support

Widowhood Practices	N	X	SD	df	t	P
Lenient	79	8.28	1.63	162	1.65	<.05
Harsh	106	7.86	1.61			

Table 2 shows that widows with internal locus of control will have significant positive perception of social support than those with external locus of control, $t = 1.01$, $df = 177$; $P < .05$.

Table 2: Summary table of t-test showing effect of locus of control on perceived social support

Locus of control	N	X	SD	df	t	P
Internal	86	8.17	1.60	177	1.01	<.05
External	93	7.92	1.71			

Pearson correlation shows a significant positive relationship between length of widowhood and perceived social support, $r = .128$, $df = 173$; $P < .05$ (Table 3).

Table 3: Pearson r correlation showing the relationship between length of widowhood and perceived social support

Length of widowhood	df(n-1)	N	r	p
	173	174	.128	<.05

The result in table 4 shows that education does not have a significant effect on perceived social support $F(4) = .445$; $P > .05$.

Table 4: Summary table of one-way ANOVA showing effect of level of education on perceived support

	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	P
Between groups	4.987	4	1.247	.455	>.05
Within groups	482.660	176	2.742		
Total	487.646	180			

Discussion

This study found that widowhood cultural practices have significant effect on widows' perception of social support they receive, in other words, what widows see as support and help coming from significant others and acquaintances is a function of the intensity and severity of widowhood rites and practices. Widows who experienced very severe and dehumanizing forms of rites tend to see those around them as hostile and unconcerned; this is in line with the findings of Nwoga (1989) that widowhood rites affect the relationship between widows and people around them. This finding also found support from the two different experiences narrated at the beginning of this write-up, in the first narrative a woman lost her husband; the breadwinner of the family in an automobile accident and the news was deliberately kept from her for over 48 hours after which she was treated as a prime suspect in the death of the husband and consequently forced to take an oath to prove her innocence. Naturally, the woman is not likely to perceive her husband's people as supportive in anyway neither would she positively evaluate the cultural practice that has subjected her to such humiliation.

The death of a husband dramatically alters a woman's status and leaves her at the mercy of the relations who are customarily "empowered" to take decisions concerning her and the properties left behind by the deceased not minding the welfare of the wife and the children. Cavallo and Warner (2002) say that this change in status and the attendant harsh widowhood practices usually affect negatively the relationship between the woman and her late husband's relations. On the whole, it is obvious that widows who experienced considerably less severe/lenient widowhood rites see people around them as supportive and kind.

Locus of control was also found to have significant effect on perceived social support, widows with internal locus of control show significant positive perception of social support than widows with external locus of control. This indicates that personality dynamics of individuals can moderate their perception and reactions to phenomena. Using attribution theory to understand this, internals strongly believe that they personally have control over whatever happens to them in life, they can influence their environment and adapt to situations with less stress unlike externals that see themselves as victims of the environment with little or no control over whatever comes their way. These differences in perceptions

owing to personality dynamics was supported by Arbuckle and Vries (1995).

Length of widowhood is found to be related to widows' perception of social support; those widowed for longer number of years would have adjusted to the situation and thus begin to appreciate efforts of relatives and acquaintances. The recently widowed on the other hand, may still be manifesting symptoms of depression, shock and denial which may not allow them to have positive perception of social support at first.

According to this study, level of education does not affect perceived social support of widows, whether or not a widow is educated will have nothing to do with how she perceives help from her social support network. This finding is contrary to the submission of Okoye (1998) which says that educational status has influence on coping in adverse situations.

Conclusion

Widowhood is obviously a universal phenomenon, but the meanings, myths and functions associated to it are culturally different. Against the new world order of globalization and human rights concept, widowhood in Africa can be described as a dehumanizing, humiliating and almost barbaric experience. However, calling for total cancellation of the practice may not be the most effective option since every societal institution has its own positive functions no matter how little, it is thus suggested that:

1. Governments and non governmental organizations will embark on massive socio-cultural reorientation programmes that will enhance positive treatment of widows and reduce the prevalence of practices that dehumanize widows and reduce them to psychological wrecks.
2. Assertiveness training and other psychological buffers should be made available to boost the self-esteem of widows and make them relatively psychologically independent, thereby equipping them to cope better with the loss of their spouses.

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