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# COPING WITH WIDOWHOOD OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCE: THE CASES OF SELECTED WIDOWS IN BENIN CITY, EDO STATE, NIGERIA

**MONDAY ABIOLA**
monday.abiola@uniben.edu +2348103630521

**&**
**MICHAEL NDISIKA**
**Department of Sociology and Anthropology,**
**University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria**
ndismike2000@gmail.com +2348036578365

**Abstract**

*Widowhood is best described as a nightmare for widows. As a result, the many patterns and ways that widows have used to cope with their experiences with widowhood must be examined in order to comprehend the problem of widows and devise a realistic support system for them. This study therefore aimed to evaluate the coping mechanisms of selected widows in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria. The research design adopted for this study was the one-shot cross-sectional research design. The sampling technique for the collection of the qualitative data needed for this study was guided by the purposive sampling design, and the snowballing sampling technique, and the analysis of the qualitative data collected was analyzed with manual content analysis technique. It was found that some were coping well because they were prepared for widowhood, and for some others they were coping well because of the availability of resources that their husbands left behind, or their personal resources. Widows who were finding it difficult to cope were mainly surviving either on meager income, or/and with alms they receive from relatives and friends. Furthermore, some others had resorted to spiritual succour by having faith in God, the greater provider. The major need of widows is the ability for them to have resources necessary for the provision of good housing, relatively adequate feeding, and education for their children. Widows should be motivated to form cooperative societies that will function as platforms for economic skill acquisition, obtaining commodities at cheaper rates, and for securing soft loans meeting their business demands and the educational needs of their children.*

**Keywords: Widow, Widowhood, Culture, Coping Strategy, Benin City.**

## Introduction

In Nigeria, widowhood is viewed not only as a state of existence, but also as a social institution (Ezejiofor, 2011). Normally, one would define widowhood as "the state or condition of being a widow, or, rarely, of being a widower" (Webster's Dictionary cited in Ezejiofor, 2011), but when we consider the numerous rituals and practices, as well as the regulations and impositions that come with it, we can see that widowhood is more or less an institution. This institution is perceived and comprehended in light of the people's culture and traditions, which govern its functioning (Ezejiofor, 2011). To this end, every woman whose husband dies is required to follow the unwritten rules and ceremonies to the letter.

The widow is not an invariant cultural object. At least in Western Europe and North America a widow is a woman who has lost both a husband and the married status following the death of the husband. In the African world, however, a widow is a woman who upon the death of her husband acquires the ambiguous status of being a married woman that has no husband. This status is essentially problematic and awkward in a number of ways. As a woman without a husband her emotional life and need for intimate relationship demand attention but her status as a married woman forecloses the natural possibilities for fulfillment. She is forbidden. First, is the dilemma of how to relate her psychosocial desires and yearnings to the demands of culture. Second, is the dilemma of remarrying while ensuring the welfare of her children, if any.

Widowhood is an experience that most women in Nigeria, if not all of Africa, fear; such women are exposed to a variety of inhumane behaviour, including rejection, abuse, denial, tyranny, subordination, and defilement, and it is best defined as a nightmare for them (Ezejiofor, 2011). As a result, the many patterns and ways that widows have used to cope with their tragic experiences with widowhood must be examined. In order to comprehend the condition of widows and devise a realistic support system for them, it is necessary to learn how they cope with widow inheritance and the terrible circumstances that it brings them into.

**Literature Review**

Suffering widows have a tendency to cope with their difficulties by being resilient. Resilience is defined as a person's capacity to adapt successfully after being exposed to adversity (APA, 2011; Eppler, 2011); and research has revealed that resilience is widespread among those who have been exposed to hardship (Bonanno& Mancini, 2008; Bonanno, 2009; DeBruin, 2012). Individuals and families that encounter hardship do not always have poor results, according to resilience studies (Eppler, 2011; Knight, 2007; Debruin, 2012). "A resilience strategy differs from other approaches that focus more narrowly on pathological outcomes since it emphasizes both good and bad outcomes" (Sandler et al, 2008, p. 61).

Individuals, families, and communities employ a number of protective factors to help them adapt and prosper after adversity, according to resilience studies (APA, 2011; Clinton, 2008; Greef& Human, 2004; DeBruin, 2012). Individuals' internal talents and external skills from their surroundings both contribute to these protective qualities (APA, 2011; Greef& Human, 2004; DeBruin, 2012). Observation suggests that widows who have had terrible experiences as a result of widow inheritance customs typically choose the resilience approach to cope with their situation. However, the current study will aim to verify whether or not this is true among Benin City's suffering widows.

Furthermore, according to DeBruin (2012), grieving people benefit from social assistance. In acknowledging that social support helps individuals manage, adapt, and prosper in the face of loss, grief and loss literature promotes broader social support literature (Boss, 2006; Eppler, 2011; Lowe &McClement, 2010-2011; DeBruin, 2012). The death of a loved one is distressing, and research suggests that having enough social support can help to mitigate the stress that comes with it (Worden, 2009; DeBruin, 2012). When faced with misfortune, social support is intuitively recognised as the assistance received from others. Despite the fact that social support is a well-studied term, there is no agreement on how to define it in the literature (DeBruin, 2012).

Social support is a varied and complicated term (Lowe &McClement, 2010-11; Stylianos&Vachon, 2008; Debruin, 2012). According to Debruin (2012), research has identified two primary components of social support. The sort of support received is the first component; this might include emotional, instrumental, appraisal, and informational assistance. The persons or groups of people who supply the resources of support make up the second component of social support (Lowe &McClement, 2010-11; Stylianos&Vachon, 2008; Debruin, 2012). This includes family, friends, professions, neighbours, and the community, among others. As a result, widows who are dealing with widow inheritance issues are more likely to seek social support to help them cope. However, this present study will attempt to investigate the degree of involvement of professionals in the use and provision of social support among widows in Benin City.

Ben-Nwankwo (2014) organised a focus group to find out how widows were coping with life without a husband. The focus of this project was on the difficulties widows face due to a lack of romance in their life. Getrude Oyetayo, a 53-year-old teacher who claimed to have struggled with loneliness since her husband died five years ago, stated that she was not too old for someone to be around her, and that the urge to have sex comes on every now and then, but that it was the grace of God that kept her going all that time.She went on to say that her job as a teacher had benefited her a lot since it had taught her to be disciplined, so she did not think about the need for romance as much. After her spouse died, Getrude ascribed her capacity to deal with life without romance to God's grace. "When I feel the desire, I hurry to the chapel," she explained. I would constantly go to the church and sweep it the first couple years after my spouse died. I am going to turn on the radio. My children would occasionally be absent; they would return to school. I am not even employing a maid. But I will make it." Ben-Nwankwo (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014).

Getrude further explained:

> "As a human being, the loneliness comes up. It is terrible. If you are not careful, you will lose focus. Loneliness is something a widow battles with. You look right, you don't see anybody and you look left, you don't see anybody. You are just on your own. My companion is my transistor radio. If I am not singing praises, I will listen to radio or watch TV. Before you know it, it would be night and I would sleep off and wake up the next morning," (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014).

Five years down, Oyetayo says she is still not used to the fact that she is a widow, saying she would not wish the condition for her worst enemy. In her words:

> "I was traumatised for a long time. I went through a lot of psychological and emotional pain. But God has been there. It is His grace that has been sustaining me. Being a widow is something you will not wish your worst enemy. I thank God anyway" (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014).

Another respondent in Ben-Nwankwo (2014) *vox pop* was Ibienne Ekile, a 30-year-old Rivers State banker based in Lagos. Ekile, whose husband died in 2010, three years after the marriage, said the need for romance was still as fresh as it was when she met her husband. in specifically said:

> "In my own case, I wasn't devastated because I wouldn't be able to take care of my home and our son. Thank God I have a good job. But I realised that I would not be able to make love to my husband any longer. Our sex life was very healthy when we were together. I just didn't know how I was going to manage. I doubt if there is any widow that would say she doesn't crave for sex" (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014).

Furthermore, Ekile said:

> "I managed to live a life of chastity for three years. I am a human being and I am young. I had to get into a relationship so that I don't jump from one bed to another. My husband's death was painful. He died in a motor accident and it has not been easy. For a woman to stay and have nobody to 'lubricate' her is not easy at all. I will not lie and tell you that I have not slept with any man since my husband died" (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014).

From the foregoing statements of the respondents in Ben-Nwankwo (2014) research, it could be deduced that widows who either refused to be inherited or who were not inherited, either remained unmarried for a long time after the death of their husbands, or tend to start an affair just to satisfy their need for romance. The coping strategies employed therefore ranges from religion, resilience, engaging in things that take attention away from romance, to starting a relationship.

Ben-Nwankwo (2014) in her research, complemented the responses from the widows with a psychiatrist perspective provided by a psychiatrist, Dr. Adeoye Oyewole, attributed a number of issues such as religious, economic and cultural as factors that might stop a widow from having a strong sexual drive. Dr. Oyewole submitted that widows had a psychological sense of loss such as the challenge of bringing up the children, challenges with the in-laws who want to chase her out of the house; and religious challenge (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014). Dr. Oyewole further noted that religious organisations expect widows to be holy and be focused and be satisfied with her life and not desire sex which is carnal because she is expected to 'need' God more than any other person (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014).

Dr. Oyewole further identified societal expectations as a component that might help widows cope with their romantic vacuum. He said that a large percentage of widows did not want to be seen at the hotel or in another guy's car because people would believe she was the one who killed her spouse because of the other man (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014). As a result, it is probable that many widows who declined to be inherited are suffering silently and internally, and that they prefer to just accept life as it comes, and that they do not take specific steps to deal with situations in order to avoid people creating negative impressions of them. This is indeed a recipe for depression which these widows are bound to suffer more from.

Yet another coping pattern of the suffering widows and specifically widows suffering the travails of widow inheritance is their membership of widows' groupings or association. The existence of widows' association is noticeable in parts of Africa; they are sometimes formed as a cohesive group to resist the oppression of widows and ameliorate their suffering widows in a patriarchal society (Alliyu, 2015). There is the Widows Development Organisation (WiDO), located in Enugu State, which supports the human rights of widows in Nigeria by

assisting widows to obtain legal protection or redress when they have been dispossessed of their belongings and inheritance; enabling them to hire lawyers and negotiate with their relatives; creating an avenue to facilitate negotiations with the extended families; providing training for support groups in advocacy and campaigning; and setting up a Vanguard Team which engages in mediation efforts with the husband's relatives (WIDO cited in IRBC, 2006). Members of the team also appear in court and, if the husband's funeral has not yet taken place, attend his burial. The president of WIDO claimed in a March 2006 communication that 4 out of 7 women who are forced to be inherited are handicapped since their only support system comes from the same family that abuses them (WIDO cited in IRBC, 2006). When she goes to court, the police, magistrate, and family may all be against her, but she still has to return to the same surroundings. Court cases take three years on average and cost a lot of money (WIDO cited in IRBC, 2006).

**Theoretical Framework**

Max Weber social action theoryprevails in the theoretical framework for this paper. Weber conceived of sociology as a comprehensive science of social action. His primary focus was on the subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions in their mutual orientations within specific socio-historical contexts (Priya, 2015). For Weber, the combined qualities of "action" and "meaning" were the central facts for sociology's scientific analysis. Action in Weber's analysis is all human behaviours to which an actor attaches subjective meaning. According to Weber action is social, insofar as by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual it takes account of the behaviour of others and thereby oriented in its course" (Priya, 2015).

The significant characteristics of Weber's ideas of social action are as follow:

i. Social action may be influenced by an action of past, present or future.
ii. Social action presupposes the existence of other individual and some action by the actor.
iii. Necessity of subjective meaning.
iv. It is oriented in its course.

Weber's focus on the mutual orientation of social actors and on the "understandable" motives of their actions was anchored in methodological considerations, which account for much of the distinctiveness of his approach (Priya, 2015). Social action may be influenced by the action of past, present and future. So social action is a result or a modification of some action of other person or persons. Social action presupposes the existence of other individual and some action by the actor. This means there can be no social action in isolation (Priya, 2015). Therefore social action is possible if there is another human being whose action or behaviour is prompting to the giving individual to act in a particular manner.

The social action theory regards all human behaviours as that to which an actor attaches subjective meaning. Equally, the social action theory comes handy in explaining the subjective (personal) meanings that widows attach to widowhood, and how they may adjust to it; this produces the perception they may have of widowhood. The social action theory is suitable for this study as it also regards actions which are products of perceptions as social action due to the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual, taking into account the behaviour of others, and its purpose. Hence to a large extent, how a widow sees

her condition is dependent on the personal meaning, independent of customs and tradition, that she has given to the status. Also, the coping strategy she adopts and her help seeking behaviour are tied to conclusions she must have drawn from the usefulness of such, taking into account the interpretation she must have given to the behaviour of those who oppress her and those who are available to help her.

**Research Method**

The research design adopted for this study was the one-shot cross-sectional research design. This was hinged on the fact that the respondents selected for the study were contacted only once so as to capture the nature of widows' coping strategies which widows in Benin City, Edo State, had adopted. The population of this study comprised all widows residing in the City of Benin who might have experienced arrangements of widowhood. The total population of widows in Benin City cannot be obtained due to lack of record on widows. Therefore, the sampling technique for the collection of the qualitative data needed for this study was guided by the purposive sampling design, and the snowballing sampling technique. The instrument of data collection was an in-depth interview guide. Accordingly, 15 interviewees participated in 15 in-depth interview sessions.

The semi-structured interview guide, and discussion guide aided the collection of the qualitative data. The interviewees purposively selected for the interviews were informed, and when their consent was obtained, convenient date, time, and venue were agreed upon for the various interview sessions. The researcher and the research assistants moderated the various interview sessions, and the working language was both English and Nigerian Pidgin. The proceedings of the various interview sessions were tape recorded with an audio recording device. The qualitative data collected was analyzed with manual content analysis technique. This involved the transcription of the recorded interviews sessions, sorting of the responses, and manually searching for recurring themes and ideas. These recurring themes were presented, interpreted and analyzed for inferences.

**Results**

Some of the interviewees said they were coping very well after the demise of their husbands as they were either prepared for the period of widowhood, or they had resources to fall back to. For one of the interviewees - a 64 years old interviewee who had a postgraduate degree – she said that she and her husband (before he died) prepared her very well for the period of widowhood. Hence she was coping well as the she had a building of her own, and she was earning a relatively good income. In her words, she said:

> To God be the glory, I prepared for times like this; knowing that I was not the first wife in a polygamous home. My husband helped to prepare me for this period as he bought land for me, and even assisted me to put up my building. While my husband was still alive we were living in the egiogbe; after his death that egiogbe house is for the first son according to Benin Tradition. So after the burial and mourning periods I packed out of the egiogbe and moved to my own house **(64-year-old Interviewee; Ndokwa; University educated; 28th January, 2017).**

For some other interviewees, though they were not prepared for widowhood, they were coping well after the death of their husband, given the availability of resources that their husbands left behind, or their personal resources. In their words, they said:

> I have been living well with my children, because I have a business that actually provided for us and with the help of God **(70-year-old Interviewee; Benin; Primary school educated; 15th January, 2017).**
>
> I have been coping with the proceeds from the business my husband and I started. Nobody has come to me to request for an account of the business or to take the business from me. This could be as a result of the fact that my late husband was the last of four children of his parents, and his elder siblings died before him. No one came to stress me up from the family **(58-year-old Interviewee; Igbo; Not educated; 25th January, 2017).**
>
> I have been coping very well. My husband's property has not been shared, but from his account, my children's education is been funded. As soon as they tender their school results they were given the money the need for their schooling. Furthermore, it's God who has been helping me. I pray a lot, anything one commits to God's hand, He will see one through. In addition, my children have been very obedient to me and we do things together **(62-year-old Interviewee; Benin; Primary school educated; 18th January, 2017).**
>
> Among the people of my ethnic background, women are brought up to be self-sufficient. So after the death of my husband I was able to stand on my feet. In addition, with the help of God and friends we were able to survive. I made sure the children were well fed and went to school **(60-year-old Interviewee; Aniocha; Secondary school educated; 18th January, 2017).**

However, a set of interviewees did not admit that they were coping well. They affirmed that the widowhood life is telling on them and their children as they had little or no resources to fend for themselves. Their submissions are:

> Well, widowhood is an experience I never prepared for. But when it came to me I looked unto my creator. I had a lot of challenges. But with God on my side and a focused mind, I attained what I wanted to attain. When my husband died my four children were still in school. They were a huge liability on me as a widow, as I did not inherit any property or company that was bringing money. So we all depended on my meager salary as a teacher. With God on our side coupled with zeal and focus, I was able to carry them along. I just give God the glory, because it was Him at the centre of the whole show **(59-year-old Interviewee; Benin; University educated; 16th January, 2017).**
>
> I am coping with the petty trading I am doing alongside my daughter. My brothers and sister occasional assist me. I don't have any other job that I am doing **(60-year-old Interviewee Esan: Primary school educated; 16th January, 2017).**

> My coping has been in the hands of God. In addition, my friends and siblings have been assisting me**.** Some persons went to my late husband's mother to inform her of the suffering of her late son's children and to care for them. Her response was shocking. She was only interested in the late son's property and not the children. Till now she has not asked after the welfare of the children **(39-year-old Interviewee; Ika; Secondary school educated; 25th January, 2017).**

From the foregoing responses, it could be seen that widows who are not coping well with widowhood are having a harrowing time of their lives. They are mainly surviving either on meager income, or/and with alms they receive from relatives and friends. Above all, they do resort to spiritual succour by having faith in God, the greatest provider.

Another set of interviewees, presumably coping well with the physical and economic upkeep of themselves and their children, affirmed that they were coping well with the socio-emotional aspect of widowhood. In their words:

> I thank God for everything. It has not been being easy to cope especially with not having my husband around to do the things we used to do **(55-year-old Interviewee; Igbo; Primary school educated; 16th January, 2017).**

> The experience is terrible and bad. It's bad that there is no man to come home to. There is no man to report to when the children misbehave; then no man to attend party with. I can't marry another man since I lost my husband over 10 years ago, because no man can understand me like my late husband. It has been Jesus Christ that has been comforting me **(64-year-old Interviewee; Ika; Primary school educated; 28th January, 2017).**

**Discussion**

All the responses about coping point to the fact that widows with sound economic base cope well with widowhood, and with meeting their daily economic needs and wants; while those who lack solid financial base tend not to cope well. In addition, for widows who do not cope well, they, apart from the meager income their petty trade fetches, mainly rely on succor from family and friends. However, the emotional need of widows is one that cannot be satisfied directly with economical possession; therefore, most of them resign to a fate of a non-romance life. From Ben-Nwankwo (2014) research, it could be deduced that widows who either refused to be inherited or who were not inherited, either remained unmarried for a long time after the death of their husbands, or tend to start an affair just to satisfy their need for romance. He said that a good number of widows didn't want to be seen in the hotel, and in another man's car; because when a widow is seen with another man, people might feel she was the one who killed her husband because of that man (Ben-Nwankwo, 2014). All in all, the coping strategies employed by widows in this regard, therefore ranges from religion, mental resilience, engaging in things that take attention away from romance, to starting a relationship.

## Conclusion

Widows with sound economic base cope well with widowhood and with meeting their daily economic needs and wants; while those who lack solid financial base tend not to cope well. In addition, for widows who do not cope well, they, apart from the meager income their petty trade fetches, mainly rely on succor from family and friends. Generally, the coping strategies employed by widows, ranges from religion, resilience, engaging in things that take attention away from romance, to starting a relationship. The major need of widows is the ability for them to have resources necessary for the provision of good housing, relatively adequate feeding, and education for their children. Coping well with widowhood, translates to widows being regarded as happy widows, and not coping well gives the widows the toga of a suffering widow. Hence, happy widows are able to fend for themselves and their children, with or without the support of family and friends; and suffering widows are those who are unable to maintain the socio-economic status when their nuclear family was complete with father, after the demise of their husbands.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion that emerged from the examination of widows' coping strategy and their experiences in Benin City, the following recommendations are made:

1. Husbands and fathers should be sensitized to write their **Will** which will stipulate how their property and valuables will be appropriated among members of his nuclear family and where necessary members of his extended family. This will help protect widows from being shortchanged by their in-laws.
2. Members of the public should be informed and sensitized about the professional services of social workers in Benin City and in Nigeria at large so that widows will know and/or be directed by concerned friends and family members on how to obtain professional help and care when they are being distressed by their in-laws.
3. All stakeholders ought to put functional arrangement in place order to ensure that poor widows who feel they have been short-changed or denied of their rights by their in-laws get free legal assistance to seek redress in court, and obtain justice.
4. The arms of government at all tiers should enact legislations geared towards providing protection for widows, when there is no will, in terms of the suitable percentage of the late husband property that they should be entitled to.
5. Wives should be encouraged to be economically engaged in viable income generating ventures which will enable them meet with their daily needs should they become widowed.
6. Widows should be motivated to form cooperative societies that will function as platforms for economic skill acquisition, obtaining commodities at cheaper rates, and for securing soft loans meeting their business demands and the educational needs of their children.

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