

Effect of Widowhood on Repression - Sensitisation Tendency

Manju Mehta, Usha Kulshrestha and Rashmi Chowdhry
University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

The present study was undertaken to see the effect of widowhood on repression - sensitization tendency taking four groups of women i.e. non working widows, working widows, non working married and working married women, who are middle aged and residing in urban setting. The study was conducted on 70 widows (35 non working and 35 working) and 90 married women (45 non working and 45 working) aged between 35 to 50 years using R-S scale by Mehta and Koradia was used to assess the repression - sensitisation tendency. Data was analyzed using 't' Test . The findings reveal that widows were found to be having significantly higher level of sensitization tendency in comparison to married women irrespective of non working /working status of theirs or of married women

The literature relating to stress with life events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; George, 1980; Dube, 1983;) amongst stressful life events, death of the spouse appears to be most crucial, especially for women. Widowhood is characterized as one of the most distressing of all life events (Holmes and Rahe, 1967) According to Atchley (1972) loss of spouse, as a significant life event has a strong impact on social and personal adjustment, health and life satisfaction of a person. When a spouse dies the survivor must not only adjust to the loss of close relationship, but also to manage the daily decisions and responsibilities that were once shared by both (Barresi 1988; Carey, 1979-80; Wortman, Kessler, and Umberson, 1992). Lopata (1978) argues that the disadvantages of widowhood are sufficient to make widow a minority group, in that they are excluded from full participation in society.

Widowhood may be perceived as a new position involving major change in a women's role both in family and society goals of life also

change with position. She has to enact new roles, like role of a wage earner or role of leading an ascetic life or so forth.

In the scenario of present day India with the advent of modernization; liberalization, competition and technological advancement; the problems of widows have increased, which can lead to intense frustration amongst them, resulting in stress, depression and other forms of adaptive behavior if their patterns of reactions to frustration is not appropriate hence it becomes imperative to look into the individual psychological factors which determine the pattern of reaction to frustration amongst widows in comparison to married women and the difference in the reaction pattern of widows and married women.

Most of the studies on widows are conducted taking elderly widows, illiterate or less educated widows e.g. Lalitha and Jamuna (2004) Achuthan (2003). There is paucity of researches on middle aged educated widows. Studies on widows are mostly under taken on

rural widows. However the findings of rural and urban widows are likely to yield different results. The breakup of the extended family system, its suppression by nuclear families, the high cost of independent urban dwelling and lack of old age homes draw a new set of issues, problems intrinsic to urban setting, widows and their caregivers

One of the most prevalent methods of conceptualizing coping styles on bipolar continuum is called Repression -sensitization dimensions, which is given by Byrne (1964). Repression refers to the tendency to deal with threatening situations through the use of avoidance strategies including repression, denial and rationalization. Sensitization refers to the propensity to respond with extreme vigilance toward aspects of the stressful situation.

In contrast, repressors tend to ignore or deny information related to life hassles. They seem to look life through rose coloured glasses, coping with negative events without bother or irritation and after defending themselves from unwanted thoughts or unpleasant mood states. They have tendency to react by blocking, denial and repression that is by putting threatening ideas out of their mind.

Schill, Thomas, Adams and Bakker and Demoyne (1982) studied subjects who were coping with stressful life events in an efficient or inefficient manner. They found that the repressors as compared to the sensitizers experienced significantly less stress.

A striking example of the avoidance strategy is the widow, who continues to set the table for her husband, lays out his cloths in the morning and speaks about him in the present tense. In some cases there is no 'outcry' and denial occur, as they are angry about what has happened to them and feel they have been abandoned. They are afraid about the disaster, afraid to be alone and afraid of everything that makes the memory, even his cloths and photographs. This is indicative of their repressive- tendency. This costs them a

lot of energy, time and attention before these symptoms diminish or disappears.

Thus, for a middle aged widow, avoidance strategies may be not useful in long run for their active life with children and family. It will be worth while to understand the dynamics of tendency to repress or sensitize among widows, both those who are working for their livelihood and those who are not working, in comparison to the women leading married life.

Method

Sample

70 widows (35 non working and 35 working) and 90 married (45 non working and 45 working) aged between 35 - 50 years and educated up to at least graduate level. Sample was drawn from the residents of Jaipur city.

Tools

R-S Tendency was measured by R-S Scale developed by Manju Mehta & Kavita Kordia (2004) based on Mani Bhushan Prasad's R-S Scale. This 14 item scale is as good in measuring the repression sensitization tendency as 90 items' Prasad's Scale. This scale has construct validity as the tetracoric 'r' between the total score of 90 items pole on preliminary draft and total scores on 14 selected items pool was 0.98 reliability of the scale was determined by Kuder-Richardson formula-20, which equals to 0.61.

Procedure

All the participants of the Study were administered R-S tendency scale in individual setting, after establishing the rapport Scoring was done according to the method given in R-S Scale's manual The Results are shown in Table 1

Results

To find out Mean difference between Non Working Widows, working widows non working married women. As well as all widows and all married women on repression sensitization tendency scores 't' ratios were computed.

Table 1 : Mean Difference between non Working widows, working widows, non working married and working married women on Repression Sensitization tendency scores

Group	NWW	WW	NWMW	WMW
	N=35	N=35	N=45	N=45
	M=8.91	M=8.97	M=6.55	M=6.89
	SD=2.75	SD=2.42	SD=1.45	SD=1.46
Non Working Widows	—	t=0.09	t=4.94***	t=4.24***
Working Widows	t=0.09	—	t=5.54***	t=4.46***
Non Working Married Woman	t=4.94***	t=5.54***	—	t=1.08
Working Married	t=4.24***	t=4.76***	t=1.08	
All Widowed women	N=70	M=9.42	SD=2.57	t=6.89***
All Married	N=90	M=6.722	SD=1.46	

2-tailed significance *.05, **.01, ***.001

Discussion

The results presented in table 1 show that the widows were found to be having significantly higher level of sensitization tendency in comparison to married women, irrespective of non working, working status of theirs or of married women. Further, it was found that two groups of widows under study were relatively similar with regard to sensitization tendency. In the same manner both the groups of married women were alike to each other.

It may be assumed that both non working and working widows have problem of readjustment adaptation to new life style as per Societal norms. As far as working widows are concerned they may have either joined the work after the death of their spouse or were working beforehand also, and discharging their household duties in association with their husband, but after the death of their husbands, they are double burdened in both the conditions. This may be leading to great concern for solving the problem, where avoidance tendencies can't work.

The situations for non-working widows also seem to be of problem solving. Their problems may be different than the problems of working

widows. They may be facing problems related to economic matters, rearing and disciplining the children, developing independence, finding meaning of their existence, making new friends and well wishers etc.

Additionally, the widows who participated in the present study were of middle age. This group of widows has to face greater difficulty as it has the obligation of bringing up children and performing the role of even father for them. The findings of study conducted by Kumari (2004) in Hyderabad city on thirty widows with one or two children and heading the household for atleast 2 years are in favour of this contention.

Many studies have shown that the distinctive characteristics of a sensitizer becomes most apparent when the sensitizer is confronted with potentially high level of stress. If we look into the literature relating to stress with life events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), George, 1980; Dube, 1983; Wardle et al., 1994; Krohne 1989; Schwartz & Brownell, 1995). These studies have indicated that sensitizers tend to react by approaching facilitating and increasing vigilance that is confronting the threatening stimuli directly. Widowhood is such potentially high level of stress.

While married women, in our present social context, are conditioned to be repressive and passive. They are required to keep their boiling pot of worries, anxieties and frustration hidden inside, for the sake of the benefit of the family, This may be the reason for low level of sensitization tendency amongst married women, both non working as well as working equally.

The characteristic repressors tend to react by blocking, denial and repression i.e. by putting threatening ideas out of their mind. To be happy in married life for urban educated women, having such tendency seems to be a necessity in present day Indian context of a mix of traditionally and modernity.

Lindemann (1994) observed that how a person reacts to the grief is important, how easily she/he can recover. People who initially break down and let them experience the full impact of the death seemed to adjust best to trauma. Those who at first denied or minimized its importance seemed to suffer particularly severe negative reactions later. A widow, who continues to set the table for her husband, lays out his clothes in the morning, pretends to deny her husband's death due to repressive tendency. This costs her a lot of energy, time and attention, before these symptoms diminish or disappear; Lindemann (1994) suggested the importance of grief work, which is described as intense mourning for the bereaved person's eventual ability to come out of grief.

The results of the present study showing higher level of sensitization amongst, middle aged widows suggest positive note about the reaction tendency of widows toward frustrating situation.

The study has shown that to talk about problems is of great importance for widows. Hence, widows should be encouraged and given opportunity to mourn actively and openly. Intervention programs for widows should be designed specifically to help grief

work take place. They should involve the sessions devoted to widow's talking about her loss and giving full vent to all her feelings. Friends and relatives of the bereaved often avoid this painful topic to spare their own and what they think, the widow's feelings. Effort should be made to provide such environment to widows where they do not repress much.

References

- Achuthan, N.S. (2003) Elderly rural widows India: A study of their social security issues and concerns- An Analytical review of existing literature. *Indian Social Science Review*, 5, 338-408
- Atchely, R.C. (1972). Dimensions of widowhood in later life. *The Gerontologist*, 15, 176-178.
- Barresi, C. M. (1988). Gender differences in unmet service need in widowhood. *The Gerontologist*, 28, 11-15
- Byrne, D. (1964). Repression-Sensitization as a dimension of personality. In B.A. Maher (Ed.), *Progress in experimental personality research*, 1, 169-220, New York: Academic Press.
- Carey, R.G. (1979-80). Weathering widowhood: Problems of Adjustment of the widowed during the First Year. *Omega*, 10, 163-174.
- Dube, S (1983) *Scaling life events: Some issues in research on stress and illness*. Paper presented at the Seminar on stress, Anxiety and mental Health, University of Allahabad, Allahabad.
- George. L.K. (1980). Role transitions in later life. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, Inc., 1980.
- Holmes, J.H. & Rahe, R.H. (1967). The social readjustments scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11, 213-228.
- Krohne, H.W (1989). The concept of coping modes: Relating cognitive person variables to actual coping behavior. *Advances in Behavior Research and Therapy*, 11, 235-248.
- Kumari, S.R. (2004). Family dynamics of Widows. *Indian Journal of applied Psychology*, 41, 9-12.
- Lalitha, K.& Jamuna,D.(2003) Life experiences of elderly widowers. *Indian Journal of Gerontology*, 17, 117-126.

- Lindemann, E. (1994) Symptomatology and management of acute grief. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 101, 141,148.
- Lopata, H.Z (1978). The absence of community resources in support system of urban widow. *Family Coordinator*, 27, 283-388.(a).
- Mehta M. & Koradia K.(2004). *R-S Scale* Varanasi, Roopa Psychological Center.
- Roy, G.S. (1999). Population Ageing: Indian Experience. *The Indian Journal of Gerontology*.
- Schill.T.Adams, A.E. & Bakker, Demoyne (1982). Repression sensitization and coping with stressful life eves. *Psychological Reports*, 50, 602.
- Scwartz, M.B., & Brownell, K.D.(1995). Matching individuals to weight loss treatments: A survey of Obesity experts. *Journal of consulting and Clinical Psychology and Social instruments*, Baroda Samisti. SP.
- Singh G. Kaur D. Kaur, H.(1983). *PSES: A new stressful life events scale for use in India*. Paper presented at the seminar on Stress, Anxiety and Mental Health, University of Allahabad Allahabad
- Wardle, J., Pernet, A., Collins, W., & Bourne, T. (1994). False positive results in ovarian cancer screening: One year follow-up of psychological status. *Psychology and Health*, 10, 33-40
- Wortman, C.B., Kessler, R.C. & Umberson, D.(1992). Widowhood and depression: Explaining long-term gender differences in vulnerability. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 33, 10-24.

Recieved: January, 2006
Accepted: May 23, 2006

Manju Mehta, PhD is presently Professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

Usha Kulshrestha, PhD is presently Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

Rashmi Chowdhry, PhD is presently Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur

**Sleep
and
Hypnosis**

An International Journal of Sleep, Dream and Hypnosis

Editor:
Mehmed Yucel Agargun

**Yuzunc Yil University
School of Medicine
Department of Psychiatry
Van 65300 - Turkey**