



An Empirical Study on the Effect of Widowhood on Personality

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Summary

Personality is one of the vital forces that constitute the very existence of man. It is the backbone of everything—starting from our cognition, conation to affect. Many factors tend to shape human personality viz. genetic makeup, upbringing, perceptual patterns, situational variants, learning, experiences, etc. All these factors either make or mark the personality of a person. The present research is an attempt to study the varied dimensions of widowhood that form the psychic and situational pros and cons of personality. It reveals that widowhood is a transition that transforms the physical, psychological, personal, familial, and social as well as outlook towards life of a bereaved woman. Findings of the study suggest that widowhood has a strong influence on the entire personality of a bereaved woman. The age of a widowed woman, the duration of widowhood and institutionalization process, everything plays a vital role to a significant extent.

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Background

Personality in the generic sense of the term refers to an individual's unique and relatively stable patterns of thoughts, behavior, feelings or emotions. It involves both psychological and physiological processes. In other words, personality also refers to the ways in which a person typically reacts to his environment or his surroundings, but in a sense represents a convergence of all the important factors that determine human behavior.

The term personality is derived from the Latin word, "Persona" which means "mask". Study and reflections on personality has been the subject of interest since the dawn of human civilization. In psychology, personality is a collection of emotion, thought and behavior patterns unique to a person. There are several theoretical perspectives on personality in psychology, which involve different ideas about the relationship between personality and other psychological construct, as well as different theories about the way personality develops.

The term "personality" has been defined by many psychologists, philosophers and thinkers. Burger, 1990 defines personality as "an individual's unique and relatively stable patterns of behavior, thought and emotions." Warren and Carmichael, 1930, opine that "Personality is the entire mental organization of a human being at any stage of his development. It embraces every phase of human character: intellect, temperament, skill, mortality and every attitude that has been built up in the course of one's life". One of the most striking definitions of personality has been given by Allport, 1937. He states that, "Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment."

Dimensions of Personality:

Katj and Schanck, 1993 have listed the following are the principal dimensions of personality: Ability, Motility, Temperament,

Traits, Attitude towards others, and Attitude towards oneself.

Raymond Cattell (1946) has propounded 16 major dimensions of personality. They are: Reserved–Outgoing; Less Intelligent–More Intelligent; Emotionally Unstable–Emotionally Stable; Submissive–Assertive; Sober–Enthusiastic; Expedient–Conscientious; Shy–Venturesome; Haarria–Premsia; Trusting–Suspicious; Practical–Imaginative; Sentimental–Penetrating; Confident–Depressive; Conservative–Experiment; Dependent–Self-sufficient; Undisciplined–Controlled; Relaxed–Tensed. The study throws light on 6 dimensions of personality based upon the Dimensional Personality Inventory by Dr. Mahesh Bhargava (1994). They are: Activity–Passivity; Enthusiastic–Non-enthusiastic; Assertive–Submissive; Suspicious–Trusting; Depressive–Non-Depressive; Emotional Instability and Emotional Stability.

Widowhood and Personality:

Widowhood is one of the bitterest experiences of life. In many cases, it leads to a wide range of personality deficits and malfunctioning, emotional instability, feelings of insecurity, inferiority, adjustment problems, anxiety, fear, depression, and high mortality rates. The shaping of personality of widows, vivid reactions and resolution of their life crises depends on several factors like age of onset of widowhood, duration, effect of socio-economic status, presence or absence of support systems, effect of institutionalization and so on. There are three kinds of widows: One is a girl with no children, a woman who becomes a widow after some years of marital span and has children and the third case is a widow of 50 years and above of age. Giri, (1999) mentions three Indian traditions or options for a widow according to orthodox belief systems and practices. They are: Sati; Ascetic Widowhood and Remarriage. Such practices in a way cripple the personality and wellbeing of the bereaved women and make them a victim of various socio-cultural maladies.

Most studies find that widowhood elevates the risk of mortality. Widowed persons also report more physical health problems as compared to married persons. Priegson et al, (2000) found that number of chronic conditions, nursing home days, physician visits and health care costs increased more among widowed persons than among happily married persons. Many studies (e.g. Bradsher, 1997; FH Norris, SA Murrell, 1990) show that a strong and active support network of family and friends are important in helping widowed persons adjust to their situation. This also gives a boost to their personality and overall sense of wellbeing. It is frequently the case that widowed parents move in with children, particularly if their health is failing. Roan and Raley (1996) showed, based on a longitudinal study that followed people for five years, that adults whose mothers were widowed increased their frequency of visits, telephone calls and letters to their mothers. However, it is possible that increased contacts by children with widowed parents occur primarily in the first few years of widowhood; comparisons of the long-term widowed with married persons show few differences in this area.

Widowhood has an adverse effect on personality and life as a whole. If not coped up in an adaptive manner it can lead to a great havoc for the individual per se and the entire society at large.

Research Methods:

Sample

The sample consisted of bereaved women staying in Vanaprastha Ashram located in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. All the cases were randomly drawn and their age range was between 25 and 70 years. The total sample comprised of 60 women. Informed and signed consent was taken from all the participants separately before starting the actual study.

Design

The study was a one-time assessment, with a cross-sectional design. The assessment was carried out once.

Assessment

The Dimensional Personality Inventory was used to assess the personality of widows in

this study (Bhargava, 1994). It consists of 60 statements measuring six important personality dimensions. They are: 1. Activity – Passivity, 2. Enthusiastic – Non-enthusiastic, 3. Depressive – Non-depressive, 4. Assertive – Submissive, 5. Suspicious – Trusting, 6. Emotional Instability – Emotional Stability. The medium of instruction and items of the test are in Hindi with the following instructions: 1) each individual or group must read all the statements carefully. 2) The responses are recorded on the basis of three response alternatives i.e yes, undecided and no. 3) The items do not have any time limit yet they should be completed as soon as possible.

After completion, the questionnaire was collected from each individual.

Scoring

According to the test, each “yes” response is to be scored as 2, “undecided” is to be scored as 1 whereas “no” is to be scored as 0. Thus on each area of personality the score may range from 0 to 20. It may be calculated part wise or on the whole with the help of manual.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was done using the chi-square test.

Results

In order to study the personality profile of widows and widowhood the subjects were studied on the basis of their age, duration of widowhood onset and effects of institutionalization. Null hypotheses were constructed for further analyses, quantitative and qualitative research.

The Chi-Square method was used for statistical analysis. The Chi-Square values of all the personality dimensions were obtained separately and consolidated percentage tables were also drawn on its basis (mentioned in Tables 1-3).

Table 1 depicts the clear-cut picture regarding percentages of activity-passivity; enthusiastic-non-enthusiastic; depressive-non-depressive; assertive-submissive; suspicious-trusting; and emotional instability-emotional stability traits among widows of age range below 50 and above 50.

Table 1: Consolidated Percentage Table of Personality Dimensions of Widows Aged Below 50 and Above 50 Years

Age	Personality Dimensions	Below Average	Average	Above Average
Below 50	Activity-Passivity	13.3%	23.3%	63.3%
Above 50		13.3%	19.99%	66.66%
Below 50	Enthusiastic-Nonenthusiastic	39.9%	16.7%	43.3%
Above 50		39.9%	16.7%	43.3%
Below 50	Depressive-Non depressive	9.9%	29.9%	59.9%
Above 50		13.3%	39.9%	46.7%
Below 50	Assertive-Submissive	39.99%	23.3%	36.66%
Above 50		36.66%	33.3%	29.99%
Below 50	Suspicious-Trusting	38.9%	6.66%	33.33%
Above 50		76.66%	16.66%	26.66%
Below 50	Emotional Instability-Emotional Stability	53.33%	36.66%	29.99%
Above 50		53.33%	39.99%	6.66%

Table 2: Consolidated Percentage Table of Personality Dimensions of Widows of Duration Below 10 and Above 10 Years

Duration	Personality Dimensions	Below Average	Average	Above Average
Below 10	Activity-Passivity	26.66%	43.3%	30%
Above 10		13.3%	19.99%	66.66%
Below 10	Enthusiastic-Nonenthusiastic	60%	13.3%	26.66%
Above 10		40%	16.66%	43.3%
Below 10	Depressive-Non depressive	59.9%	26.66%	13.3%
Above 10		13.3%	33.3%	53.3%
Below 10	Assertive-Submissive	43.33%	29.99%	26.66%
Above 10		53.33%	29.99%	16.66%
Below 10	Suspicious-Trusting	86.66%	6.66%	6.66%
Above 10		76.66%	16.66%	6.66%
Below 10	Emotional Instability-Emotional Stability	43.33%	26.66%	30%
Above 10		19.99%	13.3%	66.66%

Table 3: Consolidated Percentage Table of Personality Dimensions of Institutionalized and Non - Institutionalized Widows

Institutionalization	Personality Dimensions	Below Average	Average	Above Average
Institutionalized	Activity - Passivity	63.33%	16.66%	19.99%
NI		69.99%	16.66%	13.3%
Institutionalized	Enthusiastic - Nonenthusiastic	33.3%	16.65%	49.95%
NI		43.29%	16.65%	39.96%
Institutionalized	Depressive - Non depressive	9.99%	29.99%	39.99%
NI		23.3%	33.33%	43.3%
Institutionalized	Assertive - Submissive	46.66%	23.3%	29.99%
NI		36.66%	33.3%	29.99%
Institutionalized	Suspicious - Trusting	89.99%	6.66%	3.33%
NI		79.99%	16.66%	3.33%
Institutionalized	Emotional Instability - Emotional Stability	6.66%	39.99%	53.33%
NI		9.99%	26.66%	63.33%

- NI - Non Institutionalized

In table 1, the null hypothesis was rejected at 0.01 level of probability, suggestive of the fact that there is a highly significant difference between the activity-passivity; enthusiastic-non-enthusiastic; depressive-non-depressive; and emotional instability-emotional stability personality dimensions of widows between the age range of below 50 and above 50. The table also shows that there is an insignificant difference between the assertive-submissive; and suspicious-trusting personality traits of the subjects.

The duration of widowhood was also studied and analyzed. The duration was below 10 years and above 10 years. Percentage table 2, in which null hypothesis was rejected at 0.01 level of probability, reflects that there is a significant level of difference between the activity-passivity; enthusiastic-non-enthusiastic; depressive-non-depressive; assertive-submissive; suspicious-trusting; and emotional instability-emotional stability traits among widows bereaved below and above 10 years duration.

In the case of institutionalization, all the personality traits showed a highly significant difference between institutionalized widows and non-institutionalized widows. Table 3 is suggestive of this finding.

Discussion

The age, duration and institutionalization aspects of widowhood indeed play a vital role in creating and shaping the personality of widows. When a woman enters into widowhood at a very tender age she is unaware of the different physical, psychological and social maladies going to affect her directly and indirectly. Due to a tender age and lack of experiences in life, she goes through turmoil in her behavior, emotions and activities. Everything becomes so unclear and chaotic in front of her. Her personality enters into a roller coaster of ups and downs making her vulnerable to many physical as well as psychological suffering. On the other hand, if a woman is bereaved at an older age, she has lived a long phase of her life fulfilling the worldly duties, aspirations, roles and expectations. Since she is herself old she would have seen many

cases of widowhood before her. If she is the elder of a family then probably the level of being a victim of domestic abuse, violence, and misunderstanding tend to decrease.

As the duration of widowhood increases a woman's coping skills with life also increases. Either she goes with the sway of ill-treatment, becomes a prey to social maladies and domestic violence or she fights for herself, her dignity and rights and ultimately leads a life of health, success and well-being she truly deserves. The duration of widowhood unfolds many facets of life in front of a woman and this makes her to accept the fact, the reality and move on.

Research on widowhood and its influence on personality, life satisfaction, social participation and adjustment by Berardo, 1968; Pihlblad, and Adams, 1972 also suggest that when bereaved women join support groups or institutions there is a striking change and development in their personality and outlook towards life, in comparison to widows who are not involved in groups or institutions. It is because in a support group or institution she sees and observes many other women sharing similar condition with hers. Moreover, these organizations also educate them about their rights, enhance their self-esteem levels, provide therapeutic support for the ones who are not able to cope with the challenges of bereavement, help them to be self-dependent and so on. So their level of understanding, empathy, cooperation, coping skills, knowledge and wisdom are very well-defined. Whereas a widow who is not exposed to such groups or institutions go on suffering innumerable afflictions within her family, peer group, workplace and the society as a whole.

Widowhood is a threat to the life, health, personality and well-being of a woman at all stages and spheres. Even if they adjust in all situations, become the silent victims of social ill-treatment or fight for their rights and live a life of dignity...yet the truth always pricks their heart that they can never get their husbands/beloved back. This is high time when the world at large should empathize and try to respect the bereaved women in our society, respect them as

worthy human beings and support them in every way we can.

Limitations and Suggestions for further research

1. The study can be conducted for a larger population.
2. Other than age, onset of widowhood and institutionalizations varied aspects of widowhood can also be further studied. Cultural patterns and influences, health risk factors in widowhood, mental health–suicide risk, etc are some examples.
3. The duration of research can also be increased for greater effectiveness of findings.

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