

Resilience, Optimism and Psychological Well-being: A Comparative Study of Widows and Widowers

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Abstract

Widowhood is regarded as one of the most traumatic events of one's life. The present study is an attempt to explore the gender differences in widows and widowers in the level of resilience, optimism and psychological well-being. A sample of 40 widowed persons, 20 widows and 20 widowers, aged 55-62 years and 55-65 years respectively were selected incidentally from the Lucknow city, U.P. Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), Life orientation test-Revised (LOT-R) and The Scales of Psychological Well-Being were applied. Results revealed significant differences between widows and widowers in level of resilience, optimism and psychological well-being. Further, it can be inferred that widows are more resilient, optimistic and have better psychological well-being as compared to widowers.

Keywords: Resilience, Optimism, Psychological Well-being, Widows and Widowers.

Introduction

Becoming widowed is certainly one of the most traumatic events. The pain of losing one's spouse is experienced at an emotional level and apart from this the pain has to do with one's sense of self. Without one's life-long partner, it necessarily becomes important to redefine one's place in the world. But when one has been part of a couple for so long, then the adjustment to singlehood can appear next to impossible.

Widowhood is the marital status that a man or a woman gains once his or her spouse has died. A woman is called a widow when her husband has died while a man is called widower when his wife has died. Widowhood is one of the most distressing of all life transitions (Holmes & Rahe, 1967).

According to Census 2011, there are 5.6 crores widowed persons in India. The number of widows exceeds to that of widowers. The increase in the number of widows can be attributed to increasing life expectancy of women in India. According to the World Bank data for 2012, men's life expectancy than men in India was about 65 years while that of women's was 68 years. Apart from increasing life expectancy, there is most often an age gap between men and women during marriage.

Though much of the research on widowhood has been conducted in mid 20th century, few earlier exemplary researches on bereavement are noteworthy because they have significantly affected research in widowhood. Freud (1917) described the differences between grief and melancholia in his influential paper Mourning and Melancholia and elaborated that death of loved one sometime caused depression and he believed that it was necessary for the people to undertake tasks to relieve their grief, what we now know as grief work.

Lindemann (1944) did a research on the after effects of bereavement. This study characterized two type of grief, normal and morbid grief. This study also formed the foundation of much of the later research in bereavement and to some extent, in widowhood. Normal grief is one which people typically experience following the loss of a loved one whereas morbid grief is one that lasts longer and is more severe and at times pathological.

Parkes (1996) conducted a research in which he followed widowed people through their first year of bereavement and identified the features of grief and the factors that contributed to the nature of grief. This study was focused on young widowed people, therefore, it drew attention on the similarities and the differences in bereavement at different ages.

Recent years have seen a paradigm shift in psychology, which aims at creating well-being, happiness and life satisfaction. This flourishing field is termed as "Positive Psychology". In this context, resilience is defined as positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, in spite of experiencing adversity. The word resilience comes from the root 'resile' which means to bounce back or rebound after being stressed (Agnes, 2013). Though many definitions of resilience have been propounded, most of them contain two common elements i.e. an exposure to great risk and corresponding factors that help to promote positive outcomes or lower negative outcomes (Fergus & Zimmeran, 2005; Fraser, Galinsky & Richman, 1999; Luthar & Ziegler, 1991). Resilience commonly defined as a dynamic development process of responding more positively than expected after facing risk (Glennie, 2010). Resilience is generally assessed by how well a person reacts to a threat using his own abilities and available support systems (Condy, 2006).

Optimism is defined as an aspect of cognition i.e. how one's mind works, or how one thinks and also as a part of one's personality. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was believed that being optimistic was a characteristic to be controlled and guarded against because it encouraged the illusion of positive outcomes that could not always be demonstrated in real life. Being extremely optimistic can be dangerous for one's mental well-being because it encouraged a slant perception of reality.

However, in the second half of the twentieth century, with the advent of positive psychology, research related to optimism began to move away from the negative perspective, and started favoring the positive impact of optimism on well-being. Perhaps the most accepted definition of optimism is given by Scheier and Caver (1985), that optimism is "the stable tendency [to] believe that good rather than bad things will happen."

Psychological well-being is defined as a synergy of positive affect such as happiness (the Hedonic perspective) and functioning with optimal effectiveness in personal and social life (the Eudemonic perspective) (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Gender differences regarding coping in widowhood have been studied extensively yet the results appear to be inconclusive. One group of studies report that widows are more distressed than widowers (Fransworth, Pett, & Lund, 1989; Schuster & Butler, 1989), whereas another group of studies suggest that widowhood has a more adverse effect on widowed men (Lee, Willets, & Seccombe, 1998; Lee, DeMaris, Bavin, & Sullivan, 2001; Umberson et al., 1992). However, a third group of research studies suggests no gender differences in the psychological repercussions of widowhood (Gerstel, Riesman, & Rosenfeld, 1985). In a comprehensive literature review on widowhood, it was found that widowed men were more vulnerable than widowed women, although these differences were small (Stroebe, Stroebe and Schut, 2001). Bennett et al (2003) reported that women fare better than men in adapting to

widowhood mainly because of three reasons i.e. women have better domestic skills; women are socially more capable; and men generally "bottle up" their feelings. Lee, DeMaris, Bavin, Sullivan, (2001), reported stronger adverse effect of widowhood on the psychological well-being of widowers than that of widows because of men's stronger dislike for domestic labor, low Church attendance and lessened ability to assist their children. Koren (2015) reported gender differences in dealing with the death of the spouse. Men tended to experience vulnerability while women tended to experience resilience. A study investigating the relationship between depressive feeling and coping amongst older widowed men and women reported that depressive feelings are associated with non-coping in older widowed people and widowers reported depressive feelings significantly more after than widows (Bennett, Smith, & Hughes, 2004).

Bennett, Hughes & Smith (2003), explained the experiences of older widowed men regarding widowhood in terms of notion of masculinity. Widowers believed that women are better equipped to deal with widowhood. They explained it in terms of women's domestic abilities and social skills and men's inability to talk about their emotions. These views are shared by previous research (Stroebe, Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Widowers' vulnerability has been explained in terms of masculinity. Research studies suggest that dominant masculinity is challenged by the experience of bereavement and widowhood. The emotional repercussions of spouse loss: feeling upset, feeling depressed, crying, and feeling of hopelessness etc challenge the hegemonic masculinity identified by the roles of 'No Sissy Stuff' and 'The Sturdy Oak' (Brannon, 1976; Bennett, 2005a; Bennett, 2007). Widowhood also challenge the masculine principles of self-reliance, control (both behavioral and emotional), strength and independence (Calasanti, 2004; Kimmel, 1994). Undoubtedly, widowhood contributes to widowers' feelings of powerlessness (Kimmel, 1994).

The Present Study

The demise of any loved one is highly painful, but loss of spouse has been found to be most difficult for older adults (Arbuckle & de Vries, 1995). There is difference of opinion among researchers regarding the question- "who cope better to widowhood?" Research findings in this context are highly inconclusive. Therefore, present study is an attempt to explore the gender differences in widows and widowers in the level of resilience, optimism and psychological well-being.

Objectives of the Study

Following were the objectives of the present study-

1. To explore significant difference between widows and widowers in the level of resilience.
2. To explore significant difference between widows and widowers in the level of optimism.
3. To explore significant difference between widows and widowers in the level of psychological well-being.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for the study-

1. There would be significant difference between the mean scores of resilience in widows and widowers.
2. There would be significant difference between the mean score of optimism in widows and widowers.
3. There would be significant difference between the mean scores of psychological well-being in widows and widowers

Method and Procedure

The present study was a between group design involving two groups widows and widowers. The sample comprised 40 widowed persons- 20 widows and 20 widowers incidentally selected from the Lucknow city. The age of widows ranged from 55-62 with average age of 58.75 while the age of widowers ranged from 55-65 with average age of 60.30. All the participants were at least graduate. Only such individuals were included in the study who have suffered spouse loss at least two year ago. Apart from this they had been married for at least 15 years. An additional criterion was followed that they remained widowed and didn't remarry, as the effect of second marriage would influence participants' responses. Individuals who suffered spouse loss less than two years ago were excluded from the study. Individuals who had been married for less than 15 years were also not included in the study.

Demographic Details of the Sample

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Widows (N=20)		
Age	58.75	3.12
Year Married	33.65	5.74
Year Bereaved	5.8	1.64
Widowers (N=20)		
Age	60.30	2.40
Year Married	31.25	4.47
Year Bereaved	5.10	2.19

Rapport was established with the participants and they were taken into confidence that their responses would be kept confidential and would be solely used for research purpose. Consent was taken from the participants and they were instructed as per the instructions printed in the questionnaire. Data was collected individually from each participant.

Measures

Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC)

It is a 25 items scale that measure the ability to cope with stress and adversity. Respondents rate items on a scale from 0 ("not true at all") to 4 ("true nearly all the time"). Score Range is 0-100 and high score suggest high resilience. Chronbach's alpha of this scale is 0.89. The scale has stable discriminant and convergent validity (Connor and Davidson, 2003; Singh et al., 2010).

Life orientation test-Revised (LOT-R)

LOT-R is a 10 item (3 positively worded, 3 negatively worded and 4 filler items). This scale measures dispositional optimism. Only 6 items out of 10 are to be used to derive a score of optimism, fillers are not to be scored. Respondents rate items on a scale from 0 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree"). Scoring of negatively worded items is done in reverse order. Scoring of these 6 items is then summed up to compute an overall optimism score. Score is 0-24 and higher score imply greater optimism. LOT-R has good internal consistency (alpha coefficient ranging from .70 to .80) and the test-retest correlation are from .68 to .79 for intervals of 4 to 28 months (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994).

The Scales of Psychological Well-Being

The short form of the Ryff inventory which consists of 18 items was used. There are six dimensions. 3 items in each dimension. The dimension are: positive relations with others, Environmental mastery, Self-Acceptance, Autonomy, Personal Growth, Purpose in life. Respondents rate items on a scale from 1("strongly disagree") to 6("strongly agree"). Score is 3-18 on each dimension. There are few negatively worded items which are to be scored in reverse order. The overall Chronbach's alpha $\alpha=0.85$. The psychometric properties of the scale have been evaluated and supported by several studies (Ryff, 1989; Clarke et al, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Results

Table-1

Significance of difference between Mean Scores of Resilience in Widows and widowers (N=40)

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t-Value
Widows	20	77.2	4.88	38	2.28*
Widowers	20	49.6	11.16		
*significant at 0.05 level					

Figure 1-Difference in the Mean Resilience Scores of Widows and Widowers

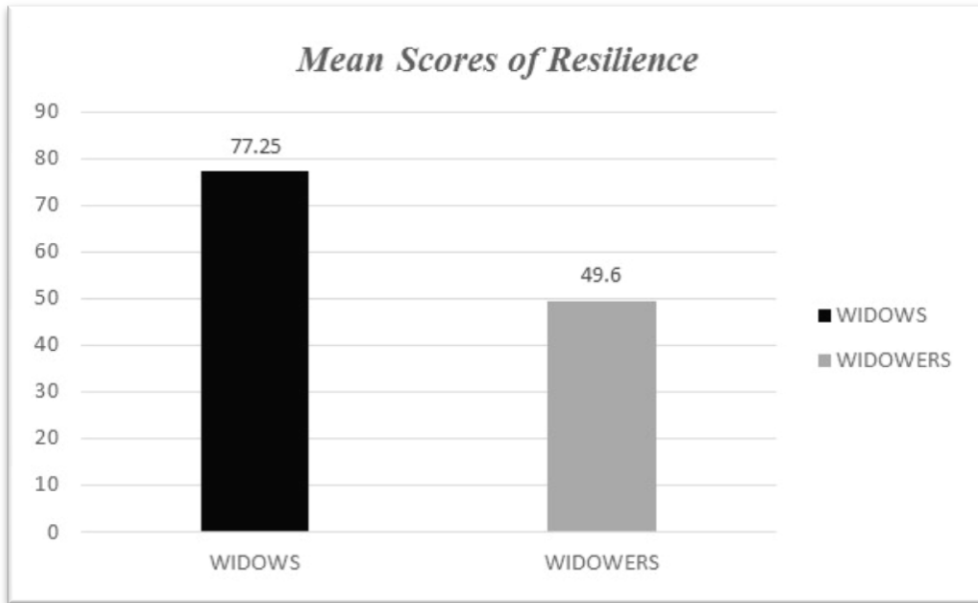


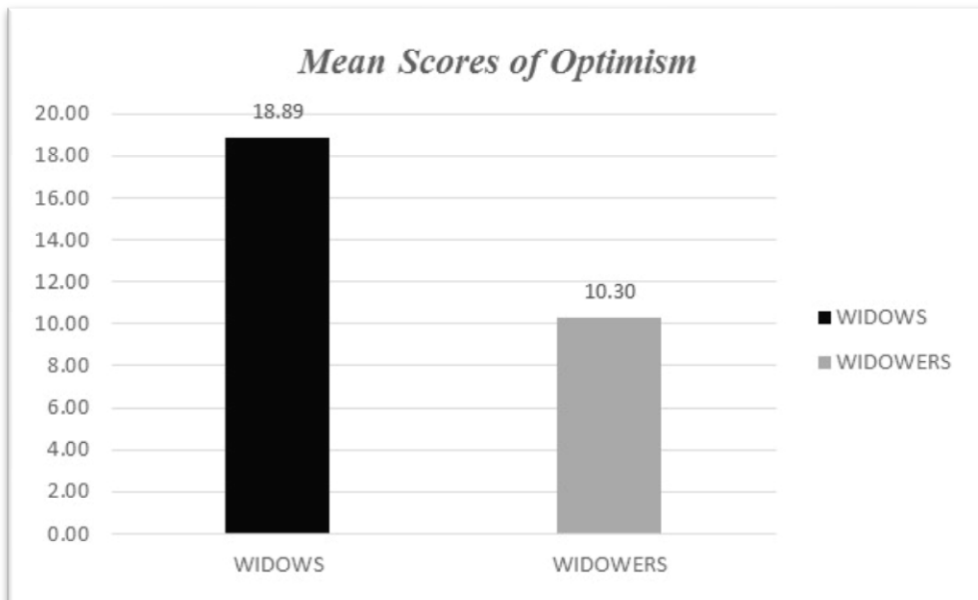
Table-1 and figure-1 indicate that the mean score of resilience is higher in widows as compared to widowers. For finding out the significant difference between the widows and widowers pertaining to resilience, the t-test was applied. The obtained t – value was found to be significant. It means that the widows and widowers differ significantly in the level of resilience. Thus, it can be inferred that widows are more resilient as compared to the widowers. Thus, the first hypothesis is confirmed.

**Table-2
Significance of difference between Mean Scores of Optimism in Widows and Widowers (N=40)**

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t-Value
Widows	20	18.89	2.60	38	2.56*
Widowers	20	10.30	3.24		

*significant at 0.05 level

Figure 2-Difference in the Mean Optimism Scores of Widows and Widowers



The table-2 and figure-2 indicate that the mean score of optimism is higher in widows as compared to widowers. For finding out the significant difference between the widows and widowers pertaining to optimism, the t-test was applied. The obtained t –value was found to be significant. It

means that the widows and widowers differ significantly in the level of optimism. Thus, it can be inferred that widows are more optimistic as compared to the widowers.

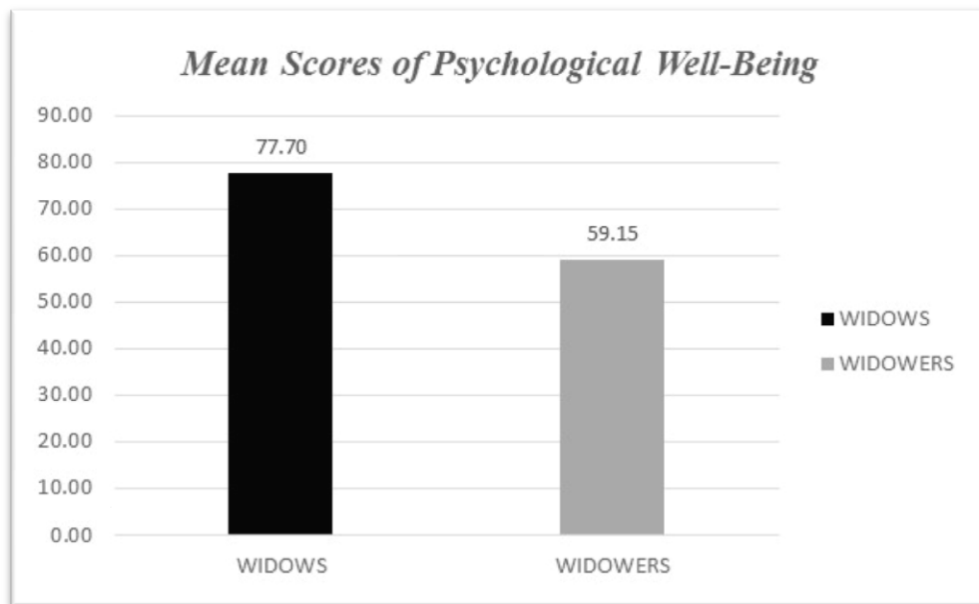
Thus, the second hypothesis is confirmed.

Table-3
Significance of difference between Mean Scores of Psychological Well-Being in Widows and Widowers (N=40)

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t-Value
Widows	20	77.70	6.01	38	5.19**
Widowers	20	59.15	12.50		

**significant at 0.01 level

Figure 3- Difference in the Psychological Well-Being Scores of Widows and Widowers



The table-3 and figure-3 depict that the mean scores of psychological well-being is higher in widows than widowers. To examine if, this mean difference is statistically significant, t-test was applied. The obtained t-value was found to be highly significant. It means that widows have better psychological well-being as compared to widowers.

Thus, third hypothesis is confirmed.

Discussion

The present study was an attempt to compare widows and widowers in level of resilience, optimism and psychological well-being. The findings of the present study are discussed in the following paragraphs.

There was significant difference between widows and widowers in the level resilience, optimism and psychological well-being. Therefore, it can be inferred that widows were more resilient, more optimistic and had better psychological well-being as compared to widowers.

The first objective of the study was to explore significant difference between widows and widowers in the level resilience. It was found that widows were more resilient than widowers. Similar, view was shared by previous research which stated that widowhood is more depressing for widowers as compared to widows (Stroebe, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). Therefore, it can be said that widowers are less resilient than the widows. The findings of the

present study are consistent with previous research findings which state that widowhood contributes to widowers' feelings of powerlessness (Kimmel, 1994) and widowers tended to experience vulnerability whereas widows experienced resilience in adapting to widowhood (Koren, 2015; Stroebe and Stroebe 1983; Lee et al. 2001).

The second objective of the study was to explore significant difference between widows and widowers in the level of optimism. The findings of the present study suggest that widows are more optimistic as compared to widowers.

The third objective of the study was to explore significant difference between widows and widowers in the level psychological well-being. The findings of the present study suggest that widows have better psychological well-being as compared to widowers. These findings are in line with previous researches which suggest that widows cope with widowhood better as compared to widowers (Bennett, Smith & Hughes, 2004). Previous researches suggest that widowers report more depressive feelings as compared to widows (Bennett, Smith & Hughes, 2004). Previous researches in this regard also suggest that there is stronger adverse effect of widowhood on the psychological well-being of widowers than that of widows.

The findings of present study are consistent with findings of previous researches which report that

widowhood is more depressing for widowers as compared to widows. Researches in this context, report that widows are better equipped to deal with widowhood because of their domestic ability and social skills and men's inability to talk about their emotions (Bennett, Hughes & Smith, 2003). These views are also explained in terms of masculinity (Bennett, 2007). Bennett (2007) reported that for older men, widowhood poses a serious challenge to emotional control as they maintain a "stiff upper lip" at times of emotional stress. Widowhood endangers the hegemonic masculinity (Calasanti, 2004; Kimmel, 1994) and also contributes to widowers' feelings of powerlessness (Kimmel, 1994).

Conclusion

On the basis of above results following conclusions can be drawn:

There was significant difference between widows and widowers in the level of resilience, optimism and psychological well-being. Thus, it can be inferred that widows are more resilient, optimistic and have better psychological well-being as compared to widowers.

Limitations and Suggestions

The present study was done on a small sample and was limited to a small geographic location so the findings cannot be generalized. Present study is entirely quantitative in nature. Future researches can follow qualitative approach in studying widowhood. Effect of other variables such as, social support, economic support, age of bereaved person, circumstances of the death of the partner could also be studied in further researches. Future research shall also examine how being depended upon within marriage affects survivors' adjustment to loss. Future research can also focus on other aspects of adjustment to widowhood such as, pursuit of new relationships and interests or rekindling of old interests or relationships that may have been neglected during one's marriage. Further research shall also identify additional predictors of personal growth following spouse loss.

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