

# Burn- Out as a Psychological Effect of Widowhood in Meru County, Kenya a: Comparative Study of Widows and Widowers

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## Abstract

Widowhood is a state of losing a spouse through death and has been on the increase in Kenya and all over the world. A spouse's death is traumatic and affects the widowed persons' psychological well-being, as they go through the various stages of bereavement. They may become withdrawn, less motivated, become frustrated and isolated which may affect their mental and physical wellbeing when burn-out sets in. There may be adverse effects of widowhood that are psychological since the widowed persons may rate themselves low, have disturbing memories and fatigue after the death of the spouse whom they shared life with. In Meru community, no research has been done on the psychological effects of widowhood yet widowhood is traumatic and a common phenomenon in the community. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the psychological effects of burn-out by comparing widowed men and women in Meru County Kenya. A literature gap exists in Kenya on burn-out of widowed men and women thus motivating the author to come up with such a study. Therefore, the objective of this study was to determine burn-out as a psychological effect of widowhood by comparing widowed men and women in Meru County Kenya. *Ex post facto*'s causal-comparative research design was considered appropriate for the study because of comparison of groups. A sample of 384 widowed persons (192 widows and 192 widowers) in four Districts that were purposively selected making a total of 384 respondents. Data was collected by use of questionnaires which were administered to widowed persons and two Focus Group Discussions for widowed persons were held in each of the four selected Districts; one for the widowers and another for widows. Data analysis was done by use of descriptive and inferential statistics. Inferential statistics included t-test which was used to establish whether differences in burn-out as a psychological effect existed between widowed men and women. Descriptive statistics that included frequencies, means and percentages were also used. The findings revealed variations in the widowed persons' psychological effect of widowhood where widows showed high levels of burn-out than widowers. From the findings, it is evident that absence of either of the spouse negatively affects the mental and physical wellbeing of the living spouse especially widows. Counselling programmes of widowed persons in the country are needed to assist and empower them especially widows who are not allowed to remarry. It is therefore recommended that the Ministry of gender, religious organisations, service providers and other stakeholders should use such programmes to address psychological needs of widowed persons. Finally, the findings may assist the widowed men and women to cope better psychologically with their state of widowhood which is traumatizing as they attach meaning in life and bring up their families single handedly.

**Keywords:** psychological effect, widowed person, living spouse, widowhood, burn-out, trauma

## 1. Introduction

Burn-out is the state of mental, emotional and physical exhaustion of a person due to stress or fatigue among other causes. A lot of burnout really has to do with experiencing chronic stress (Ballard, 2014) especially for widowed persons. Branden (2001) observed that widows and widowers also can experience ambiguity about the emotions they are feeling and the uncertainty of how to express them which is an indication of burn-out. Similar to widows, bereaved husbands experience an array of emotions, such as anger, shock especially if the death is unexpected, numbness, denial, and profound sadness. Unlike widows, however, grieving men tend to control their emotions with the possible exception of anger, for instance, by holding back and crying less openly. Burnout is a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on a person (Ballard, 2014). The three key dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. The significance of this three-dimensional model is that it clearly places the individual stress experience within a social context and involves the person's conception of both self and others (Ballard, 2014).

Widowers, more often than not, will channel their energy into active coping and problem-solving strategies like work, physical activity, or addressing disruptions in the household. At other times they may prefer to be alone with their thoughts, whether thinking about the circumstances surrounding their wife's death or reflecting on ways to cope with their new situation. This may lead to frustrations, fatigue, cognitive problems which are signs of burn-out.

Koole (2003) notes that widowers who experience the same emotions as widows but were raised with the belief that emotional control is a sign of strength often find themselves confronting an inner conflict about how to

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respond to a loss. Ballard (2014) reports that exhaustion, frustrations, lack of motivation, cognitive problems

and interest, cynicism and other negative emotions are signs of burn-out. The situation will instinctively call for a response that is emotional but the widower may not be socialized to express himself in that way. Adding to this confusion on the part of the widower is an assumption that there is only one way to grieve. Men usually express their feelings of grief in solitary ways, but this should not be construed as being any less intense than a widow's grief. At the same time, to a varying degree, some widowers express their emotions more openly than others, suggesting that while some responses may be more typical, any one widower's experience can be somewhat unique as well (Owen, 1994). Earlier researchers showed variations on how widowed persons express their burn-out. This study therefore sought to compare burn-out as a psychological effect of widowhood on the widowed men and women in Meru County, Kenya.

## 2. Research Problem

The death of a spouse is a moment of devastation and sadness due to loss of love, care, company and livelihood, accompanied by a feeling of abandonment. It represents not simply the departure of a friend and sometimes a breadwinner, but also results in a radical change in one's social status, lifestyle and behaviours. This may affect the widowed persons' psychological lives in the way they relate with others, think, behave and express emotions as indicators of burn-out. In the Meru community of Kenya, the attempt to create normalcy after the death of a spouse by embracing specific coping mechanisms has ramifications that create challenges which need serious attention. Issues of death are generally emotive and affect mental well-being of a widowed person. This situation is made worse when the process of re-adjustment to the new scenario created by bereavement is controlled by pre-defined cultural forces that view women as weaker beings than men. For instance, the widows are perceived by the Meru community to be weak beings naturally including their emotions and morals as they become the head of families with no husband to depend on. Such people may develop a feeling that they are not supported by the community and relatives hence may experience burn-out. It is even worsened when the in-laws disown the widows in the struggle for inheritance unlike in the case of widowers. In Kenya studies have been done on widowhood in the era of HIV/AIDS in Siaya and Kisumu. However, there is no research that has been done on burn-out as a psychological effect of widowhood in Kenya, specifically Meru County. Therefore, the study attempts to establish the psychological effects of widowhood by comparing widowed men and women in the Meru County of Kenya.

## 3. Methodology of Research

This chapter presents a description of research design, location of the study, population of the study, sample size and sampling procedures, instruments, data collection and data analysis procedures.

### Research Design

*Ex post facto's* causal-comparative research design was utilized because two groups of widowed persons (widows and widowers) were compared in order to determine burn-out as a psychological effect of widowhood. The study was carried out in Meru County Kenya.

### Sample Size

The researcher used simple random sampling technique to select four districts from the eight districts in Meru County, Kenya. According to Ogula (1998), a sample size of 384 respondents is acceptable for a descriptive research with a population of 100,000. In this study, the target population was 80,332 and therefore a sample size of 384 is deemed appropriate. Out of the 384 widowed persons that were selected, 192 were widows and 192 were widowers who were purposively selected. From this number, 48 widowed men and 48 widowed women were sampled in each District by use of purposive sampling technique.

### Instrument and Procedures

The study utilized questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions to collect data from the respondents. The items in the questionnaires were open and closed-ended. Furthermore, Focus Group Discussions helped to capture the in-depth information by probing further on psychological issues that affected widowhood persons leading to burn-out. The issues raised were recorded in a recording list for reference and in order to assist the researcher in data analysis.

### Data Analysis

Burn-out as a psychological effect of widowhood was explored to establish whether differences exist in the widowed men and women mental and physical exhaustion. The data that was collected from the questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages was used and inferential statistics included the t-test to compare means of widows and widowers in Meru County, Kenya. Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) note that t-test is an ideal

statistical tool when comparing the means of two groups. Burn-out as a psychological effect was established and compared in widowed men and women. The significance level was set at  $\alpha=0.05$  and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17 was employed in the entry and analysis of data. According to Borg (1996) SPSS is the commonly used set of computer programme in social science research. The programme is comprehensive, integrated collection of computer programmes for managing, analysis and displaying data. The results of the data were presented in summary using frequency tables, bar graphs and pie charts that enhanced clarity and brevity. Furthermore, from the Focus Group Discussions, some excerpts giving the responses of widowed men and women were presented in themes and summaries. These were very useful because they gave more in-depth information about burn-out as a psychological effect of widowed persons.

#### 4. Results of the Research

##### Comparison of burn-out Widows and Widowers

Burn-out is a state of mental and physical exhaustion of a person. Widowed persons undergo challenges after the loss of their spouses that led them to suffer mentally and physically. These results were reached after the widowed persons responded to the items in relation to burn-out.

The results are represented in Figure 1 and 2

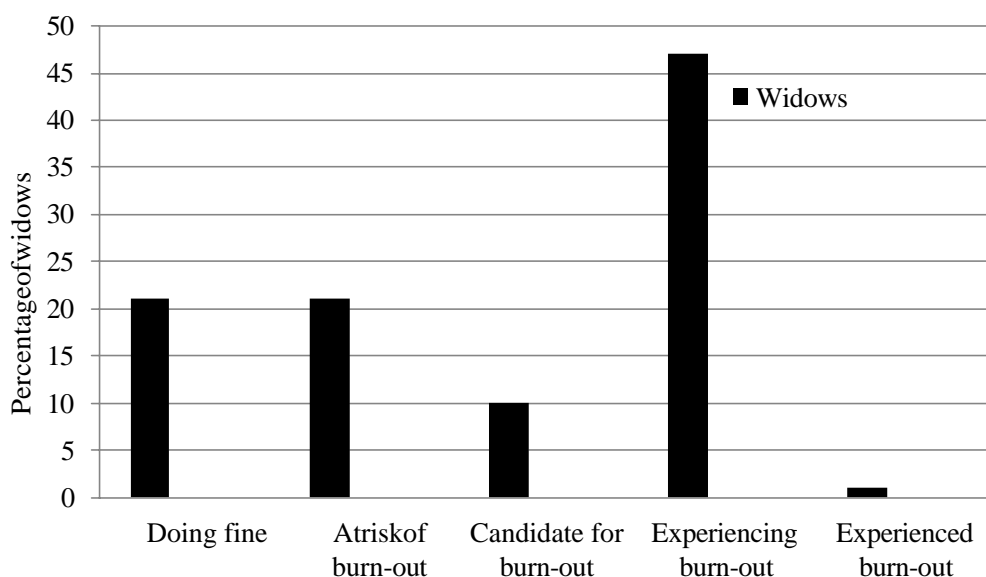


Figure 1. Widows' Responses on Burn-out

An inspection of the results in Figure 1 indicates that from widowed persons' responses 21% of widows registered doing fine, an indication that they cope well with the state of widowhood. However, 21% were at risk of burn-out whereas 10% are candidates for burn-out. The study findings also revealed that, already 47% of widows were experiencing burn-out and 1% had already experienced burn-out. Furthermore, in the Focus Group Discussions, almost half of widows shed tears as they were expressing themselves after remembering the nasty experiences they had undergone. One widow broke in tears as she was explaining how she was denied the right to bury her husband by in-laws and how efforts to follow justice were futile due to financial problems. She lamented bitterly about the issue that had made her lack enough sleep and developed hypertension.

Majority of the widowers also reported frequent visits to see doctors due to unidentified problems.

However this was different for widowed men as presented in Figure 2

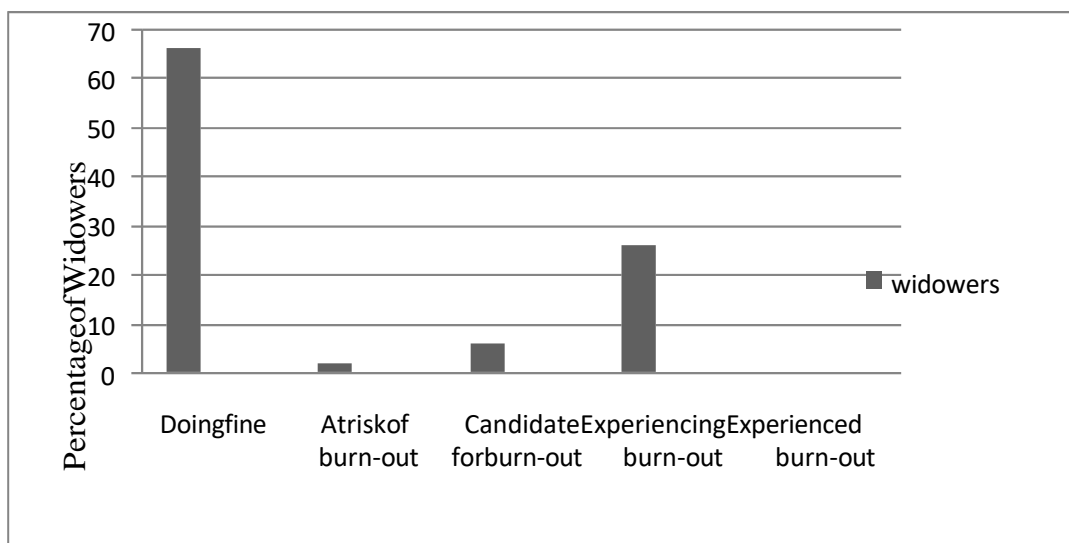


Figure 2. Widowers Responses on Burn-out

An inspection of the results in Figure 2 indicates that 66% of widowers were doing fine an indication that they coped better than widows with the state of widowhood. This could be a result of remarriage being used as a coping mechanism used by widowed men. It is further noted that 2% of widowers were at risk of burn-out, an indication that getting used to the new life alone after the loss of the wife was cumbersome. However, a small percentage of widowers (8%) are candidates for burn-out as opposed to widows at 10%. Another 26% of widowers were experiencing burn-out though no widower had already experienced burn-out. However, this finding was not sufficient to make a conclusion on the stated hypothesis.

Therefore, a look at the t-test should provide a clue, which the P-value would either corroborate or falsify as in Table 1.

Table 1  
 Comparison of burn-out of Widows and Widowers

Category	Mean	SD	t-value	df	P-value
Widows	2.358	1.478	33.473*	1	0.000
Widowers	2.733	1.252			

\*denotes significance at  $\alpha=0.05$  level

The obtained P-value ( $t=33.473$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) is indicative of statistically significant differences in burn-out between widows and widowers. Widowers had a lower mean of 2.358 than widows at 2.733. It was noted that the widows had a higher standard deviation of 1.478 as opposed to 1.252 for widowers. In view of these findings, the hypothesis ( $H_{01}$ ) suggesting that there is no statistically significant difference in burn-out as a psychosocial effect of widowed men and women in Meru Country was therefore rejected. Widows and widowers suffer a lot when their spouses become sick and pass away or die through other causes. Coping with the loss of a spouse is often one of the difficult challenges in life, whether the spouse dies in middle age, old age or somewhere in between. The surviving spouse, now a widow or widower, faces many challenges in coming to terms with a life without their friend and partner. Often the widower experience is examined in light of similarities and differences between them and their female counterparts that affect their burn-out (Ntozi, 1997).

From the participants, their major sources of burn-out, they stressed on the importance of relationships to overcome burn-out. This was by having interactions with others in terms of friendships, family, and other widowed men and women as key sources of reducing burn-out. For the most part, the participants noted the stability in their relationships between marriage and widowhood and reported that they continued to rely on these relationships to be able to cope with widowhood. At the same time, several participants discussed the changes they experienced in relationships as widows that may have contributed to either mental or physical exhaustion.

As stated in the previous section on interpersonal relationships, many of the widowed men and women described the importance of widowed persons for maintaining their normal mental and physical health. Furthermore, in the Focus Group Discussions, it was noted from the facial expressions, gestures and emotional behaviour of widows that burn-out was high. For instance more than half of them shed tears as they were expressing themselves after remembering the nasty experiences they had undergone. One widow broke in tears as she was explaining how she was denied the right to bury her husband by in-laws and how efforts to follow justice were futile due to financial problems. She lamented bitterly about the issue that had made her lack enough sleep and led her to develop hypertension. Majority of the widows also reported frequent visits to see doctors due to unidentified problems. However, this was different for widowed men as reflected in the Focus Group

Discussions as an excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4

**Researcher:** Do past memories after widowhood, events you underwent disturb you after the spouse passed away and causes disturbances in your mind even when you remember them and always feel unwell? (Probe to know if there are past memories whether negative or positive that may affect the mental and physical health of widowed persons).

**Patricia (Widow):** But you have to do, to extend yourself, too. People do not just come to another person one has to extend oneself and find it is worthwhile. There are lots of people out there who would love to spend time with them. So one has to open up his/her arms and the heart to them too, so that they feel comfortable. If not one experience mental exhaustion due to memory lapses on death of husband that keep disturbing me.

**Job (Widower):** When my wife passed on my body ached for three months continuously. I had to consult a doctor who referred me to psychologists for counselling. He termed my condition as burn-out that required more of talking than medical drugs. Although the doctor prescribed some drugs, he insisted that losing my wife had contributed to the condition I was in.

**Florence (Widow):** I have lost some friends, though at the place of work. Some that were more couple friends and I can understand now why. I mean one man who found out the lost my husband just pulled away. So I have lost some of those male friends who fear to be associated with somebody's wife. I feel not loved or as if people view me negatively.

**David (Widower):** I guess single women are not assimilated as much into a community as may be single men. This leads to mental and physical exhaustion as widowed women figure out why they are perceived negatively by the society.

**Doris (Widow):** Oh, well you know, there is a big difference being a widow and having a husband. Some of the groups that I belong to like married women with spouses. I started forgetting the appointments they made to me and was always sad after losing my husband. I think this was the reason why they started isolating me.

**Julia (Widow):** one does not get invited out to say couples' things, so much. Other times yet then a person is invited by people one does not expect. Somebody had told me about that, once you're divorced or widowed you do not get invited out as much. And I was like, no but I finally found out that it is kind of true. There are certain couples that it does not matter; they will invite you no matter what. But there are certain groups that you do not; you are not invited as much anymore.

**David (Widower):** I generally feel unwell most of the times and when I visit the doctor he advises me to rest enough. But I usually know things changed by the loss of my wife though I need to go over it.

**Lucy (Widow):** Well, I think other people have to know that in our society, widowhood means you cannot associate with, you will be rejected by married couples. Maybe it will not happen that day, but it happens to everybody. And it happens to widowers too, you just have to understand that our society does not accept widows, widowers or divorcees with married couples. It just does not happen and so that is the first thing you have to understand.

**Silvia (Widow):** I guess widowhood is sort of a forbidden subject. I do not talk about my late husband a lot, and I need to talk about him. It is part of my being and I do not know if I talk about him any more than I would if he were still alive at first; I felt some of my friends would get irritated if I mentioned him in their presence.

The excerpt suggests that couples carry significant power and privilege in Meru County. Not only do couples have the power to exclude others from their plans, couples' comfort is highly considered when widowed women arrange the social plans. Burn-out also, was noted to have made widowed men and women to exclude themselves from relationships of any nature. Nearly half of the participants in the current study specifically addressed their experiences with exclusion from relationships and activities with couples. Florence's experience with exclusion from other couples was understandable to her but was rated as burn-out that had started to develop.

From this, it appeared that entering into a community of widows was not a passive endeavor, but one that required new widows and widowers to actively seek out these relationships. As noted from both widowed men and women's responses they acknowledge the possibility that they might experience burn-out that is made manifest in physical form where one feels sick always. Therefore, these findings reveal that widowed women than men burn-out and require intervention measures to cope better with their state widowhood.

## 5. Conclusions

The study findings revealed that widowhood influenced the widowed men and women differently in burn-out. Specifically, widowed women rated high in burn-out than widowed men. For the widowed women, this may be due to lack of financial support especially through discrimination, issues of property inheritance, denial and

rejection as a major problem of widowed women unlike men.

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