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(IJEPC)**www.ijepec.com**DIVORCE STIGMA IN THE CHURCH: IMPLICATIONS ON THE
WELLBEING OF DIVORCEES IN EVANGELICAL CHURCHES
IN NAKURU COUNTY, KENYA**Martha Teriki J. Chebbet^{1*}, Ruth Kamunyu², Jane Kiarie³¹ Department of Psychology, Pan Africa Christian University, Kenya
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DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.850022**This work is licensed under** [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

Divorce among Christian couples is a growing reality in the Church across the world. Regardless of the circumstances that led to divorce, Christians should extend a helping hand to divorcees since there is no easy solution to human problems. However, the church is often seen to be out of step with the reality of society with regards to its response to the issue of divorce. This study sought to investigate the prevalence and manifestation of stigma of divorce in the church and its differential ramifications on the spiritual, social, and mental wellbeing of divorcees in Evangelical Churches in Nakuru County, Kenya. The study applied quantitative research methodology to gather and analyse data. A structured questionnaire was administered to 121 divorcees across 11 sub-counties through snow-ball sampling method. Data was gathered using a structured questionnaire. Percentage frequencies, mean and standard deviation scores were used to summarize data while inferential analysis was performed using correlation technique in SPSS. The study established moderate prevalence of stigma of divorce in the churches. There was a differential effect of stigma of divorce on psychosocial wellbeing dimensions, with the strongest effect size found on social wellbeing. Conclusion was drawn that divorcees experienced stigma of divorce in the church, albeit at muted prevalence levels. The study demonstrated that the influence of stigma of divorce was not uniform across spiritual, mental, and social wellbeing of divorcees. This pointed to a more nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which stigma in the church affects divorcee wellbeing.

Keywords:

Differential Effects, Divorce Stigma , Evangelical Churches, Psychosocial Wellbeing

Introduction

Divorce among Christian couples is a growing reality confronting the Church across the world, with potential negative ramifications on the holistic well-being of divorcees. Regardless of the circumstances that led to divorce, Christians should extend a helping hand to divorcees since there is no easy solution to human problems (Galliher & Galliher, 2017). On this front, the church should play a crucial role in establishing social networks that enable divorcees to access post-divorce services, and in facilitating a welcoming atmosphere for them to take advantage of counselling programs (Konieczny, 2016). Frequently, however, people, including those in the body of Christ, create supposed solutions and require compliance from others as if it were their divine mandate (Gartner & Allen, 2015). Divorcees are often stigmatized by the Church, which is seen to be out of step with the reality of society with regards to its response to the issue of divorce (Hille, 2017). Stigma of divorce in the church is seen as “an injustice done in the name of Christ and inflicted upon people already suffering a devastating loss in their lives” (Meier, 2017, p.1).

Historical reviews suggest that the Church has never taken divorce favourably (Dane, 2007). Conservative Christians, especially, disseminate strong messages against divorce through sermons at the pulpit, in a manner that makes an already bad situation worse for divorcees (Stokes & Ellison, 2010). Citing a survey of US Churches, Konieczny (2016) reported that, just a quarter of divorcees reported being reached out to by the Church during or after divorce. This form of stigmatization has also been observed in a study undertaken by Li et al. (2018) among US nurses which suggested that, the church increased the likelihood of healing among the widowed but not among the divorced or separated.

Tsuma and Atony (2019) studied the effects of divorce and strategies adopted the Africa Inland Church in addressing the issue of divorce in Kenya. Results showed that the Church adopted intervention strategies like marriage counselling but noted that, there were no strategies in place to provide support for divorced people. From this finding, it can be deduced that the Church pays no attention to the plight of divorcees as members of the body of Christ. This lack of mechanisms for providing support to divorcees signals the Church’s attitude towards divorcees, one that is insensitive to the negative impact of divorce on the spiritual, mental, emotional and social well-being of divorced members. As a result, divorcees in church experience social stigma manifesting in the form of social exclusion, distancing, devaluation and shaming, treatment with suspicion, and hostility – with negative ramifications on their well-being (Lee, 2018; Olofsson, 2019). Such forms of stigma make divorcees feel embarrassed to socialize and this escalates their loneliness that is detrimental to their well-being (Benedicta et al., 2017). Thadathil and Sriram (2019) add that, because divorcees are stigmatized, they also face emotional insecurity, which adversely affects their well-being.

The state of well-being of divorcees has been the subject of a plethora of empirical studies (Al Ubaidi, 2017; Bourassa et al., 2015; Christine, 2018; Mecheser, Al-naqeeb, & Obaid, 2014; Schaan et al., 2019; Yesiwork et al., 2019; Zineldin, 2019). However, the nexus between stigma in the church and divorcee wellbeing has received limited scholarly attention in Kenya. In a study undertaken by Kahindi (2018), which investigated Christian response to single parenthood in selected Churches in Nairobi County, it was found that the response was discriminatory, with widows being the most tolerated while divorcees least tolerated. This potentially portends negative implications to the psychosocial well-being of divorcees. The present study sought to investigate the prevalence and manifestation of stigma of divorce in the

church and its differential ramifications on the spiritual, social, and mental wellbeing of divorcees in Evangelical Churches in Nakuru County, Kenya.

Literature Review

Stigma is a distinguishing feature that differentiates an individual from the rest of society, leading to suspicion or hostility towards them (Lee, 2018). Stigma of divorce manifests in two variants: public stigma and self-stigma (Canfield & Cunningham, 2018; Kostram et al., 2016). Public stigma, also referred to as the social dimension of stigma, refers to the negative beliefs and attitudes that society has towards divorce and divorcees. This is contrasted to self-stigma which results when divorcees internalize prejudice against them, leading to diminished sense of self-worth (Canfield & Cunningham, 2018). It has been argued that the social context of divorce, rather than the divorce itself, is the one that leads to stigmatization of divorcees (Mendoza et al., 2019). For instance, among some communities, the stigma of divorce is considered worse than the divorce itself (Mendoza et al., 2019). This is due to the shunning, disapproval, isolation, and discrimination that divorcees often experience in such societies (Benedicta et al., 2017; Olofsson, 2019; Nagaria, 2016).

Empirical literature suggest that church communities may be a particularly salient context for the experience of divorce-related stigma (Bryan & Giunta, 2018). In a study by Mulovhedzi (2017), it was revealed that divorcees who occupy leadership positions in the Church are not given support by the congregation, are challenged to lead by example, and are disbarred by Church doctrine, simply because of being divorcees. Mulovhedzi (2017) further observed that divorcees are also treated with suspicion, especially in mingling with other married members of the congregation. As a result, the author noted that some participants no longer attended Church service during Holy Communion days. Respondents in Mulovhedzi's (2017) study expressed feeling like an outsider and an outcast in their own Church. Others felt that their spiritual life was being muzzled by the Church. As a result, the study found that some divorcees stopped going to Church altogether. These results suggest that stigma has a debilitating effect on divorcees' well-being and this is particularly acute in the church.

Highlighting the likelihood of societal humiliation in Church, Hille (2017) argues that divorcees may struggle with embarrassment and guiltiness over ways in which they feel responsible for or recompensed for their marital breakdown. Hille further postulate that divorcees may also become bitter and unforgiving of their ex-spouse, a sense of neglect by God, and disenchantment with the incapacity of their conviction or their Church to avert or respond to the divorce. For instance, many respondents in Mulovhedzi's (2017) study reported experiencing debilitating loneliness. This was as a result of stigma, and for this reason, they felt separated from the Church, like lepers in the name of wanting to reduce the number of divorcees.

In a study undertaken by Sutton (2020) on the role of African American Church in meeting mental health needs of its parishioners, stigma was found to play a salient role in determining the mental well-being of parishioners. Interviews with respondents revealed that some people felt ashamed and were looked at differently by Church members. These results mean that divorcees may harbour further feelings of rejection, reflecting in the behaviours and attitudes towards divorcees.

O'Neil (2017) examined the issue of divorce in Church scripturally and then observationally through the studies of other pastoral individuals, through interviews of local Church leaders, and through a nationwide survey. He sought to establish respondents' Church's position on divorce. Results showed that all the participants held the view that, the Church should see divorce as a serious problem and take measures to discourage it more than the Church is doing today. This finding suggests that the society is not tolerant of divorce and may not be sympathetic to divorcees. Therefore, there is a possibility that many divorcees may be more exposed to psychosocial wellbeing challenges because of this lack of social support.

A number of studies have explored social stigma and its relationship to post-divorce stressors and well-being (Caarls & De Valk, 2018; Konstam et al., 2016; Lee, 2018; Thadathil & Sriram, 2019). Simon and Ratcliff (2019) explored religious divorce stigma and depressive symptoms among young adults. Their study surveyed 281 young adults in the United States who had experienced parental divorce during childhood. Participants completed measures of religious divorce stigma, parental relationship quality, and depressive symptoms. The study found that higher levels of religious divorce stigma were associated with greater depressive symptoms, even after controlling for parental relationship quality. This suggests that religious divorce stigma may have a unique and negative impact on mental health outcomes among individuals who have experienced parental divorce. The focus of the study was offspring rather than divorcees, hence presenting a contextual gap.

Harkins and Harkins (2019) explored the thoughts of congregants about divorce and remarriage. The study surveyed 153 members of a Protestant church in the United States to assess their attitudes toward divorce and remarriage. The study found that while most participants believed that divorce was morally wrong, they were more accepting of remarriage under certain circumstances, such as in cases of abuse or infidelity.

Hodge and Gant (2021) undertook a qualitative study on religious coping and the influence of the church on coping with divorce. They conducted in-depth interviews with 17 individuals who had experienced divorce and were affiliated with a Christian church in the United States. Participants described both positive and negative experiences with church support, with some feeling understood by their religious community and others feeling judged or excluded.

Rathi and Pchauri (2018) explored the problems faced by divorced women in Meerut District of India in their pre and post-divorce period. They interviewed 38 divorced women who shared their various experiences. In their study, stigma was found to be a constraint to mental well-being, with some participants confessing that they tried to commit suicide as a result of social stigma they experienced as divorcees. Another review of research on the stigma of divorce in India undertaken by Thadathil and Sriram (2019) showed that divorcees suffered from social and health-related problems, linked to the stigmatization of divorce by the society's conservative social system.

Madu (2019) used a qualitative approach to examine the impact of religious beliefs on divorce in Nigeria. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 25 divorced individuals and 10 religious leaders. The study found that the stigma associated with divorce in the church contributes to divorcees feeling isolated, unwelcome, and unsupported. Religious beliefs, such as the belief in the sanctity of marriage and the importance of forgiveness, were found to discourage divorce and limit the support offered to divorcees.

Matlala and Kgatle (2017) explored the role of church leaders in promoting social acceptance of divorcees in the church. Data were collected through interviews with 10 church leaders from the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa. The study found that church leaders played an important role in promoting social acceptance of divorcees in the church by providing counseling, creating support groups, and offering practical assistance. However, the study also found that there was still some stigma associated with divorce in the church, particularly among older members.

Whereas the general theme in past empirical work is that stigma of divorce was prevalent in church and its effect is negative, the gap in contextual knowledge in Kenya is apparent.

Methodology

The study applied quantitative research methodology to gather and analyse data. This allowed for the systematic and objective measurement of variables, making it easier to identify and test relationships between variables. It was also useful for identifying trends and patterns across the dataset (Asenahabi, 2019). The target population comprised of divorcees who congregated in various evangelical churches in Nakuru County in Kenya. A structured questionnaire was administered to 121 divorcees in evangelical churches across 11 sub-counties.

The divorcees were recruited into the sample through snow-ball sampling method. This is a non-probability sampling methods used in studies where the population of interest is hard to reach or not well-defined. It involves recruiting participants through referrals from other participants, starting with a small initial group and expanding the sample size by asking each participant to refer others who fit the criteria for the study (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Questionnaire method was used to gather data. The questionnaire comprised of three sections. The first section contained 10 questions for eliciting demographic information such as gender, age, level of education, type of divorce (whether formal or informal), number of years since being divorced, cause of divorce, salvation status, Church membership status, and number of years in membership of the Church. The second section contained 5 Likert-type scale items for measuring social stigma. The third section contained 18 items classified into three sub-scales: mental wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, and social wellbeing. The scale ranged from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. A composite mean score was generated for the each sub-scale as well as and the overall scale.

The questionnaire was checked for its validity and reliability. De Souza et al. (2017) discuss three types of validity. One is content validity; whereby the expert opinion of the research supervisor was relied on to assure instrument validity. Another one is criterion validity; which compares the results of the study with some accepted or established standard. The third one is construct validity; which is about the extent to which dimensions used in research represent the underlying construct. In this study, construct validity of the instrument was assured by ensuring that all possible dimensions of each construct are reflected in the Likert scale items by anchoring the dimensions on the bio-psycho-socio-spiritual model (Saad et al., 2017) and social well-being theory (Keyes, 1998). The constructs used were clearly defined and operationalized. Subsequently, multiple indicators were used for each construct and items that represent each indicator constructed using Likert scale. The full range of the constructs under investigation were represented in both content and scope in the Likert scale.

Instrument reliability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency with which the same results can be obtained over repeated trials (Korsjen & Moser, 2018). De Souza et al. (2017) identify four types of instrument reliability: test-retest reliability, homogeneity, inter-observer reliability, and parallel forms reliability. Test-retest reliability assesses the stability of the instrument by administering it at two different times, with the expectation that the results should be similar. Homogeneity is about the internal consistency of the instrument, which means all the items in the instrument measuring the same characteristic. Homogeneity was determined statistically by running Cronbach's alpha test. Alpha coefficients of 0.7 and above are considered to signify instrument reliability (De Souza et al., 2017). Inter-observer reliability is concerned with the degree of agreement of two observers with respect to scores of the instrument. There is also parallel forms reliability whereby different instruments for evaluating the same construct are developed and administered and results compared. Instrument reliability was tested by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Table 1 shows the reliability statistics. The table shows that all the variables had an alpha coefficient >0.7 , implying that the instrument was reliable.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Variable	N of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Mental wellbeing	6	.715
Spiritual wellbeing	3	.705
Social wellbeing	8	.853
Stigma	6	.805

The process of analysing the data entailed a number of distinct stages; beginning with entry of data into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Morgan et al., 2011). The data was then be checked for errors by looking at the minimum and maximum values to determine whether the limits set were exceeded in order to make it useable, reliable and valid (Morgan et al., 2011). As part of this process, the data were examined for missing data and normality of the dataset. This was achieved through visual inspection of the distribution of the dataset by observing the histogram (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012).

Descriptive statistical techniques, such as, percentage frequencies, mean, standard deviation, and skewness were run to determine the location, spread and shape of the dataset (Mao, 2015). In order to determine the relationship between study variables, Spearman's rank correlation technique was employed to determine the direction and significance of the relationship between stigma composite score and psychosocial well-being composite scores.

Ethical considerations are important aspects of any research process and the current study was not an exception (Mustajoki & Mustajoki, 2017). The researcher adhered to ethical principles that govern scientific research such as transparency and integrity; protection of the dignity of research participants; keeping their participation anonymous; respecting their rights to privacy; and securing their voluntary participation (Comstock, 2013). According to Beckmann (2017), researchers need adhere to three principles of using human subjects for research, which forms the bedrock of research ethics: protecting participants' autonomy and according them courteous and respectful treatment; maximizing their benefit and minimizing any potential harm from their participation in the study; and acting with justice and fairness with respect to matters, such as, administration of the cost and benefits to participants by ensuring non-discrimination and non-exploitation of the participants.

The ethical measures in this study were detailed in an informed consent form, which explained the purpose of the study and disclosed how the data was used, so not to infringe on participants' freedom of choice (Beckmann, 2017). The purpose of the study and implications of the study to research participants were explained prior to obtaining their informed consent. The form also outlined the data protection measures, that were taken and the treatment of the data once the study is completed. Participants were granted the opportunity to withdraw their participation at any point, before or during the data collection process. This, however, lapsed once the data collection process has been completed. The participation of the respondents were kept strictly confidential, and they were required not to disclose their identity anywhere on the instrument. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee at Pan Africa Christian University.

Results

Demographic results showed that 90.2% of the respondents had children, 78.1% dissolved their marriage informally, had been in a come-we-stay marriage (44.3%) or had customarily married (30.3%), were female (63.1%), aged between 26 and 45 years (67.2%)

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed on the items of the stigma of divorce to establish the measure of each item of stigma of divorce. Table 2 shows the results of the descriptive analysis of the stigma of divorce.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Stigma of Divorce items

Items	N	Min	Max	\bar{x}	σ_x
The way the church talks about divorce makes an already bad situation worse	121	1	5	2.94	1.463
I feel like divorcees have been neglected by the church	121	1	5	2.88	1.170
I feel embarrassed interacting with other church members	121	1	5	2.53	1.272
I feel excluded, devalued and shamed in Church	121	1	5	2.50	1.316
The way I am treated by the church makes me feel enthusiastic about attending church service altogether	121	1	5	3.56	1.244

An observation of the results in table 2 suggest that the prevalence of stigma of divorce in Evangelical churches in Nakuru County moderate. This is because most of the scores were below cut-off point, with negative talks about divorce yielding the highest mean score on a 5-point scale ($\bar{x}=2.94$, $\sigma_x=1.463$, $N=121$), followed by feelings of neglect by the church ($\bar{x}=2.88$, $\sigma_x=1.170$, $N=121$), feeling embarrassed interacting with other church members ($\bar{x}=2.53$, $\sigma_x=1.272$, $N=121$), and feeling excluded, devalued and shamed ($\bar{x}=2.50$, $\sigma_x=1.316$, $N=121$). In contrast, the mean score obtained on a 5-point scale for feeling enthusiastic about attending church service due to treatment experienced in church was moderately high ($\bar{x}=3.56$, $\sigma_x=1.244$, $N=121$).

Psychosocial wellbeing of divorcees was analysed by aggregating the sub-scale scores. Descriptive analysis of the composite mean scores for psychosocial well-being sub-scales is

presented in table 3. The table displays the minimum (Min), maximum (Max), mean (\bar{x}) and standard deviation (σx) score for each sub-scale.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Psychosocial Well-being Sub-Scale Scores

Psychosocial well-being sub-scale	N	Min	Max	\bar{x}	σx
Spiritual wellbeing	121	1	5	4.14	.757
Mental wellbeing	121	1	5	3.97	.680
Social wellbeing	121	1	5	3.57	.768

Table 3 reveals that the score for spiritual wellbeing was the highest on a 5-point scale ($\bar{x}=4.14$, $\sigma x=.757$, $N=121$), followed by high mental wellbeing score ($\bar{x}=3.97$, $\sigma x=.680$, $N=768$), while the score for social wellbeing was above average ($\bar{x}=3.57$, $\sigma x=.768$, $N=121$).

Correlation analysis was run between divorce stigma in the church and respondents psychosocial wellbeing facets. Table 4 presents the correlation output at $p<.01$.

Table 4 Correlation of Divorce with Psychosocial Wellbeing Dimensions

			1	2	3	4
Spearman's rho	1. Divorce	Correlation Coefficient	1.000			
	Stigma in	Sig. (2-tailed)	.			
	the Church	N	121			
	2. Mental	Correlation Coefficient	-.241**	1.000		
	Wellbeing	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008	.		
		N	121	121		
	3. Spiritual	Correlation Coefficient	-.159	.590**	1.000	
	Wellbeing	Sig. (2-tailed)	.084	.000	.	
		N	121	121	121	
	4. Social	Correlation Coefficient	-.264**	.332**	.507**	1.000
	Wellbeing	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.000	.000	.
		N	121	121	121	121

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 shows that divorce stigma in the church was negatively correlated with psychosocial wellbeing of respondents; with stigma having the strongest effect size on social wellbeing ($r=.264$, $p<.01$, $N=121$), followed by mental well ($r=.241$, $p<.01$, $N=121$), and lastly, spiritual wellbeing ($r=.159$, $p>.01$, $N=121$). The results suggest that psychosocial wellbeing of respondents decreased with increase of stigma in the church although the influence relationship was weak. The table also reveals that the influence of stigma of divorce on divorcee wellbeing was only statistically significant with respect to social and mental wellbeing, but not spiritual wellbeing. The findings imply there was a differential effect of stigma of divorce on psychosocial wellbeing dimensions.

Conclusion

This study purposed to establish the prevalence levels of divorce stigma in evangelical churches in Nakuru and whether the established stigma of divorce differentially affected the spiritual, mental and social wellbeing of divorcees. Conclusion can be drawn that divorcees experienced

stigma of divorce in the church, albeit at muted prevalence levels. Stigma of divorce was most experienced in the way the church talked about divorce, which worsened what was already a bad episode in their lives. This was followed by a sense of neglect of divorcees by the church, and to some extent, feelings of embarrassment when interacting with other church members. This is resonant to Hille's (2017) estimation of the likelihood of societal humiliation at Church, whereby he advanced an argument that divorcees may struggle with embarrassment and guiltiness over ways in which they feel responsible for their marital breakdown. There is a general consensus among churches that marriage is a sacred union that should not be broken. Therefore, divorce may be viewed as a failure or a sin, which could lead to feelings of shame or guilt for those who have gone through the process. This belief may be reinforced through religious teachings and sermons, making it difficult for divorcees to feel accepted or supported within the church.

The study has demonstrated that the influence of stigma of divorce on spiritual, mental, and social wellbeing of divorcees was not uniform. This has implications on programming interventions and theorizing wellbeing outcomes of divorce stigma in the church. The differential effect is important because it helps to identify the specific aspects of a psychosocial wellbeing of divorcees that are most adversely affected by social stigma. The study points to a more nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which stigma affects divorcees. In this case, stigma of divorce did not materially affect spiritual wellbeing, meaning that spiritual interventions would add limited value. Instead, the results call for more attention to social wellbeing interventions, meaning that programming should aim to prevent stigma that adversely affects divorcee's social wellbeing. For example, interventions could focus on improving social support networks and reducing social isolation among divorcees. The Church, in collaboration with the marriage and family therapists, should organize programs in which they share and sensitize the rest of the Church members on how to interact with the divorced members of the Church in a manner that makes them feel included and cared for.

Although minimal, the established differential effects of stigma in the church on divorcee's psychosocial wellbeing facets invite scholarly attention to the need for development of more accurate theories about how stigma in the church influence a divorcee wellbeing. This understanding can help researchers to develop more nuanced models of how stigma affects well-being. In overall, what is apparent from this study is that the relationship between stigma in the church and psycho-social wellbeing of divorcees is complex and therefore, further scrutiny in future studies may be necessary.

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