

Church Policy On Divorce, Coping Styles, And Psychosocial Well-Being Of Divorcees In Evangelical Churches In Nakuru, Kenya

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Abstract:

Background: Incidences of divorce have become rampant among Christian couples. As a result, churches have come up with policies on divorce to guide how they respond to divorcees as a growing demographic group. However, some policies may make an already bad situation worse, necessitating effective coping styles. This study examined divorcee psychosocial well-being in light of Church policy on divorce in selected Evangelical Churches in Nakuru County. Specially, the study sought to establish the predominant policy adopted by evangelical churches in the county with a view to establish the implications on divorcee wellbeing. A secondary objective of the study was to determine the coping styles of divorcees in light of church policy on divorce and what it portends for the psychosocial wellbeing of divorcees in the church.

Materials and Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study design was used. The study was conducted among 121 divorcees in selected evangelical churches in Nakuru County in Kenya. Participants were recruited into the study through snowball sampling method. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed through descriptive statistical techniques in SPSS.

Results: The lesser evil principle characterized the policy on divorce applied in Evangelical Churches in Nakuru County. Divorcees exhibited high spiritual wellbeing, followed by mental wellbeing, and lastly, social wellbeing. Their wellbeing was underpinned by spiritual coping styles.

Conclusion: The lesser evil principle promotes psychosocial wellbeing of divorcees. Church leaders and members of congregation should be trained on how to respond to the problem of divorce in church in a manner that promote the wellbeing of divorce and draw them near to God.

Key Word: Church Policy on Divorce, Coping Styles, Psychosocial Wellbeing, Spiritual Coping

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I. Introduction

Incidences of divorce have become rampant among Christian marriages in spite of the many counselling programs that are conducted for prospective spouses by their respective Churches (Abalos, 2018). A research done by Barna (2013) in America, for instance, found that the percentage of born-again Christians who divorced exceeded the national average by two points. According to Ama (2018), divorce is a life shattering experience, not to mention that it is a violation of the will of God and a frustration of His purpose besides the pain of rejection and disillusion that the parties undergo. Studies have indicated that divorcees are significantly more likely to be treated for mental illnesses than the average person (Hille, 2017). Literature reports poor mental health outcomes associated with a struggle at the end of marriage, including a 23 percent higher mortality rate (Blum, 2018).

There are several policy options that guide the response of churches to the issue of divorce (Lagat, 2018). One of them is the rigorist standpoint, which maintains that a marriage cannot be dissolved and, therefore, divorce is not acceptable. According to Kirimi (2019), Catholic Church policy is such that once a couple has received the sacrament of marriage, it can never be ended in God's eyes. Even if the said person got a civil divorce, the Catholic Church assumes that they are still married. Further, that Catholics believe that human beings lack the authority to put asunder what God has joined together. The Church, therefore, takes a stern stand on the matter by instituting punitive disciplinary measures that range from disbarment from receiving Holy Communion to excommunication from the Church (Jenkins, 2020).

The no-divorce policy, however, is not shared with all Christian Churches across the denominations, as there are some denominations that make exception to the no-divorce police on the strength of the proclamation by Jesus in Matthew 5:23, implying that he made exception where there is evidence of adultery. Jenkins (2020) observed that some Churches, like the United Methodist Church, while not favouring divorce, do recognize its inevitability in some cases. However, the exception in the case of adultery did not begin with this Church.

Doxiadis (2020) argue that the Greek Orthodox world has consistently accepted in principle the possibility of divorce. He documents that in the Byzantine Empire, the Church recognised various grounds for divorce, which apparently favoured husbands over their wives, though not entirely prohibiting wives from seeking divorce. This discrimination may portend differential effects on the social and emotional well-being of divorcees.

The second way is the legislative perspective which grants divorce on account of adultery - based on Jesus' teaching and desertion based on the teaching by Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:15 (Lagat, 2018). Styles (2014) drew from the teachings of Jesus to explicate that the grounds for divorce among Christians was adultery. Lagat (2018) further observes that there have been theological arguments in favour of divorce that takes this legalistic based on precedence. From a theological standpoint, some Churches have held that God set precedence on this matter by divorcing his wife Israel due to unfaithfulness. Thus, human beings are in order to imitate God and divorce their spouses on grounds of infidelity as implied in Jeremiah 3:8.

Meier (2017) faults misinterpretation of the term adultery which some Churches have used as an exception and expands the definition further by suggesting that, even spousal abuse can pass for adultery and provide grounds for divorce. His policy on the issue of divorce is that, while it is a painful experience, "sometimes it is the key out of prison that allows personal healing to begin" (Meier, 2017, p. 58). In such a case, Kostenbeiger (2004) argues that separation should be allowed and a determination can be made to dissolve a marriage that has been violated by adultery, and where restoration of the marriage has been difficult. Subsequently, Kostenbeiger (2004) takes the position that the innocent party should be treated as if single or unmarried.

Another approach is the double standard way, which put more restrictions of grounds for divorce to Christians than it does to non-Christians based on 1 Corinthians 7:11,15, which has been referred to by some scholars as the Pauline Privilege (Jackson, 2018, as cited in Lagat, 2018). In this case, couples who are believers are not permitted to divorce each other, but in the case where one spouse is an unbeliever and decides to leave the marriage, then divorce under such ground is permissible.

Lagat (2018) talks of the lesser evil approach that is akin to the liberal approach. In this approach, the lesser of two evils is taken. This is where by cruelty, desertion or deprivation of sex can be used as grounds for annulment of marriage. On this respect, it has also been argued that Christians have been called to peace. Parallels have also been drawn with Old Testament teaching in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which implied that, divorce was permissible on grounds of indecency. Some Churches try to strike a balance between the letters of Jesus teaching with its spirit by appealing for grace. Jenks (2016) examined divorce among Christian Jews from four Protestant denominations: the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Southern Baptist Church, and the Mennonites. The first two represented the more liberal Protestant denominations and the latter two were more conservative in their approach to family issues. The study established that, United Methodist Church was certainly not in favour of divorce but it recognised its inevitability in some cases.

The Church is important in creating social support systems that make post-divorce ministries accessible to divorcees, and in making the environment conducive for divorcees to utilize counselling programs (Koniczny, 2016). However, it is seen to be out of step with the reality of society with regards to its policy on divorce (Hille, 2017). Styles (2014) examined the history, repercussions, and policy on divorce in the Christian world. The intention of the study was to offer guidance to couples on the verge of divorce by drawing their attention to the aetiology and consequences of divorce and offering them a prescriptive model for strengthening their marriage bond. Findings from historical reviews suggest that the Church has never taken divorce favourably (Dane, 2007). Doxiadis (2020) further recounts that under Ottoman rule, Orthodox Christians were often able to expand their options to dissolve unwanted marriages by appealing to Islamic courts, forcing the Orthodox Church to progressively loosen the restrictions on divorce. However, he argues that, the ease of divorce came under increasing attack from moralists and early feminists dramatically changed the tide, leading to a reintroduction of restrictions of grounds for divorce.

A wide range of coping styles, used by divorcees, exists with varying degrees of effectiveness for their well-being in light of the church's policy on divorce (Kreyenfield & Trappe, 2020). Broad categories of coping styles have been identified and classified into positive coping (adaptive coping) if they weaken the impact of post-divorce stressors on well-being and negative coping (maladaptive coping) if impacts on well-being are strengthened (Monahan, 2018; Paysnick, 2015). This means that strategies of dealing with post-divorce stress can either facilitate policy-induced adjustment and well-being of divorcees or worsen the situation (Kolodziej-Zaleska & Przysta-Basista, 2016). However, limited empirical research has examined the subject of church policy on divorce among Christians in Kenya and what it portends for the divorcees' wellbeing. It is against this background; therefore, that the current study examined divorcee psychosocial well-being in light of Church policy on divorce in selected Evangelical Churches in Nakuru County. Specially, the study sought to establish the predominant policy adopted by evangelical churches in the county with a view to establish the implications on divorcee wellbeing. A secondary objective of the study was to determine the coping styles of divorcees in light of church policy on divorce and what it portends for the psychosocial wellbeing of divorcees in the church.

II. Material And Methods

Study design: A descriptive cross-sectional study design. The main aim was to provide a snapshot of the psychosocial wellbeing of divorcees in Nakuru County in light of the prevailing church policy on divorce and their coping mechanisms adopted by the divorcees in church.

Study Location: The study was conducted among divorcees in selected evangelical churches in Nakuru County in Kenya. The research was conducted on individuals who had gone through a divorce and were living in 11 different Sub-Counties within Nakuru County. These Sub-Counties are Nakuru Town East, Nakuru Town West, Njoro, Molo, Gilgil, Naivasha, Kuresoi North, Kuresoi South, Rongai, Subukia, and Bahati.

Study Duration: November 2022 to December 2022.

Sample size: 121 divorcees.

Sample size calculation: The sample size was distributed equally across the 11 sub-counties that together form Nakuru County. This was done in order to increase the precision of estimates from each sub-county.

Subjects & selection method: The research subjects were divorcees who attended Evangelical churches in Nakuru County. Participants were recruited into the study through snowball sampling method. This is whereby the initial participants were selected from among divorcees introduced to the researcher by church leaders in the respective evangelical churches. These initial participants were then asked to refer others who met the study criteria, and the process continued until the desired sample size was reached (Cheng et al., 2020).

Inclusion criteria:

1. Members of Evangelical churches who were divorcees.
2. Both male and female divorcees.
3. Aged ≥ 18 years

Exclusion criteria

1. Divorcees in Nakuru County who are non-evangelicals.

Procedure methodology

A structured questionnaire was physically administered to the research participants. The questionnaire contained Likert scale items developed by the researcher. The items were measured on a 5-point scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Church policy on divorce as a construct was measured using an inventory that represented five church policy standpoints: rigorist standpoint, legislative perspective, Pauline privilege, lesser evil principle, and the liberal approach. Coping styles examined included: religious/spiritual coping, travelling, walking, and self-distraction. 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).

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistical analysis was employed to analyse the data. Item statistics were first computed, then a composite mean index was generated through simple aggregation of the items to measure each construct. The results were presented in tables from which interpretation was conducted.

III. Result

Descriptive statistics for the scores on church policy on divorce is presented in Table 1. The table shows the mean and standard deviation scores on respondents' rating of church policy on divorce on a 5-point scale. The scores corresponding to the respective church policy on divorce are ranked in order from highest to lowest.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Church policy on Divorce

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Lesser evil principle: My Church does not encourage divorce but accepts people who opt to divorce on the grounds of cruelty, abuse, and fear for their life	121	1	5	4.00	1.286
Liberal approach: My Church does not encourage divorce but accepts people who opt for divorce due to abandonment, desertion, or irreconcilable differences	121	1	5	3.46	1.285
Rigorist standpoint: My Church does not allow or accept divorce for any reason	121	1	5	3.25	1.364
Legislative perspective: My Church allows divorce in case of marital unfaithfulness only	121	1	5	3.14	1.311
Pauline privilege: In my Church, divorce between a believer and non-believer is accepted, but divorce between two believers is not allowed	121	1	5	2.14	1.255

Table 1 shows that the lesser evil principle was the most predominant church policy on divorce among evangelical churches in Nakuru County (M=4.00, SD=1.286). This was followed by the liberal approach (M=3.46, SD=1.285), rigorist standpoint (M=3.25, SD=1.364), and legislative perspective (M=3.14, SD=1.311). The table indicates that the Pauline privilege was the least observed policy on divorce among evangelical churches in Nakuru (M=2.14, SD=1.255).

Descriptive Statistics of Coping Styles

Table 2 presents the descriptive analysis of coping style items as well as the composite score. The table shows the mean and standard deviation rating scores on a 5-point scale.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Coping Style items

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
I often turn to the bible for comfort whenever the effects of divorce take a toll on me	121	1	5	4.39	.833
I regularly commit my situation to God whenever I feel depressed due to the divorce	121	1	5	4.36	.815
I try to find ways to distract myself from thoughts about my divorce	121	1	5	3.96	1.128
I attend church services regularly in order to cope with divorce	121	1	5	3.76	1.218
Whenever I feel depressed due to my divorce status, I go for a walk or other form of exercise	121	1	5	3.57	1.251
I cope with post-divorce stress by traveling a lot	121	1	5	2.94	1.266
Coping with Divorce Composite Score	121	1	5	3.83	.71312

The results, as shown in the table suggest that many of the respondents used turned to the Bible as a coping mechanism whenever the effects of divorce took a toll on them (\bar{x} =4.39, σ =0.833). From the study, respondents resorted to the Bible as a source of comfort and solace when they were overwhelmed by the effects of divorce. The table also indicates that most of the respondents used prayer as a means of coping with their depression which results from their feelings of divorce (\bar{x} =4.36, σ =0.815, N=21). Other coping styles which were more favoured by respondents included distractions (\bar{x} =3.96, σ =1.128, N=121) and attending Church services to cope with the divorce (\bar{x} =3.76, σ =1.318, N=21) and engaging in physical exercises (\bar{x} =3.57, σ =1.251, N=121). The least rated copying style were traveling (\bar{x} =2.94, σ =1.266, N=121). The general analysis of the different aspects of coping styles revealed that the Church and everything concerning religiosity took precedence in the coping styles of the respondents.

Descriptive Statistics for Mental Well-being

Descriptive statistical analysis was performed on the items about the mental well-being of the respondents. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the mental well-being measures. Table 4.12 shows the descriptive statistics of the measures of mental well-being

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Mental Well-being Items

Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
I pursue goals that give meaning to my life	121	1	5	4.48	.895
I face challenges in life	121	1	5	4.13	1.134
I focus on my personal development as a divorcee	121	1	5	4.11	1.228
I navigate my environment in a way that agrees with my values	121	1	5	3.94	1.002
I have a sense of independence in thought	121	1	5	3.82	1.248
Mental well-being composite score	121	1	5	3.97	.680

The scores in table 3 suggest that on average, respondents had a moderately high mental wellbeing (\bar{x} =3.97, σ_x =.680, N=121). This was mainly due to high ratings on pursuit of goals that have meaning to life (\bar{x} =4.48, σ_x =.895, N=121), taking challenges head on (\bar{x} =4.13, σ_x =1.134, N=121), focus on personal development (\bar{x} =4.11, σ_x =1.228, N=121), navigating the environment in a way that agrees to personal values (\bar{x} =3.94, σ_x =1.002, N=121), and having a sense of independence in thought (\bar{x} =3.82, σ_x =1.248, N=121).

Descriptive Statistics for Spiritual Well-being

Spiritual well-being items were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the measure of the individual items on the spiritual well-being. Table 4 shows the results of the analysis. It shows the minimum and maximum values in the responses, the mean and standard deviation.

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis of the Spiritual Well-being

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel connection with God	121	1	5	4.36	.999
I have a sense of purpose in life	121	1	5	4.10	1.221
I feel at peace with members of my Church community	121	1	5	3.98	1.060
Spiritual wellbeing composite score	121	1	5	4.14	.757

The results in table 4 suggests that on average, respondents had a high spiritual wellbeing as indicated by a composite mean rating of 4 on a 5=point scale (\bar{x} =4.14, σ_x =.757, N=121). This was mainly attributed to the high scores obtained on feeling connection with God (\bar{x} =4.36, σ_x =.999, N=121), having a sense of purpose in life (\bar{x} =4.10, σ_x =1.221, N=121) and feeling at peace with members of the church community (\bar{x} =3.98, σ_x =1.060, N=121).

Descriptive Statistics for Social Well-being

Descriptive analysis was used to analyze the individual items describing social well-being as shown in table 5. The table shows the minimum and maximum values, mean and the standard deviation scores on a 5-point scale.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics of social well-being

Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
I feel comfortable being a part of the Church community	121	1	5	3.89	1.060
I feel accepted in Church just as I am	121	1	5	3.75	1.149
I feel a sense of belonging in Church	121	1	5	3.72	1.139
I feel a sense of belonging in my family	121	1	5	3.65	1.054
I feel valued and have a sense of worth in Church	121	1	5	3.61	1.157
I feel accepted as a member of the community	121	1	5	3.52	1.137
I feel valued by my friends	121	1	5	3.30	1.138
Social well-being composite score	121	1	5	3.57	.768

Table 5 indicates that the social well-being score was moderately high (\bar{x} =3.57, σ_x =.768, N=121), suggesting that respondents had above average social well-being. In terms of individual items, feeling comfortable

being part of the Church community had the highest mean rating on a 5-point scale (\bar{x} =3.89, σ_x =1.060, N =121), followed by feeling accepted in Church unconditionally (\bar{x} =3.75, σ_x =1.149, N =121), feel a sense of belonging in Church (\bar{x} =3.72, σ_x =1.139, N =121), feeling valued and a sense of self-worth in the church (\bar{x} =3.61, σ_x =1.157, N =121). The table reveals that the least rated measure of social wellbeing was feeling valued by friends (\bar{x} =3.30, σ_x =1.138, N =121), and feeling accepted as a member of the community (\bar{x} =3.52, σ_x =1.137, N =121).

IV. Conclusion

The broad aim of this study was to establish the psychosocial well-being of divorcees in light of Church policy on divorce in selected Evangelical Churches in Nakuru County. This study has demonstrated that the psychosocial wellbeing of the average divorcee in the evangelical churches generally good. Specifically, their spiritual wellbeing was in the best state, followed by mental wellbeing, and lastly, social wellbeing. The wellbeing of divorcees in the evangelical churches were explained by a sense of communion with God and purpose in life as well as tranquillity in the body of Christ. Divorcees in the evangelical churches in Nakuru County pursued goals that gave meaning to their lives, faced challenges head on, and focused on their personal development. They also had a sense of independence in thought, and navigated their environment in a way that was in accord with their own values. As a result, they were comfortable being part of the church community, and had a sense of self-worth. The divorcees thus exhibited a complete manifestation of psychosocial wellbeing that relates to the notion advanced in literature (Saad et al., 2017), namely, the realization of ultimate meaning, purpose and significance, in relation to oneself, family, others, community nature, and the sacred. These findings are consistent with the results of a study by Platovnjak (2015) which investigated whether divorce cut a divorcee's ties to Christ and the Church and found, that contrary to common belief, divorce actually stimulated most of the divorced persons to grow spiritually.

Potentially underlying the generally positive psychosocial wellbeing of divorcees in the evangelical churches was the fact that the lesser evil principle whereby the churches do not encourage divorce but accept people who opt to divorce on the grounds of cruelty, abuse, and fear for their life characterised church policy on divorce. It was also noteworthy that the liberal approach whereby the churches do not encourage divorce but accept people who opt for divorce due to abandonment, desertion, or irreconcilable differences was the second most manifest church policy among the evangelical churches represented in the study sample. These results are consistent with results of Jenks's (2018) study of four Protestant denominations which found that half of the churches under review took a liberal approach to their response to the issue of divorce in church. The results contradicts the argument that the church is seen to be out of step with the reality of society with regards to its policy on divorce (Hille, 2017). The results signal a departure in church policy from the rigorist standpoint of the more conservatist denominations that for many years, have shaped church response to divorce. This leads to the conclusion that the evangelical churches have taken steps to be more inclusive and supportive of divorcees.

Divorcees favoured spiritual/religious coping styles to mitigate the adverse effects of divorce or retrogressive church policy on divorce. The divorcees referred to the bible as their first line of defense and regularly committed their situation to God. It can be noted that the Bible offers guidance and comfort to those who experience divorce through several passages that speak to the pain and difficulty of divorce, but also offer hope and encouragement. The bible, for instance, describes Christ as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace; and goes on to declare that the of greatness of his government and peace there will be no end (Isaiah 9:6). It can thus be concluded that the divorcee's activation of spiritual coping as a positive coping mechanism was central to their psychosocial wellbeing despite their identity as divorcees.

Church policymakers are implored to realize that while not ideal, the lesser evil principle, as demonstrated in this study, has merits as it makes the church conducive for showing compassion for those who are going through divorce, which is an already difficult and painful process. By acknowledging that divorce may sometimes be necessary, the church can offer support and comfort to those who are struggling, hence drawing them near to God. In any case, it is God who makes divorcees able to stand (Cf. Romans 14:4). That the divorcees in this study reported a strong sense of connection with God, and used his word as a protective shield against the challenges of divorce, signal the healing power of spirituality, and the fact that their divorcee status did not make them feel less Godly.

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