

Influence of Parents' Death on Psychosocial Wellbeing of Adolescents: Selected Orphanages in Nairobi, Kenya

Sébastien Kalengwe Tshamata¹, Dr. Elizabeth Ngozi Okpalaenwe²

¹Student at Marist International University College, Masters Programme of Counselling Psychology and Spirituality, Kenya

²Lecturer Marist International University College, Kenya

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Abstract: Adolescence is a transitional period that everyone goes through after infancy. In adolescence, hormonal and physical changes take place which is evident in appearance of breasts in girls and beard in boys. Socially, the adolescents expand their social circle by spending more time outside family bounds, which disorients them. This is a critical stage of their life when parents are required to offer emotional support, guidance and mentorship. The demise of a parent at this delicate period may worsen the adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing. Therefore, this study investigated the influence of parents' death on the psychosocial wellbeing of adolescent orphans in selected orphanages in Nairobi, Kenya. The study was guided by these objectives: to explore the psychosocial wellbeing of orphaned adolescents after the demise of their parents and to explicate the effects of the death of parent (s) on the psychosocial wellbeing of the adolescent orphans living in the selected orphanages. The study used a qualitative research approach. The target population was 175 while the sample size was 10 comprising 6 adolescent orphans and 4 caregivers. The respondents were purposively selected while qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews and observation. The study found out that parental death disrupts adolescent orphans emotionally and socially. It also creates scarcity of the basic needs in the lives of the orphans forcing them to look for help from orphanages. The findings of this research may help parents to prepare in advance the future of their children. Further, the study established that the affected adolescent orphans need counselling especially grief therapy in order to restore their psychosocial wellbeing.

Keywords : Caregivers; Adolescent Orphans; Orphanages; Parental Death; Psychological Wellbeing

I. Background to The Study

Among the first humans that a child comes in contact with are their biological parents. Parents are expected to stay with the children up to their maturity. Unfortunately, due to death, not every child has the chance to enjoy parental presence up to adulthood. DeLuca (2019) observes that from 140 million orphans in 2015 globally, the number has reached an estimated 153 million. Issah (2019) noted that the African continent houses 52 million orphans. Mutura (2022) and Mureithi (2022) puts the number of orphans in Kenya at 3.6 million.

The causes of death of parents differ according to circumstances, lifestyles, and standards of living. Waruru et al. (2022) presented the four leading underlying causes of death in Kenya in 2019 as follows, HIV/AIDS, hypertensive disease, other cardiovascular diseases, and cancer. Njoroge (2019) and Mafumbate (2019) affirmed that traditionally, orphans were taken care of by extended families. In Kenya, Njoroge observes that, in the 1970s this value of generosity towards orphans started crumbling due to many factors including rapid urbanisation, poverty and population growth. By the 1990s, Njoroge continues, the spread of HIV/AIDS brought about a considerable number of orphans. The increase in number of orphans and the attached stigma to the disease, made it difficult for the extended family system to care for orphans. This brought about an increase in the number of orphanages. In Kenya, the number of registered charitable organisations taking care of orphans is around 800 (Grant, 2018).

The present study focused on orphans living in three selected orphanages in Nairobi the Kenyan capital city. This study's main objective was to seek to understand the experience of adolescent orphans following the demise of their parental.

Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives; 1) To explore the psychosocial wellbeing of orphaned adolescents after the parent's death. 2) To explicate the effects of the death of (a) parent (s) on the psychosocial wellbeing of orphaned adolescents of the selected orphanages in Nairobi, Kenya.

Research Questions

Two research questions led this research; 1) after the death of parents, what is the nature of the adolescent orphans' psychosocial wellbeing 2) What are the effects of the death of parents on the psychosocial wellbeing of the adolescent orphans living in the selected orphanages?

II. Literature Review

Exploration of Psychosocial Wellbeing of Adolescent Orphans

Arifin and Salamah (2020) investigated the attitude of gratefulness among 15 adolescent orphans in Sukabumi district in Indonesia. This research used a qualitative method while data was collected using observation, interviews and documentation. Descriptive statistics was employed for data analysis. The study revealed that there was a positive relationship between being grateful and attainment of psychological wellbeing. This implies that orphans who showed gratefulness had high chances of experiencing more positive emotions than those who did not. Gratefulness can trigger wellbeing in someone whose life has been disturbed by an event like the death of a significant person like a parent. Therefore, when an adolescent orphan, living in an orphanage is too demanding to caregivers, it can be a sign of lack of gratefulness and the attitude of taking things for granted or having a sense of entitlement.

Kibachio and Mutie (2018) studied the challenges faced by orphans in Embu County, Kenya. Through stratified sampling, these researchers sampled 198 adolescents (51.3% females and 48.7% males). The majority of the respondents (92.4%) were double orphans and 7.6% had a surviving parent. Around 83.4% of the surviving parents experienced considerable health challenges and the remaining 16.6 % were healthy. The study used a descriptive research design. Interviews, observation, desk review, case studies and focus groups were employed for data collection. For data analysis, the researcher used descriptive statistics. The result indicated that the adolescents whose remaining parents were sickly for long suffer more than the parents due to psychosocial stigma, reduced financial capacity and dependence on other family members. The orphan's wellbeing was compromised due to the parental absence or inability to be cared for by the surviving parents.

Huynh et al. (2019) investigated the factors affecting the psychosocial well-being of orphan and separated children in five low and middle-income countries namely Cambodia, India, Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. One of the objectives of the research was to examine if the psychosocial wellbeing of orphans and separated children depended more on the presence of some components of quality of care rather than the care setting itself (for instance an orphanage, and foster family).

The population was 2,013 while the sample was 500 respondents randomly selected using cluster sampling in each research site. It was a 36 months longitudinal study. The result showed that four items of quality of care meaningfully forecasted child psychosocial wellbeing as presented by order of importance; 1) Food security (13.4%). 2) Shelter (10%). 3) Caregiving (8.9%). 4) Health care services (7.3%). So, no matter what was the setting of the place the orphans were living in, the most important thing that mattered was provision of the basic necessities of food, shelter, caregiving and healthcare services in that order. Lack of the four basic necessities implies that the adolescent would suffer from homelessness, malnourishment, sickness or neglect depending on the prevailing circumstances.

Effects of Parents' Death on the Orphan's Wellbeing

Tafa et al. (2018) studied the predictability of future physical illness in connection with an early loss of parents (for the children participants) or a spouse (for adult participants) in Italy. The respondents were 418 adolescents and their remaining parents. These adolescents became orphaned as early as their third anniversary of birth. Using the univariate and multivariate Cox proportional hazard regression, in six years of a longitudinal research, Tafa et al. observed both the surviving parents and their children. The respondents underwent regular medical check-ups during the six-year period of the study where they were treated for both psychopathological and physical problems. The result of the study showed that the physical illnesses were easily predictable when the adults were not showing signs of recovery. On the side of the adolescents, the prediction of health issues was possible when they were having affective troubles and dissociation. The most important predictor of physical illnesses was dissociation.

The reviewed study had many merits including the possibility of pinpointing the impact of an important loss on both the remaining spouses and the adolescents. It looks as if time on its own does not heal grief. There is need to address the issue that hurts. Through this study, it is clear that a loss of a loved one can create a dormant unsuspected psychological vulnerability which triggers physical illnesses in both widows and adolescents alike.

Juma et al. (2013) explored the impact of poverty on sexual behaviours of adolescent orphans and non-orphans in Nyanza Province, Kenya. The respondents were 147 (male and female adolescents plus their surviving parents). These participants were sampled purposively and the data collection was done through focus groups and interviews. For Juma et al., poverty due to the absence of a parent was defined as the lack of possibility to provide basic needs including food, shelter, and education.

Consequently, the adolescent orphans created ways and means of getting money to finance their basic needs such as conducting small businesses. These activities became sources of deviant behaviours like sexual experimentation, prostitution, premature marriage, resulting in unwanted pregnancies and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) like HIV. From their findings, it is clear that parental death impacts negatively the financial capability of families leading to poverty. For the adolescent orphan, a chain of actions or behaviours are set in motion after the death of a parent. These behaviours are not always in favour of a meaningful psychosocial development of an orphan.

Ndje et al. (2020) studied the impact of parentification on 5 sampled adolescents in Cameroon in a qualitative study. They used a semi-structured interview to collect data. It appeared that these adolescents took the place of their parents for various reasons including sickness followed by death; poor health of a parent, poverty followed by depression of a mother, and alcoholism of a parent. The study revealed that the 5 adolescents' ego was compromised because of playing the role of parents instead of respecting their natural growth process. Therefore, the absence of a parent in an adolescent's life is potentially harmful to their ego.

III. Methodology

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

This study used qualitative research approach and was conducted in three selected orphanages in Nairobi, Kenya. These three research sites are located in Kibera which is one of the informal settlements of Nairobi and Eastleigh, an area inhabited by a working class and middle-class. The total population was 175 which comprised of orphans and their caregivers. The sample was purposively selected and was composed of 6 adolescent orphans and 4 of their caregivers. The adolescent orphans' age varied between 10 years and 17 years old.

The main objective was to understand the influence of parental death on the psychosocial wellbeing of the adolescent orphans who were living in the three selected orphanages in Nairobi, Kenya. The study also focused on caregivers from the selected orphanages in order to give an in-depth and broad understanding of the influence of parental demise on the adolescent orphans both males and females.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Semi structured interviews and observation constituted the instruments meant for data collection. The study used two sets of interview guides; one for the adolescent orphans and the second one for the caregivers. For analysis, the researcher used content and thematic analyses. In other words, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and organised according to the themes that came out which included poverty, rejection and sexual abuse. These are some of the consequences of parental death. The aim of this procedure was to get a full meaning of the content of the interviewees' experience and understanding of the influence of parental demise on the psychosocial wellbeing of the adolescent orphans of the selected orphanages.

Demographic Information of the Interviewees

Table 1. Interviewees Demographic Information

Participants	Age	Characteristics
Caregiver A	35 years	Male with 5 years as a caregiver
Caregiver B	38 years	Female with 5 years as a caregiver
Caregiver C	Late 50s	Female with 21 years as a caregiver
Caregiver D	41 years	Female with 9 years as a caregiver
Orphan A	10 years	Male
Orphan B	13 years	Male
Orphan C	16 years	Female
Orphan D	17 years	Male
Orphan E	16 years	Female
Orphan F	15 years	Female

Table 1 shows that the age of the caregivers varied between 35 and late 50s years of age and the average years in the profession of caregiving is 10 years. The study showed that the 4 caregivers are conversant with the issues pertaining to the care for orphans in their respective orphanages. The fact that there is only one male among them does not affect the outcome of the findings. The orphans are both males and females aged between 10 and 17 years.

Exploration of Psychosocial Wellbeing of Orphaned Adolescents

The participants were asked to express their experiences as far as the psychosocial wellbeing of adolescent orphans is concerned. It appears that poverty was a common feature in the experience of orphans.

Orphan A said:

I was asked by my mum to come here (to the orphanage) to get educated. My mum and I live in a house made of iron sheets. My mother washes people's clothes for us to live. My dad died I do not know when (27 February 2023).

The idea of joining the orphanage does not come from the orphan but from his mother. It appears that the surviving parent could not raise her adolescent orphan and therefore, orphanage remained a reliable solution. Hence, the adolescent moves out of his mother's home to the orphanage to avoid the consequences of poverty.

In the same vein, Orphan C said:

My aunt has been telling me that I have to say that my father is dead even before his actual death took place. She was telling me that so that I may get some help from NGOs. I always feel guilty that I am the one who killed my father because I was saying he was dead before his death (22 February 2023).

The presence of the adolescent in the orphanage means being in search of a better place where basic needs are met and peace of mind, found. In the above experience, the adolescent's relationship with her deceased father is distorted due to guilt. To the lack of basic needs and the orphans' expectations, Caregiver C had the following to say:

When they are here (orphanage), we treat them well; they eat, they dress well, they go to school. They should feel cared for in all their needs. All the help they receive for many (orphans), orphanage is like paradise. (22 February 2023).

The orphanage's mission is to mend the disruption that has taken place in the orphan's life. The disruption comes from the absence a parent or both which prevent the orphan from acquiring basic necessities for a decent life. The orphanage becomes a provider of the basic needs for the orphans.

Caregiver C continues:

At first, they keep on talking about their diseased parents; and then they start calling the caregivers using words like mum, dad and grandparent. A lot of the orphans are traumatised not only due to the death of their dear parents but also due to the way the situation has been mishandled by the adults (22 February 2023).

The use of familiar terms like mum, dad and grandparent symbolises being part of the new social environment that the orphanage offers. Men and women who live in the orphanage can be potential reminders of rejection and abandonment that were subjected to the orphans before joining the orphanage. As a result, being part of an orphanage is a gradual process which involves accepting the reality of being separated from the people one knows such as family members. In other words, psychosocial disturbance takes place in the life of orphans before joining an orphanage.

Before joining an orphanage, the orphans experience uncertainties in every aspect of their lives because anything can happen at any time for reasons beyond their control. This conclusion is in agreement with the outcome of the research done by Kibachio and Mutie (2018) in Embu County Kenya, that observed that orphans live in permanent anxiety. No wonder some orphans resort to substance use as a coping mechanism.

The Effects of Death of Parents on the Psychosocial Wellbeing of the Adolescent Orphan

This section of the research intends to explain the effects of parental demise on the psychosocial wellbeing of the adolescent orphans. The absence of a clear explanation of the parental demise brings confusion and identity crisis. Regarding this state of affairs, Caregiver A had the following to say:

The remaining parents find challenges in explaining the death of a parent to their children; sometimes, they wait for an uncle to come explicitly for it when they find that the child can understand the meaning of death. Sometimes, they tell their children that the dead person went to work and he/she will come back. Unfortunately, the child continues hoping that the person will come back. The orphan would ask the question why the person does not come back. Sometimes, parents say,

God has taken him/her away. Consequently, the orphan grows without a clear idea of what really happened (22 February 2023).

The adolescent has the right to know what happened to their deceased parents. Half-truths do not solve the problem but worsen it while telling the truth allows the orphan to grieve.

Orphan F said:

I stopped asking my grandmother what happened to my parents because one day she answered that I should be contented with the care that she is giving me (20 February 2023).

Parental demise changes the families' internal organisation. According to Daneal (2020), due to HIV/AIDS, grandmothers have become the major caregivers of many orphans. When grandparents play the role of biological parents, the parenting style that is most likely to take place in such a case is *laissez-faire* (Kretchmar-Hendricks, 2022). This parenting style does not allow an adolescent orphan to develop the needed skills for a meaningful life.

The remaining parent and the extended family have the responsibility of bringing up such orphans. Lack of clear explanation to the orphan about what transpired may result to identity crisis. In other words, deep down in their minds, they do not know whether they are orphans or not. There is a kind of void, uncertainty and resistance to the fact that a parent or both are missing. In this case, it becomes difficult for such an orphan to go through the five steps of grief of Dr Elizabeth Ross. Similarly, the image of God is also distorted when they raise questions such as, "Which loving God will snatch a biological parent from a child who needs support, love and care?" Therefore, every orphan is in search of meaning to their parental death so as to comprehend the phenomenon of losing a dependable parent to a child.

Caregiver A says:

Even you, when you lose somebody you love, automatically things change; the way you view the world and life changes. As a child, the world becomes a scary place to be in because it takes away someone dear to you on whom you depend (22 February 2023).

The answer of caregiver A comes from observation of the psychophysiological impact of the demise of one's parent. A parental demise scares the orphan. However, after the death of their parent, the only hope that orphans have is to stay alive; as it is only when one is alive that he/she can dream of bringing positive change to one's life.

For Orphan D poverty started when his father died; he said:

Even if I have never seen my father, mum told me that after the death of my father, his siblings ordered her to vacate the house where my family was living. They told her to go anywhere she wished to raise her children and after they have grown up to take them back to them (the siblings of our father) so that they may be their slaves. So, she left our traditional area; she established herself in the Kibera slum in Nairobi. The siblings of my late father destroyed the house and sold the land (22 February 2023).

Orphan E said:

After the death of my mum her siblings told me that they were not ready to carry a burden that was not theirs. After hearing that, I understood that I had to look for a place where to live. I ended up living on the street for months before joining the orphanage (22 February 2023).

Orphan E is a child raised by a single mother. The life of this orphan became unbearable after her mother's demise; the possible reason lies in the absence of a dependable father in her life; therefore, single parenthood does not give a chance to the orphan to look for support from the other parent's side in case of death of the parent with whom the child lives.

Caregiver C said:

In some families, they don't respect the orphans. I know a family where after the death of the parents, an aunt took all the properties of the family and she did not bother to take the children; so, the children live here (orphanage) (24 February 2023).

When a parent is no more, orphans find their psychosocial adjustment very difficult to attain. They undergo a lot of emotional, physical and social difficulties. Similarly, orphans inherit parental family issues which are sources of a lot of suffering.

The 13-year-old Orphan B said:

I had to work during the weekend to earn 500 Kenyan Shillings which I used to divide between my grandmother, my friend, and myself. During the other days of the week, I am in class. The money that I used to give my grandmother helped her pay the school fees of my younger brother (10 years old). Later on, I dropped out of school to support my grandmother (23 February 2023).

Some of the adolescent orphans literally take the place of their parents; that is the process of parentification (Ndje et al., 2020). Parental demise is one of the events that hit seriously orphans forcing them to develop activities and attitudes that are detrimental to their normal development.

Orphan D said:

I cannot afford seeing my mum going every day to wash people's clothes for 500 Kenyan Shillings. She has been doing it since the day my dad died. Now, she is only in her early 40s but her joints do not support her body anymore. She has developed high blood pressure. Sometimes, I hear her talking alone. I spend time listening to her. I have developed stomach ulcers and high blood pressure due to overthinking (23 February 2023).

This is a case of confusion in parenting style between a mother and her male child which appears in the story. Bowlby (1952) finds that the reversal of roles between parents and their adolescent brings about pathological issues in the minor. In this case, the adolescent is not ready to cope with the psychological burden under which the mother is subjecting him. As a result, the minor develops some psychosomatic disorders.

Caregiver A says:

Bodies of children are badly affected after the death of their parents; they are weak after the death of their parents. Some lose weight, others lose appetite, and others become obese (22 February 2023).

The adolescent orphans feel in their bodies the impact of the death of their parents but they cannot put into words such an experience without the help of dependable adults and counsellors.

Caregiver A says:

In the situation where the father is dead, and the child is left with the mother, there is a lack of fatherly love and guidance. A father figure is missing from the family. Consequently, the child does not have a positive regard for the mother, especially, at a certain age. Orphans tend to rebel against the family members. The situation is worst when the orphan is a boy living with his mother (22 February 2023).

The death of a parent creates separation and enmity between the remaining parent and the orphan. Orphans are not consulted as far as the remarriage of their remaining parent is concerned. A male orphan is considered a potential competitor to the stepfather according to Caregiver A who said:

The mother can bring in somebody else as another father with whom the son might not get along. The son feels that he is being pushed out of the family as he is no longer the centre of his mother's attention and affection because of this man. There is a link between getting a new husband and the feeling of "I am not wanted here" experienced by the boy. Most of the time, the mother chooses the husband and sacrifices her own child. This sacrifice is in the form of neglect, abuse, and rejection which the adolescent will understand quickly through the mother's attitude (22 February 2023).

Rivalry and jealousy may start between the two males around one woman who is at the same time a mother to one and a lover to the other. It is not possible to have two cocks under the same roof. Therefore, one has to leave. The weaker one is the adolescent whose place is not next to his mother but on the street or in an orphanage.

Caregiver B said,

Sometimes, their fathers rape them and impregnate them. Some of the children when you tell them that I want to take you back to your remaining parent they start crying because of what they saw and experienced at home (23 February 2023).

A girl orphan is a potential sexual prey to her own biological father and/or to the stepfather. Being an orphan means being vulnerable to everyone due to rejection, abuse and neglect that they experience. An orphan is a loser and a potential perpetrator of the same loser's behaviours because humans tend to repeat what others did to them (Gachutha, 2018).

IV. Discussion of the Findings

Through the interview guide, various subject areas related to orphan's psychological wellbeing were discussed. They included the relationship between poverty and orphanhood, being orphan and the attitude of the remaining parent, the issue of inheritance, the impact of orphanhood and the orphan's health. Losing one's parent means grappling with the lack of basic needs

before reaching the age of maturity. This is not an enviable situation for any child in the world. This dire situation causes the adolescent orphans to look for refuge in orphanages where basic needs are provided. Therefore, joining an orphanage is a choice made by an orphan for survival. Orphanage is an unfamiliar environment as compared to an extended family setting where a child interacts with familiar faces. In contrast, in orphanages, the orphans have to slowly adapt to the new environment.

Parental demise compromises the psychosocial wellbeing of their offspring. This is the worst incidence that can happen to a minor as it obliges the child to come up with survival skills which they should be learning while under the protective care of dependable parents. Although, death is a natural phenomenon, it would help for parents to psychologically and spiritually equip their children for such eventualities in order to minimize its negative impact to the children. Similarly, parents should properly prepare their children's future so that, in case they are no more, their offspring can be financially independent. This preparation should include provision of the inheritance in a written form to avoid unnecessary suffering of the children.

The management of the orphanages should emphasize on grief counselling for all adolescent orphans. Grief is a major issue that needs to be addressed in the life of orphans. Grief has an extraordinary impact on mind, body and behaviour of orphans. Therefore, it needs to be handled properly for healing to take place in the life of adolescent orphans. The administrators of the orphanages should organise regular workshops on grief for the adolescent orphans and caregivers to attend. Such workshops are opportunities for the adolescent orphans to realise that they are not alone in such a situation. During workshops, the adolescent orphans can ask questions and interact with other people; in the process, they enlarge their social circle as well.

The administrations of the orphanages should make sure that the caregivers undergo some sessions of psychotherapy so that they may be capable of listening to the issues of the adolescent orphans without being affected; in other words, caregivers need to have no unfinished businesses that can compromise the needed care that the adolescent orphans require of them.

V. Conclusion

Parental death has a negative influence on the life of an adolescent orphan. The research showed that orphanhood affects orphans socially, psychologically, financially and spiritually, therefore putting the life of the victims in danger. As a result, phenomenon like parentification and child living on streets occur. Orphans who opt to live in orphanages, do so in order to avoid multifaceted consequences of parental death. Therefore, parental demise is likely to create a bitter reference point in an adolescent orphan's life if nothing is done to alleviate their negative conditions and bring them back to wholeness. For instance, grief counselling can bring tremendous positive change in the orphan's life.

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