

Influence of Parental Psychological Divorce on Emotional Wellbeing of In-School Adolescents in Ondo West Local Government Area, Ondo State

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Abstract

Parental psychological divorce can make the processes of cognitive, psychosocial and emotional transformations difficult during adolescence. There is dearth of literature on this phenomenon- psychological divorce and related factors in Nigeria. Hence, this study investigated the extent to which parental psychological divorce influenced emotional wellbeing of in-school adolescents in Ondo state. A cross-sectional design was adopted. Using convenient sampling technique, a total of 250 (male=101, female=149) adolescents were selected from schools in Ondo-West local government, Ondo State, Nigeria. Parental Psychological divorce was measured using the Marital stress inventory by Omoluabi (1994). Emotional wellbeing was measured using the State-trait anxiety inventory developed by Gorsuch and Spielberger (1989) and Beck Depression inventory by Berk, Brown and Steers (1996). Four hypotheses were formulated and tested using ANOVA and Independent T-test. The result indicated that Parental psychological divorce had a significant influence on emotional wellbeing with adolescents from psychologically divorced parents significantly scoring lower on emotional wellbeing than those from intact home: Depression [$F(1,248) = 42.60, p < .05, t(248) = -6.53, p < .01$] and Anxiety [$F(1,248) = 129.74, p < .05, t(248) = -11.39, p < .01$]. Sex also had significant influence with female adolescents from psychologically divorced homes scoring higher than their male counterparts on depression and anxiety [$F(1,246) = 5.12, p < .05$], [$F(1,246) = 11.07, p < .05$] respectively. Finally, independent t-test revealed that age group of the adolescents had no significant influence on Depression but did on anxiety [$t(248) = -2.06, p < .05$], while the mean values of the older adolescents on depression and anxiety were generally higher than the younger ones. Based on these findings, it was recommended that counselling and family therapies on problem solving, communication and marriage fitness be readily available to couples who are going through psychological divorce processes to redress the situation and avoid legal divorce, while supportive parenting strategies are encouraged for the adolescents especially the older ones.

Keywords: Parental psychological divorce, emotional wellbeing- anxiety and depression

Introduction

Emotional well-being is an umbrella term. Different researchers use different concepts and terms for capturing the phenomenon of emotional well-being such as self-concept and self-esteem, (Mullen, Gothe & McAuley, 2016; Rosenberg, 1965) mood, affect, quality of life, mentality and subjective well-being (Brierley, 1980; Farrell, 2018). Combat Povelly Agency (1994) explains it as person's current state of affair. Self-esteem, self-actualisation, stress, anxiety and depression are the key components of emotional well-being or mental health. According to Mental Health Foundation (2016), emotional well-being is defined as 'A positive sense of wellbeing which enables an individual to be able to function in society and meet the demands of everyday life'. Bar-on (2005) described it as the states that emerge from feelings of satisfaction with one's close

interpersonal relationships and with one's situation. Emotional well-being is a combination of happiness and life satisfaction on one end of a scale of continuum with the negative extreme as anxiety and depression. Happiness is an emotional state whereas life satisfaction addresses a more global cognitive evaluation of one's life. Both extremes tell of the well-being of the individual.

Social and emotional wellbeing in children and young people create the foundations for healthy behaviours and educational attainment. It also helps prevent behavioural problems and mental health problems. According to The Family Pediatrics Report (2003) and NICE (2013), when the family environment enables their needs to be met, children generally turn out well both socially and psychologically. They are happy and confident, not anxious or depressed and their parents are satisfied with their lives and marriages. Psychological divorce is one of the factors that can threaten this emotional stability in the children.

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Psychological divorce is a disagreement in which couples living together under the same roof are separated from all activities and responsibility such as sexual activities and family up-keep (Saposnek & Chip, 2004). This type of divorce does not necessarily involve the legal dissolution of marriage. Parental psychological divorce is a growing social problem and may be more traumatic than other forms of divorce such as the legal divorce, willful separation, and annulment or marriage dissolution (Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Greanings, 2006; Miller, 2013). This form of divorce among all others is the most prevalent, the most psychologically painful and the most silent destroyer of many of the victims and their children and indeed, the destroyer of most marriages (Ayoub, Deutsch & Maraganorr, 1999; Baydar, 1988; Strohschein, 2012). Marital conflicts in general and psychological divorce, in particular, affect not only the couples and their families but also societies and economies. It affects physical health, wage-earning potential and economic security, work-force impacts, welfare services, and outcomes related to the age of first marriage (Kreager & Felson, 2013). When there is psychological divorce between couples, they usually adjust to doing things separately and helping their children to yield to their own opinions as against those of the other spouse; including even learning disruptive family behavioural patterns, (Abekhale, 2010; Miller, 2013; Saposnek & Chip, 2004). Such couples further persuade their relations to accept their changed statuses (Formby & Charlin, 2014).

Parental psychological divorce has been associated with a number of indexes of maladjustment in adolescents, including aggression, depression, conduct disorder, anxiety (Emery, 1982). On-going conflict blocks communication and aids power imbalances between parents which are problematic for the child and family functioning (Weissbourd, 1995). Children who experience their parents go through a psychological divorce are susceptible to depression, being withdrawn, acting out and acting differently. When children watch their parents go through a psychological divorce, the actions of the parents affect the children all through their childhood and eventually adulthood. Some researchers feel younger children are more affected especially those who have childhood problems prior to the time of divorce Aileen O'Gorman (1999) and older children fare

better because they are more mature and are in the process of separating from their parents anyway.

Contrary opinion and findings state that psychological divorce can have devastating effects on children regardless of their age. Researchers have found that as they navigate through adulthood, children are insecure, even more so than when they were children because no matter how independent children might turn out to be, they need to anchor on family stability as never before. The adolescents experience premature detachment from their parents. Brian (1993) revealed that they stand helpless and may become frustrated that they might strive towards unreal and unattainable emotional compensation. Also, their feelings of insecurities, inadequacy and helplessness may falsely suggest that they did something wrong, thus sharing in the responsibility of the psychological divorce.

Observations have been made by the researcher of both emotional and psychological maladjustments with consequent low academic achievement and poor self-concept among in-school adolescents of Ondo-West Local Government. These are attested to by some literature. Agokei and Oluwaseun (2018) in their study titled Impact of Hope and Self-Affirmation on the Psychological Well-Being of Out-of-School Adolescents in Ondo State. Although the respondents used in the study who were out of school adolescents, nevertheless a low level of psychological wellbeing was observed among a number of the adolescents in Ondo state whether in or out of school. It is necessary to find out if psychological divorce is a key factor in this. More so, there is a dearth of literature in Nigeria on the phenomenon of psychological divorce. This study is thus hoped to fill in the gap.

Theories

The research was guided by Stafford (2008) Social exchange theory, Multidimensional model of well-being (Ryff, 1989, 1995) and Beck (1967) Psychological Theory of Depression.

Social exchange theories: Social exchange is a social psychological and sociological perspective that explores social change and stability as a process of negotiated exchange between parties. Social exchange theory posits that all human relationships are formed by the way of subjective cost-benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. Costs are the element of rational life that has negative values to a person, such as the effort put into a relationship and the negatives of a partner. The cost can be time, money, effort etc. while Rewards are the elements of a relationship that have positive value (reward can be sense of acceptance, support and companionship etc).

The social exchange perspective argues that people calculate the overall worth of a particular relationship by subtracting its costs from the rewards it provides. The theory explains that if the costs of the relationship are higher than the rewards, such as a lot of effort or money put into a relationship and not reciprocated, this could lead to issues. Relationships among spouses could be seen from the perspective of this theory as a number of times partners complain about efforts into their marriages not being appreciated or reciprocated.

Multidimensional model of well-being: The model includes six distinct components of emotional wellness: self-acceptance, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relations with others, personal growth and autonomy. In combination, these dimensions encompass a breadth of wellness that includes positive evaluations of one's self and one's past life (Self-Acceptance), a sense of continued growth and development as a person (Personal Growth), the belief that one's life is purposeful and meaningful (Purpose in Life), the possession of quality relations with others

(Positive Relations With Others), the capacity to manage effectively one's life and surrounding world (Environmental Mastery), and a sense of self-determination (Autonomy). If any of the parties in a marriage feel threatened in one or more of these components, it could affect the relationships in that home. On the other hand, psychological divorce could result in the threat of these components affecting emotional well being.

Depression theory: Beck identified three mechanisms that he thought were responsible for depression- The cognitive triad (of negative automatic thinking), Negative self schemas and Errors in Logic (faulty information processing). All these could affect the three parties involved in marriage- husband, wife, children as their self concept is affected, they are also overwhelmed with negative automatic thoughts, develop irrational thought processes- overgeneralising little fault or one-off negative behaviour from parents or from any of the parties, being selective in perception. Hopelessness is learnt in this situation which could lead to depression in the children or even the couple.

Hypotheses

1. Adolescents from psychologically divorced parents will significantly score lower on emotional wellbeing than those from peaceful homes.
2. Female adolescents whose parents are undergoing psychological divorce will significantly score lower on emotional wellbeing than their male counterparts.
3. Children in the late adolescents whose parents are psychologically divorced will significantly score higher on emotional wellbeing than those in early to mid-adolescence.

Method

A pilot study was conducted prior to the study to ascertain the psychometric properties of instruments used and also to enhance its suitability and relevance to the constructs being examined. Simple random sampling technique by balloting was employed to select five out of the eight secondary/high schools in Ondo-west local government to meet the requirement of two-thirds of the target population in survey research. Two of the schools were used for a pilot study, after which the participants that constituted the actual field study were conveniently selected from the remaining three. The authorisation was got from the principals of the secondary or high schools for the pilot and main study. Permission was granted by the principals of schools and the students were addressed. Teachers also helped to solicit the cooperation of the students. Those who were willing to participate in the study were given instruments to take home to their parents to fill. This was after their consent was got and they had been given the ones they were to respond to. Questionnaires were administered in each school the next day to the students. Questionnaires filled by students and their parents were then retrieved from them. The procedure was carried out giving consideration to ethical issues such as parental consent and adolescent assent. Using purposive and convenient sampling techniques, questionnaires were administered to the participants. The respondents were briefed on the purpose of the research and they were also informed about the confidentiality of their responses. They were told participation was purely voluntary and that they could withdraw whenever they felt uncomfortable to continue with the research. Anonymity was ensured as names were not required. The questionnaires were distributed to participants who consented and corresponding numbers were put at the back of the questionnaires for both students and their parents for the purpose of identification. The students'

questionnaires were filled and collected immediately. Out of 260 questionnaires administered, 250 were valid for analysis.

Results

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis one which stated that Adolescents from psychologically divorced homes will significantly score lower on emotional well-being than those from intact homes was evaluated using t- independent test. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 1: Summary of Independent t-test of Parental Psychological Divorce on Emotional Wellbeing

Dependent Variables	Parental Psychological Divorce	N	Mean	SD	df	T	P
Depression	Intact homes	123	11.28	10.33	248	-6.53	< .01
	Psychologically divorced homes	127	19.51	9.61			
Anxiety	Intact homes	123	82.12	16.06	248	-11.39	< .01
	Psychologically divorced homes	127	115.09	27.95			

The results in Table one showed that parental psychological divorce had significant influence on depression [$t(248) = -6.53, p < .01$] and anxiety [$t(248) = -11.39, p < .01$]. Table 2 shows that children from psychologically divorced homes exhibited a higher level of depression [Mean = 19.51, SD = 9.61] and anxiety [Mean = 115.09, SD = 27.95] compared to adolescents from intact homes: Depression [Mean = 11.28, SD = 10.33] and Anxiety [Mean = 82.12, SD = 16.06]. This simply implies that adolescents from psychologically divorced homes scored lower on emotional well-being as a result of their higher scores on depression and anxiety when compared to those from intact homes. Therefore, Hypothesis one was accepted.

Hypothesis two which is that Female adolescents whose parents are undergoing psychological divorce will significantly score lower on emotional well-being than their male counterparts were evaluated using 2 x2 ANOVA. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 2: Mean and SD Scores of the Groups in Emotional Well-being

Depression		Groups		
Psychological divorce	Sex	Mean	SD	N
	Female	11.96	10.91	79
Intact Homes	Male	10.05	9.20	44
	Total	11.28	10.33	123
	Female	21.26	8.34	70
Psychologically divorced homes	Male	17.37	10.67	57
	Total	19.51	9.61	127
	Female	16.33	10.81	149
Total	Male	14.18	10.65	101
	Total	15.46	10.78	250
Anxiety		Groups		
Psychological divorce	Sex	Mean	SD	N
	Female	84.43	15.58	79
Intact Homes	Male	77.98	16.25	44
	Total	82.12	16.06	123
	Female	120.87	22.94	70
Psychologically divorced homes	Male	108	31.87	57
	Total	115.09	27.95	127
	Female	101.55	26.58	149
Total	Male	94.92	30.10	101
	Total	98.87	28.18	250

Table 3: Summary of 2 X 2 ANOVA showing the Influence of Gender and Psychological Divorce on Emotional Well-being

DV	Source	SS	df	MS	F	P
Depression	Psychological Divorce	4108.61	1	4108.61	41.95	< .05
	Sex	501.40	1	501.40	5.12	< .05
	Psychological divorce * sex	57.87	1	57.87	.59	> .05
	Error	24093.4	246	97.941		
	Total	28910.1	249			
Anxiety	Psychological Divorce	65720.88	1	65720.88	130.9	< .05
	Sex	5555.86	1	5555.86	11.07	< .05
	Psychological divorce * sex	612.88	1	612.88	1.22	> .05
	Error	123476.19	246	501.94		
	Total	197789.90	249			

From the results above, it was observed that psychological divorce had a significant influence on emotional well-being: Depression [$F(1,246) = 41.95, p < .05$] and Anxiety [$F(1,246) = 130.9, p < .05$]. In a similar way, Sex also had a significant influence: Depression [$F(1,246) = 5.12, p < .05$] and Anxiety [$F(1,246) = 11.07, p < .05$] with female adolescents from psychologically

divorced homes scoring higher than their male counterparts on depression and anxiety, which is an indication of low emotional well-being even though the interaction effect was not significant. Hypothesis two is therefore partially accepted.

Hypothesis three which stated that Children in their late adolescence whose parents are psychologically divorced will significantly score higher on emotional well-being than those in early to mid-adolescence was evaluated using independent t-test.

Table 4: Summary of T- Independent Test Showing the Influence of Age Groups on Emotional Wellbeing

Dependent Variables	Age group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t	p
Depression	Early adolescent	158	14.81	10.83	248	-1.25	p > .05
	Late Adolescent	92	16.58	10.65			
Anxiety	Early Adolescent	158	96.08	26.68	248	-2.06	p < .05
	Late Adolescent	92	103.66	30.14			

From the results in the table above, it was indicated that age group of adolescents had no significant influence on Depression [$t(248) = -1.25, p > .05$] while it significantly influenced anxiety [$t(248) = -2.06, p < .05$]. The direction of the influence indicated that individuals in their late adolescence showed a higher tendency for anxiety ($M = 103.66, SD = 30.14$) than those in early adolescence ($M = 96.08, SD = 26.68$). This result simply implies that although age range did not influence depression, it had a significant influence on the anxiety levels of adolescents with psychologically divorced parents. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was partially accepted.

Discussion

The findings of this study are in line with literature which reports that adolescents from psychologically divorced families typically have lower levels of emotional well-being and children from psychologically divorced families score the lowest on emotional well-being (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019; Acock & David, 1994). Results also corroborated the research of Gove (1972) and Pollard and Harris (2013) who stated that marital stress between parents has a grave effect on the overall wellbeing of the child. Amato (2000) submitted that children from psychological divorced homes compared with those from intact families are at higher risk of a host of problematic well-being outcomes including depression, anxiety, aggression and delinquency and have a more emotional problem as adults (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae, 1998). They are also less satisfied with different social and family related aspects of life. There is a body of evidence that the effect of parental psychological divorce on children continues well into adulthood. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal research up to 20 years after psychological divorce has shown important differences between children of psychologically divorced and intact families in this area (Pearson, 1998). The significant

influence of sex buttresses the trend in literature -Schmutte and Ryff (1997) found out that women report more frequent and intense internally focused mood such as sadness, fear, nervousness, shame and guilt. They found elevated rates of internalising disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders experienced by women (Schmutte & Ryff 1997). Cherlin *et al* (1998) were the first to prospectively model the longitudinal trajectories of depression among children of psychologically divorced and intact families. Their results indicated that parental psychological divorce continued to have a negative effect on emotional well-being. One of the important findings of their study was that depressive symptoms increased during mid-adolescence and then declined in late adolescence to young adulthood, especially for females; and that compared to males, females experienced a greater number of depressive symptoms- children who had experienced psychological divorce by age 15 demonstrated a sharper increase in depressive symptoms; and also that stressful life events children experienced shortly after parental psychological divorce mediated the effect of parental psychological divorce on depressive symptoms; and finally that stressful life events, particularly those related to relationship and personal loss were significantly associated with the trajectories of depressive symptoms. Age was found to be partially significant as confirmed by Fahey (1997) who observed that adolescents like young children experience considerable initial emotional pain and anger when their parents are psychologically divorced.

Conclusion

In conclusion, psychological divorce was found to significantly influence emotional wellbeing, conceptualised as depression and anxiety among in-school adolescents in Ondo-west local government area of Ondo state. Out of the two demographic variables, sex significantly influenced the emotional wellbeing of the adolescents, indicating lower emotional wellbeing amongst the females from psychologically divorced homes than their male counterparts who are going through similar life events. It was assumed that older children would fare better in this situation, but this was not confirmed by the study as the younger ones did. This could be as a result of the position taken by some scholars that as the older adolescents navigate through transition into adulthood, they are insecure, even more so than when they were children and they still need to anchor on the stability of the home.

Recommendations

- A couple planning to marry should be encouraged to have marriage counselling.
- Family and couples' therapy should be readily available to families undergoing psychological divorce. Such therapies include teaching communication strategies, problem-solving skills, integrative marital behaviour which involves both partners accepting what they can't change about their spouse and taking the responsibility to direct change towards self.
- A recent approach known as Marriage Fitness Program is encouraged for psychologically divorced couples. It involves putting aside their problems and concentrating energy into trying to connect all over again.
- Family therapy where the family is seen as a system comprising individuals that make it run successfully has also been found effective. Children's problems are addressed this way.

Ethical Standard

The author having undergone West-African Bioethics Training Program ensured the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki were followed.

Consent

As per international standard or university standard, participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author.

Competing Interests

No competing interests exist.

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