

The Impact of Marital Conflicts on the Psychosocial Adjustment of Adolescents in Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria

Osarenren Ngozi; Nwadinigwe Peter and Anyama Stella

Department of Educational Foundations,
University of Lagos, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author: Osarenren Ngozi

Abstract

The study investigated the impact of marital conflicts on the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents in Lagos metropolis. The sample comprises 150 senior secondary two students randomly selected with the use of stratified random sampling technique from five secondary schools in five selected Local Government Areas of Lagos metropolis. It is envisaged that this study would benefit couples and those contemplating marriage as it will expose them to other experiences thereby giving them insight into marital problem solving mechanisms. Society at large will also benefit from this study because their awareness level on marital conflicts and the consequences on adolescents would have been raised since a better family makes a better society. Researchers-constructed questionnaire was administered on the respondents to test the three hypotheses formulated for the study. Independent t -test, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistical techniques were used for data analysis. The findings showed that there is a significant impact of marital conflicts on the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. Psychosocial adjustments did not significantly differ due to gender but on the other hand Psychosocial adjustments significantly differ due to marital conflict. Marital conflicts Significantly affect adolescents' perception of marriage as an institution.

Keywords: conflict, marital conflict, psychosocial, psychosocial adjustment, adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is the socially acceptable union between a man and a woman. It means the coming together of two totally different individuals as husband and wife who agree to plan and set up their own family. Osarenren (2002) viewed marriage as usually a union between an adult male and an adult female. Marital conflicts come in different forms like spouse battering, spousal abuse, sexual abuse, marital irresponsibility, incest, rape, subtle struggle for control between the couple and other abusive behaviours. There is concern about the rising rate of unresolved marital conflicts, which often lead to marital instability, further leading to divorce, desertion, single-parenthood and legal separation. Thus, unresolved marital conflicts oftentimes lead to failed marriages. Marital conflicts are often caused by childlessness, forced marriage, incompatibility, communication gap, interference by in-laws, finances, infidelity, sex of children, lack of appreciation etc. Therefore, when marital conflicts occur regularly, it may have adverse effects on the psycho-social adjustment of adolescents who are the products of such marriages.

Perhaps, it is in the light of the foregoing that Makinde (2004) noted that marriage is an adventure because the two individuals that have agreed to cohabit willingly, to take risks, test new ideas and experience new situations and that no matter how

long the courtship will be, neither can boast of having studied and known all about the partner's idiosyncrasies. Hence, marriage provides an adventure playground for couples and their ability to adjust paves the way to a successful marriage.

It is against this background that Osarenren (2002) concludes that differences and difficulties are inevitable in marriages. She contends that spouses usually work hard towards handling these differences and difficulties but when some are not able to resolve the differences and difficulties, their marriage fails. When marriages fail divorce is the resultant *effect*. This obviously impacts greatly on the children of the marriage leaving some of the children deeply traumatized throughout life.

Onyskiw and Hayduk (2001), states that marital conflict between parents has an adverse *effect* on a child's adjustment. In their review of studies related to juvenile delinquency, they found that family quality, harmony, or climate have a stronger relationship with juvenile delinquency than father absence per se. Related to this, they further observed that discord and conflict in the two-parent home can be more detrimental to the child than father absence in a one-parent home.

Piers (1969) investigated the difference between family structure and family conflict in their *effects* on

the self-concepts of children found out that children who perceive greater conflict in their families will have significantly lower self-concepts. According to him, children are not adversely affected by living in a single parent family, but that family conflict and/or parental unhappiness can be detrimental, at least to self-concept, which is also a measure of social and personal adjustment.

Furthermore, Formosa, Gonzales and Aiken (2000) reported that girls from conflictual households exhibited lower levels of conduct problems while boys in the same familial environment exhibited higher levels of conduct problems. In fact, Krishnakumar and Buehler (2000), in a meta analysis of 39 studies published over a 17-year period, reported evidence to support the hypothesis that girls are the victims of more aggressive and hostile parental conduct than are boys. Other researchers have conducted studies reporting evidence to suggest that boys are on the receiving end of higher levels of harsh punishment from parents than are girls (Jouriles & LeCompte, 1991).

Nevertheless, the finding of Krishnakumar & Buehler (2000) suggests that gender does play a role in terms of parental treatment of children, and the subsequent adaptive/maladaptive outcomes, specifically in family environments characterized by marital conflict.

Musick and Meier (2010) on the effects of parental conflict witnessed in childhood on psychosocial adjustment of 175 college students found that gender differences on marital conflict exerted direct effects on boys' coping behaviour, while for girls, effects were indirect through their self-blame and threat appraisals.

Nwadinigwe (2000) opined that the type of home a child comes from affects the learning behaviours of the child in terms of his acceptance of value by which the home is adapted to. A home where positive attitudes are not encouraged, love is not given and affection denied, will not be a suitable home environment for a growing and developing child.

Moreover, Cummings, Davies & Campbell (2001) reviewed the empirical literature on marital conflict and child adjustment and concluded that:

- a. Child witnesses of spousal violence show problems similar to the victims.
- c. High levels of conflict are more closely related to child adjustment than family structure per se (intact vs divorced).
- d. There is a causal link between parent anger/aggression and child anger/aggression that exists regardless of parenting practices or other aspects of family functioning.
- d. Children often do attempt to intervene and

reduce marital conflict.

- e. Child response patterns include concerned, angry/ ambivalent and unresponsive.

Factors that increase the impact of marital conflict on children are:

1. Frequency
2. Severity
3. Child centered
4. Unresolved
5. Witnessed

Ichado (2000) observed that teachers commonly described children from unstable homes as more hostile, aggressive, anxious, fearful, hyperactive and distractible than children from intact families. Studies (Mallum and Mallum, 1990; Akingbade, 1991) have also shown that children from broken homes commit more acts of juvenile delinquency and they have low self-esteem and low self-concept.

Another study by Amato and Keith (1991) shows that adverse family environment of marital discord, separation or desertion, alcoholism, promiscuity etc. produces in the child emotional disturbance. Similar cases lead to distorted parents child relationship if the home is broken because of incompatibility between the parents, the child is affected not only by the break itself but also by the parental friction that led to the break. The parent with whom the child remains may be very bitter towards the spouse who is no longer, to make disparaging remarks to the child concerning the other parent.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Marital conflicts have been seen as the major causes of marital instability which often leads to divorce, desertion, single-parenthood and generally failed marriages. This is because a family characterized with crisis, disharmony, disunity, turbulent and chaos would provide the children with frustration in life which may lead to unhappiness and loss of self-concept which can make the children develop personality patterns that interfere with good adjustment and development of poor adjustment which may adversely affect them in adulthood.

Moreover, despite the fact that marital conflict is a daily occurrence, it is often rendered invisible, unrecognized and unattended to thereby receiving little or no attention, with the silence engulfing it being used as a weapon in further perpetrating it. The present dearth in local statistics and lack of systematically documented information on marital conflicts as they affect the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents needs urgent attention.

Again, some of the research works on this problem in Nigeria focused more on marital conflicts as they affect marriage stability with little or no effort to

examine if marital conflicts have any direct or indirect effects on the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents knowing fully well that adolescence stage is the period of storm and stress.

Therefore, it is against this background that this study is designed to investigate the effect of marital conflicts on the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents in Lagos metropolis.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study includes the following:

- i. To determine the effect of marital conflicts on the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents in Lagos metropolis.
- ii. To examine if there will be any gender impact of marital conflicts on psychosocial adjustment of adolescents.
- iii. To establish if there are consequences of marital conflicts on adolescents' perception of the institution of marriage.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

For the purpose of this research, the following research hypotheses are formulated to guide the study:

- 1. Marital conflicts will not significantly influence the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents.
- 2. Psychosocial adjustment of adolescents will not significantly differ due to gender and marital conflicts.
- 3. Marital conflicts will not significantly affect adolescents' perception of marriage as a sacred institution.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design used for this study was descriptive survey research design. The samples for this study comprised one hundred and fifty (150) adolescents (both male and female) drawn from five different public schools randomly selected from five Local Government Areas in Lagos metropolis, Nigeria. Thirty (30) adolescent students were drawn from each school i.e. fifteen male and fifteen female adolescent students. A 31 item researcher constructed Marital Conflict and Psychosocial Adjustment Questionnaire (MCPAQ) was used for the collection of data for this research. Split-half reliability estimation was done to establish the internal consistency of the questionnaire and correlation coefficient values ranging between 0.63 - 0.74 were obtained.

RESULTS

Hypothesis One

This hypothesis stated that marital conflict will not significantly influence psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. Independent t-test statistical technique

was used to determine whether significant difference in psychosocial adjustment due to marital conflict exists. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: independent t-test analysis of marital conflict influence on psychosocial adjustment

Conflict	N	\bar{X}	SD	t-Cal	t-crit
High	87	41.19	3.78		
Low	63	43.27	1.86	4.43	1.98
Total	150	42.87	4.96		

Table I shows that a calculated t - value of 4.43 resulted as the influence of marital conflict on psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis Two

The second hypothesis stated that psychosocial adjustment of adolescents will not significantly differ due to gender and marital conflicts. Two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistics was used to test the hypothesis and the result of the analysis is presented in the table below.

Gender	Conflict	N	X	SD
Male	Low	15	41.65	2.87
Female		20	44.06	5.44
Male	Moderate	22	42.73	3.62
Female		28	40.65	2.89
Male	High	23	39.77	6.12
Female		42	41.84	3.27

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean of Square	F-ratio
Marital conflict	258.18	2	129.09	3.94
Gender	35.62	1	35.62	1.09
Conflict/gender	18.95	1	18.95	0.58
Within group	4751.65	145	32.77	
Total	5064.44	149		

Significant at 0.05, df = 2 and 145; critical F = 3.05

Table 2 shows that a calculated F - value of 3.94 resulted as the influence of marital conflict on psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. This calculated F- value of 3.94 is significant since it is greater than the critical F - value of 3.05 given 2 and 145 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. This led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The table also showed that a calculated F - value of 1.09 resulted as the gender influence in psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. This calculated F - value of 1.09 is not significant since it is less than the critical F - value of 3.91 given 1 and 145 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. This means that psychosocial adjustment of adolescents does not differ due to gender of respondents.

Similarly, the table shows that the interaction between marital conflict and gender resulted in calculated F - value of 0.58 which is not significant

since it is less than the critical F - value of 3.91 given 1 and 145 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. Based on the significant F - value of 3.94 observed as influence of marital conflict on psychosocial adjustment, further analysis of data was done using Fisher's Least Square method whereby a pair-wise comparison of group means (ex) was done. The comparison shows that adolescents who experienced low marital conflict from home do not significantly have higher psychosocial adjustment than those who experienced moderate marital conflict ($t = 1.86$, $df = 83$; critical $t = 2.00$, $P > 0.05$). However, adolescents who experienced low marital conflict significantly have higher psychosocial adjustment than those who experienced high marital conflict from home ($t = 2.37$, $df = 98$; critical $F = 2.00$; $P < 0.05$). On the other hand, adolescents who experienced moderate marital conflict do not significantly differ in psychosocial adjustment than those who experienced high marital conflict ($t = 1.58$; $df = 113$; critical $F = 2.00$, $P > 0.05$).

Hypothesis Three

The hypothesis stated that marital conflict will not significantly affect adolescents' perception of marriage as a sacred institution. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) statistics was used to determine whether marital conflict will significantly affect adolescents' perception of marriage as an institution. The result of the analysis is presented in table 3.

Table 3: One-way analysis of variance on marital conflicts impact on perception of marriage as an institution

Perception	N	X	SD
Low	35	39.65	2.44
Moderate	50	37.84	5.26
High	65	35.49	2.17

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean of Square	F -ratio
Marital conflict	245.46	2	122.73	
Within group	4595.22	147	31.26	3.93
Total	4840.68	149		

Significant at 0.05, $df = 2$ and 147; critical $F = 3.0$

Table 3 shows that a calculated F - value of 3.93 resulted as the marital conflict effect on adolescents' perception of marriage as an institution. This calculated F - value is Significant since it is greater than the critical F - value of 3.05 given 2 and 147 degrees of freedom at 0.05 level of Significance. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Further analysis was done to determine the trend of the difference using Fisher's Least Square method. The result of the pair-wise comparison shows that adolescents who experienced low marital conflict do not significantly differ in their perception of marriage as an institution from those who experienced moderate marital conflict ($t = 1.46$; $df = 83$; critical $t = 2.00$; $P > 0.05$). On the other hand, adolescents who experienced low marital conflict significantly have higher and positive perception of marriage as an institution than those who experienced high marital conflict ($t = 3.56$; $df = 98$; critical $t = 2.00$; $P < 0.05$). Similarly, adolescents who experienced moderate marital conflicts at home significantly have higher and positive perception of marriage as an institution than those who experienced high marital conflicts at home ($t = 2.24$; $df = 133$; critical $t = 2.00$; $P < 0.05$).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Hypothesis one stated that marital conflict will not significantly influence psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. The finding shows that marital conflict significantly influences psychosocial adjustment. It found that adolescents that experience low marital conflict significantly have higher psychosocial adjustment than those that experience high marital conflict. This may be due to the fact that children at this particular stage of development are more aware of, and more able to articulate.

The study by Emery (1989) supports this finding as he noted that violence in the family works against the psychosocial processes of the child. Peterson, Leigh & Day (1984) in their research agreed with this finding as they noted that some circumstances at home can cause an adolescent to become truant. According to them one of those circumstances is a high degree of family conflict and disorganization. Again, Chauhan (1991) noted that truants are incapable of finding emotional and social satisfaction at home. Also, Landis (1960) shared this opinion when he explained that the degree of divorce related trauma experienced by adolescents who could remember their parents' divorce was greater for those who saw their homes as happy prior to the divorce than for those who saw their homes as characterized by open conflict between their parents prior to the divorce.

Piers (1969) agreed with this finding when he investigated the difference between family structure and family conflict and their effects on the self-concepts of children and found out that children who perceive greater conflict in their families will have significantly lower self-concepts. According to him, children are not adversely affected by living in a single parent family, but that family conflict and or parental unhappiness can be detrimental, at least to self-concept, which is also a measure of social and

personal adjustment.

Moreover, Cummings and Davies (1994) shared the same opinion when they comprehensively reviewed the empirical literature on marital conflict and child adjustment and found out that high levels of conflict are more closely related to child adjustment than family structure. Again, Ichado (2000) agreed with this finding when he reported that parental disharmony always affect the student because to a greater extent the students would be disrupted and disturbed about their parents' relationship and this might cause lack of concentration in school - cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects. Makinde (2004) supported this finding as she stated that if the emotional climate at home is questionable, the childrens' emotional development will be warped and distorted. According to her, this may lead to cases of delinquency.

Hypothesis Two stated that psychosocial adjustment of adolescents will not significantly differ due to gender and marital conflict. The finding shows that Psychosocial adjustment of adolescents significantly differ due to marital conflicts and that psychosocial adjustment of adolescents does not differ due to gender of respondents. This may be that there was no difference in terms of internalizing behaviours for either gender.

This finding supports the finding of Onyskiw and Hayduk (2001), which states that marital conflict between parents has an adverse effect on child adjustment. However, the finding of this hypothesis contradicts earlier studies by Formosa, Gonzales and Aiken (2000) who reported that girls from conflictual households exhibited lower levels of conduct problems while boys in the same familial environment exhibited higher levels of conduct problems. Krishnakumar and Buehler (2000) reported evidence to supporting that girls are the victims of more aggressive and hostile parental conduct than are boys. Furthermore, Krishnakumar & Buehler (2000) suggest that gender does play a role in terms of parents' treatment of children, and the subsequent adaptive/maladaptive outcomes, specifically in family environments characterised by marital conflict.

This finding does not confirm those of Musick and Meier (2010) on the effects of conflict by parents witnessed in childhood on psychosocial adjustment of 175 college students who found that gender differences on marital conflict exerted direct effects on boys' coping behaviour, while for girls, effects were indirect through their self-blame and threat appraisals.

Hypothesis three stated that marital conflict will not significantly affect adolescents' perception of marriage as an institution. The adolescents who indicated experiencing low marital conflicts have positive perception of marriage as an institution than those who experienced high marital conflict. Therefore, adolescents experienced high marital conflict significantly have negative perception of marriage as an institution. This significant positive or negative level of perception may be due to the fact that the home provides the initial training for the child and that parents act as models for their children. However, some socialization difficulties are encountered where these models are missing. There is no satisfying substitute for a mother or a father because it is often argued that troubled homes are more likely to produce troubled children.

Amato (1993) whose findings support the present study stated that majority of children who stay with their divorced parents feel emotionally worried and disturbed about their own future marriage. In line with this view, Amato (2005) similarly reported that most adolescents who are from broken homes find it difficult to go into marital relationships. According to him, their fear or anxiety is a product of harrowing experiences which they have acquired through the failure of their parents' marriage. In the same vein, Hoffman (1997) observed that adolescents who stay with their mother or father alone may be fixated in some developmental tasks relating with how to establish relationship with the opposite sex. This may also affect their ability to easily establish marital relationship with the opposite sex.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the findings in this study, it is concluded that marital conflicts have major effects on the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents conflict. It is also concluded that marital conflict significantly affects adolescents' perception of the institution of marriage.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

The study has many implications for parents, educational planners, guidance counsellors, teachers and other stakeholders.

Parents should be encouraged to live harmoniously by resolving their differences amicably through effective communication flow because if married persons discuss issues freely, they are more likely to share the understanding of matters that arise from the marital relationship so as to have a stable family that will impact positively on the psychosocial development and adjustment of the adolescents.

School as a powerful socializing agent should be involved in impacting knowledge which will help the

children in their interpersonal relationship through the elaboration of the curriculum to include courses on marital interaction, and marital enhancement programmes so as to enable students from different family upbringing and background to know how to cope with situations around them. Classes on the consequences of marital conflict, such as divorce, separation, family instability, broken homes would be campaigned against.

Marriage counsellors should encourage the would-be partners to engage in fruitful courtship which should be free from pretences for effective knowledge of the compatibility of the would-be partners.

Again, our electronic and print media should provide educative programmes for both parents and children on the sources, effects and consequences of marital conflicts and how to handle it. The government should enforce the implementation of the need for guidance counsellors in secondary schools so as to help adolescents to adjust properly as stipulated in the National Policy on Education.

Deliberate effort should be made towards counselling and reorientation of adolescents and their parents who are victims of unresolved marital conflicts for proper readjustment. Adolescents should be counselled on why they should not allow their family situation to affect their own attitude towards marriage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- ❖ Couples should embrace effective communication because communication is very important in successful marriages.
- ❖ Programmes and training in relation to the principles that will make couples to live peacefully and harmoniously should be organized for counsellors.

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