

# THE IMPACT OF MARITAL INSTABILITY ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*Contrary to arguments that marital instability is synonymous with the West and the rest of Europe, most developing countries like Nigeria continue to witness cases of 'unofficial' divorces, separations and other marital crises which have impeded the development of child at early years. While children's early development and overall well-being depend more on social, economic, psychological and cultural factors, it is pertinent to understand the implications of unstable or separated couples/parents for the life of the child. A great number of studies have indicated that children raised in non-traditionally married families or unstable homes do not fare well as their counterparts who are brought up in stable and peaceful homes. Thus, this study assesses the impact of diverse marital instabilities as well as home-conflicts on early childhood development in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Childhood development, divorce, marital instability, Nigeria, well-being

The increase in divorce rates is one of the most visible changes in African societies and family lives. These changes have brought about various concerns, some of which focus on their economic implications, others on the effects on child development, and “still others that see them as moral problems related to a breakdown of the family institution and influence of Western culture” (Mair, 1993). There is no doubt, a large research literature analyzing the effects of divorce. Several studies from various countries have tried to estimate the economic, social, health, and psychological consequences of divorces on adults, and generally found that divorce is associated with some negative outcomes on, at least, the other party (although it may have positive psychological effects on some). The concentration here is on early childhood development with reference to Nigeria, a country already faced with myriad of socio-economic challenges that place the child development in a precarious state.

Children's early experiences in their environments shape who they are and affect their overall well-being. To attain their full potentials, children need not only safe and stable housing, adequate and nutritious food, access to medical care, secure relationships with adult caregivers, nurturing and responsive parenting, quality learning opportunities at home and in school; they also need an environment (at home) that is conducive for the totality of their psychosocial well-being and development. The research has shown that a large number of children face instability in their lives as a result of parental conflicts resulting from myriad of factors – these have had much impact on the development of children at early stages of their lives.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Two main theories shall be imported and used as the foundation of this work. The first is the family stress theory (Patterson 2002). This theory is often applied in the fields of family studies and psychology. It states that three factors interact to predict the likelihood of a crisis or the inability to maintain stability: a stressful event, a family's perception of the stressor, and a family's existing resources. According to the proponents of this theory, if the family has the resources to handle the burden of the stressor, then a crisis can be avoided. During difficult life circumstances, families implement coping strategies such as turning to their support networks and community resources to effectively manage the stress. Effective coping or family resiliency leads to adaptation that can restore balance to the family's functioning. However, some families experience a “pile-up” of stress when

they have difficulties coping and managing change, which can lead to mal-adaptation and poor family functioning over time.

Evaluating the family stress theory in order to draw a link between family functioning and children's outcome, it becomes necessary to dwell on the Ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979). As noted by this theory, multiple and complex layers of social contexts influence and support children's development although the family is the principal context in which human development takes place (Ubani, 1993). When children are engaged in positive interactions with their caregivers (parents/guardians, etc), they are more capable of meeting their full potential such as high competence and low problem behaviors Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994). However, when interactions between parents (for instance), are negative or absent, then children's capacities are not realized and they demonstrate more difficulties. Thus, parents' roles tend to prevent their children from the negative effects of stress and stimulating positive development through active engagement and sensitive care giving.

A substantial body of research confirms that the structure of the family into which a child is born and develops present both advantages and disadvantages that subsequently affect cognitive, socio-emotional and even physical health outcomes (Amato, 2001; Patterson, 2002; Ugwuanyam, 2002). McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) showed that children born to two married biological parents – the traditional family structure – had lower risk of being a high school dropout, pregnant teen, and idle; these children also had better adult outcomes. Later studies observing younger children found that those born to married parents (e.g. adopted, or children from broken homes) had fewer socio-emotional and health problems as well as higher cognitive scores (Brown, 2004 and Adewale, 2005). Children thrive in stable and nurturing environments where they have a routine and know what to expect. Although some changes in children's lives are normal and anticipated, sudden and dramatic disruptions can be extremely stressful and affect children's feeling of security and perception of the environment and individuals. Within the context of supportive relationships with adults who adopt preventive/protective measures against any negative effects of instability, children learn how to cope with adversity, adapt to their surroundings, and regulate their emotions.

### **Divorce/Separation**

There is no general theory of divorce but marriage is mostly seen as an arrangement in which expressive and instrumental goods and services are exchanged between husbands and wives (Ugwuanyam, 2002). According to this approach, marriages are contracted because they provide men and women with economic and psychological well-being exceeding what they could gain outside the marriage. In the same vein, marriages are dissolved when the value of the outside options exceed that of marriage for at least, one of the spouses. According to Djaura (2010,) materialism is one factor that leads to the break-down of marriages; this is more so because, when a man is seeking the hand of a woman in marriage, he pretends a lot. What is notable in these theories is that they mainly hold that spouses decide on whether to continue their marriages based on calculations of their personal utilities. Therefore, while the well-being of other parties involved in the marriage – particularly, the other spouse and the children – may be taken into account when deciding on the continuation of the marriage, it does not necessarily play a role. An implication of this argument is that although children are centrally involved in divorce, they may not have a powerful say on the parents' decision of whether to divorce or not. In Africa, the child has always been the biggest loser in divorce cases in contrast to what is obtainable in Western countries. The reason for this has been the lack of implementation of policies and the law, and the usual unpronounced divorce cases that are increasingly taking place in Nigeria and other African countries. Thus, what might be an optimal solution to at least one of the parents (regardless of whether the decision is to divorce or to remain married) might not be as good for the children (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; Uche, 2009).

### **How Marital Instability Influences Children Development**

A large body of research has supported the idea that children's behavioral development, school performance may be influenced as much by multiple changes in family composition during childhood as by the quality and character of the families in which children reside at any given point. To assess the influence of family structure, transitions and conflicts, we compare children who have experienced either or both of these factors to children who have remained in stable cohabiting unions or marriages since birth. According to research in developmental psychology, children are highly reactive to change in their immediate environments in the period from infancy to preschool (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov 1994; Adebowale 2011); and children who are exposed to frequent instability and environmental stress in their early years may continue to accumulate destabilizing events throughout childhood. Children's problem behaviors are further increased with multiple changes in family structure. Family transitions that occur early in children's development prior to age 6 and in adolescence appear to have the strongest effects. Children demonstrate more negative behaviors when they lack the emotional and material support at home that they need to smoothly handle a family transition.

Other popular literature on the influence of family instability on child outcome include Amato and Keith (1991a) and Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan (2004) – they have well established that children from intact families have better outcomes and a higher well-being than children from divorced families. However, it cannot be concluded that the outcomes associated with divorce actually result from separation per se as opposed to another factor that is more common among people who divorce. The selection perspective considers that the negative outcomes observed among children who grow up without one of the biological parents are due to differences between the kinds of people who divorce and the kinds of people who remain married. In fact, it has been well demonstrated that, before family break-up, divorced families are different from intact families in several characteristics influencing both parental divorce and children's outcomes. For instance, children become vulnerable and susceptible to involve in behaviours that are detrimental to their well-being – this is as a result of lack of care and support from a stable home. Thus, the external environment (which may be injurious) awaits the child. Earlier on, especially in a hostile environment, children become victims to habits like smoking, street fighting, pilfering, stealing etc.

Since a long time ago, research has demonstrated that the socio-economic characteristics of families influence children's outcomes (Coleman and Benson, 2006; Uche, 2009), and the effect of one's family background continues to play a prominent role in determining life chance. The conflict selection explanation stresses that it is parental conflict prior to divorce and not marital break-up per se that is what explains why children of divorced families fare worse on several domains when compared to children of intact families. This argument is supported by the literature that shows that children tend to be drawn into conflict between parents – resulting in a deterioration of parent-child relationship and general family cohesiveness. Moreover, it has been shown that early experiences of parental conflict, i.e. during childhood, have lasting consequences on the quality of the relationship between children and their parents (Amato and Afifi, 2006; Sobolewski and Amato, 2007).

### **Parental Divorce and Offspring Psychological Well-being**

Parental divorce has the potential to cause a lot of stress to children and adults alike even though there is major individual heterogeneity in the effects, with some benefiting, others experiencing short-term drops in well-being and others entering a longer term negative consequences. This difference is linked to the quality of the marriage prior to divorce, the rate of conflict in the divorce process, personal adjustment skills and social support. Some children whose parents put an end to a particularly conflicting or abusive marriage may benefit from parental divorce, but the average outcome seems to be negative with more children suffering from it, although according to many reviews, the effects are not very strong (Amato, 2001).

Children have a need for a secure relationship with adult caregivers in absence of which psychological development will not take place. Uche (2009) showed that parental divorce can provoke an insecure attachment between a child and his or her parents. Therefore, children from divorced families have a higher probability to experience a lower psychological well-being. Since child development begins from the home, the absence of a conducive environment provided by the peaceful relationship between parents results in negative impact on the child. Children who grow up in the midst of continuous marital conflicts and violence tend to be hostile believing it is ideal.

### **Educational Outcomes**

A substantial part of the research on parental divorce focuses on children's educational outcomes such as performance and achievement tests, grades, teachers' ratings, or intelligence. During the last three decades, researches from different countries have demonstrated that parental separation has generally negative effects on these outcomes (Amato, 2001). Among the childhood experiences, educational outcomes is one of the main arguments that stressed the decline of children's performances standard, since it is well-demonstrated that economic difficulties affect negatively children's psychological well-being during childhood.

### **Economic Deprivation**

Family income is a good predictor of children's educational outcomes. Low cognitive stimulation provided in poor households is a major pathway linking childhood poverty to childhood intellectual development. Divorce is often associated with decreased material well-being and downward social mobility. In developed countries, usually, provisions are made for the children thus, separating couples need to divide their economic resources, though losing their economies of scale but the reverse applies in developing countries. It is also common for children of divorce to continue residing with their mothers, who tend to suffer economically more than their fathers (Uche, 2009). Single-mother families are more likely to experience a higher level of economic insecurity and fathers may find it hard to transfer their resources and aspirations to their non-resident children.

It is well-established that divorce is associated with a decrease in the quantity and quality of the relationship between children and non-custodial parent. It seems that parental-child contact is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. However, these show that child's feelings of closeness with the non-custodial parent have a positive impact on children's educational outcomes although its effect is lower than authoritative parenting. However, even if there is a close relationship between the non-resident father and the child, some parents behave toward their children as an adult friend.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In this paper, the author has been able to establish the influence of fragile families (unstable homes or marriages) on child well-being or outcomes in early childhood. In other words, children of divorced parents have worse cognitive, behavioral, and health outcomes in general than children born into more stable families. Similar to the review by Amato (2000), parental divorce has the potential to create a major turmoil in children's lives, a turmoil that can have long-term consequences. This may need not be the case, however, as not all children suffer from divorce and divorce may even be beneficial for children from highly conflicting and abusive families. Nevertheless, parental divorce appears, on average, to have more negative than positive consequences on children's lives.

Future research should address the questions of who suffers more from divorce and why, and what are the positive and negative coping strategies that reduce the potential of negative effects of parental divorce. Interestingly, much of this research has focused on the West, and it would be interesting to replicate these here in Africa and Nigeria in particular. From a policy perspective, it is also important to gain more insights into the role that public institutions and policies can play in mediating the effects of parental divorce. This not only calls for explicitly comparative cross-national research, but also for research that takes advantage of changes in national policy.

Conclusively, Nigerian judiciary should embark on mass sensitization of the populace urging them to embrace court marriage as it involves much procedure before termination while parents, religious and educational institutions; guardian and counseling experts, human rights activists, governmental and non-governmental organizations should constantly organize marriage seminars with couples, bachelors and spinsters regularly in order to inculcate love and true concept of marriage into them with emphasis on the effects on child development.

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