

EDITORIAL COMMENT

In this Edition, there are thirteen well-researched articles. Their research focus cover such critical psychological issues like stress coping strategies, consumer preferences, corruption, internet psychology, achievement technique and police matters. In all, the edition presents a holistic package that speaks to current global issues. And so doing attempts to proffer solution, using psychological methodologies that are well tested and found effective as an investigative tool.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT IN THE STEPCHILD- STEPPARENT RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Step relationships appear here to stay and the issue of stepparent and stepchildren are no longer as alien in Nigeria as it was some decades ago. Research interest in this phenomenon in Nigeria is an important addition to research interest in the area of psychological adjustment.

The study set out to examine the coping behaviors that stepparents and step children often make use to in their bid to adjust psychologically to the stress of step-relationship. It also examined the pattern of cordial relationship on six factors in step relationships arising from death and from divorce circumstances.

Using 66 stepchildren and 48 stepparents and research instruments, the study showed that there is no significant difference in the most often used coping behaviors of stepparents and stepchildren. Also the attempts to be cordial relationship between step parents and stepchildren whose step-relationship arose from death circumstances than between those which arose from divorce circumstances.

The use of coping behaviors and establishment of cordial relationships have implications for stepparent stepchildren relationship.

INTRODUCTION

A considered good point to take off the consideration of our topic is an exposition of patterns of step-child - step-parent relationship.

Obiora had married Ifeoma for ten years and had by her two sons (Emeka & Kanayo). Complications during the birth of their third child led to the death of both Ifeoma and the baby. Two years later, Obiora got married to Nneka.

The marriage of Mr. Adefila was blessed with a daughter, Rose. Since the second year of the marriage, the marriage had been passing through difficult times. When Funke (the wife) could no longer stand the unpleasant conditions, she sued for divorce, won the case as well as the custody of their seven year old daughter. She later got married to Mr. Ajanla, a 45 year old good natured man.

There is also the case of Mallam Shehu who though a Muslim had vowed to marry only one wife. He caught Binta his wife in an impious act and consequently sent her back to her father's house, keeping with him their children aged 12 and 10 years. Mallam Shehu after six months got married to Zainab who tried to extend

love to Amina and Bala, but met a stone wall. Binta was always coming to the house especially when Mallam Shehu was not in, and she encouraged her children to sneak out of the house to come and visit her in her new married home.

The above are but a few examples of the two major patterns of step families that exist in our societies - those emerging due to death and those emerging due to divorce.

Definition

To start with the definitions of "step-child" and "step-parent" which occur specifically in our topic will be logical, but this writer has chosen to extend the definitions from the embracing concept of "stepfamily" since the other two terms will necessarily be covered.

Step families consist of married or cohabiting ("Living together") couples (step-parents) who between them have from a previous relationship, at least a child who either visits or lives with them (Francis 2001). The child is the step child while the one of the couple who is not the biological parent of the child would be the step-parent.

Stepfamilies are here with us

Over the past 30 years, major transformations have taken place in family life all over the world, (especially in the Western world). Traditional nuclear families are no longer the norm. An estimated one in every eight marriages now ends in divorce and remarriages for one or both partners have doubled since the 1970s. In the United States, each year, millions of the adults remarry and become step-parents to one or more child(ren), with statistics revealing that there may be close to 15 million children under age 18 years living in stepfamilies (Atwood, 2000).

Although, the prevalence of step-families in Nigeria may not be as high as that of America, a quick survey would certainly reveal that it is quite high. A cursory look at the families around us provides quite a notable number of stepfamilies. Though stepfamily issues may not be "hitting the headlines", there is no doubt that stepfamilies are here with us. Stepfamily realities are not as foreign as they sounded a few years back.

Psychological Adjustment in Stepfamily Relationship

Why, one may ask, is the need for the examination of psychological adjustment in stepchild - stepparent relationships? The answer become obvious when it is recalled that although stepfamilies are similar to nuclear families, there are indeed certain things peculiar to stepparent / stepchild relationships that make obvious and urgent demands for adjustments, if the relationships must be worthwhile. A look at the

words: "stepparent", "stepchild" or "stepfamily", suggests a reality that is more complex than just "parent", "child" and "family". The complexity involved here could be best illustrated by a stepfamily made up of two divorced parents with children from the earlier marriages living together; indeed, this 'step' reality has a lot of implications, for the parents and the children involved. As Francis (2001) said "learning to live within such a new family structure can dramatically alter the living patterns, self-confidence and emotional well-being of all those concerned". Imagine a child whose mother was recently divorced and another woman married in her place. What does it mean to the child that this woman takes the place of his/her mother? One can imagine the possible consequences of putting people who had no human reason to love one another into a relationship that was structurally analogous to - and had to serve as a partial substitute for - the most intimate of loving relationships, namely, that of parent and child.

Naturally, any 'step' relationship or stepfamily formation is preceded by an event of grief or loss, e.g., the death of a loved one, the failure of the earlier relationship, etc. These sad events take their toll on the human psyche. A potential obstacle to the successful formation of a stepfamily is how the parties have handled the end of the earlier relationship(s), especially in the case of a divorce. Very often, either of (or both of) the divorced parents feel guilt and responsibility over his/her inability to make the marriage work. Some may even have a feeling of insecurity and rejection. Have these people sufficiently come to terms with themselves over these guilt feelings, or mourned these losses fully before entry into another marriage? These feelings which are aroused by separation and divorce or death are very powerful and can invade any new relationship.

On the part of the children, some may be feeling a guilt that they contributed to their parent's separation. "Very often, a break-up in a relationship comes after months of quarreling - and it is common for the children to become pawns in that situation, with the parents disagreeing with each other on how the child(ren) should be brought up and disciplined. The memory of all these quarrels stays with such offspring(s) - and they often grow up believing that they were somehow responsible for the break-up of their home. (Webber, 2002) worse still, remarriage marks the loss of hope of reconciliation that most children cherish long past any realistic point. This can be difficult. "Even when the children know and like the stepparent and are looking forward to the new family, they cannot forget the loss of their old family" (Duncan & Brown, 2002).

During the split between two co-habiting partners, there is usually a lot of trauma and bad feeling. Sometimes the adults concerned are so busy with all of their own upset and grief that they don't have much time for their children or for explaining

things to them. To cope with these pre-divorce deprivations, each child develops a unique mix of these emotional conditions: core feelings of worthlessness and shame; excess fear of emotional bonding and abandonment; over- or under-trusting others; social and spiritual feelings of emptiness and 'aloneness'; and excessive fear of change and the unknown, or indifference to these; 'numbing out', or failing to develop healthy limits on key emotions; personality 'splitting' or 'dissociation', reality distortions, etc. "The biggest 'wound' is growing fervent denials that any of these invisible 'wounds' exist, or have any major impact on their current happiness and well being. (Gerlach, 2002) one can imagine how much stress these conditions could occasion in the subsequent stepparent/stepchild relationships that often follow divorces nowadays.

Decisions need to be made concerning new sets of roles, rules and traditions for the new household. A lot of difficulties is usually experienced in step families in the issue of discipline. Questions such as: "who will discipline who?"; "what will they be disciplined for?" "How will they be disciplined?" Can remain unanswered and unresolved. Many a stepfamily has foundered over the confusion and emotion that arises out of this issue. Parents in first time families often experience these same problems too. There is, however, one significant difference in these families: the children are the offspring of both parents and this gives each parent the 'right' to guide and set standards for his or her own children. This role of the disciplinarian is just one role that parents assume. "One of the traps that many step parents fall into is the belief that they become instant parents to their stepchildren once they start living with them. Children, and sometimes their parent, often challenge this intrusion in their psychological space" (Newman, 2001)

Another complexity facing the newly formed stepfamily is how to financially and logistically manage the affairs of the household. "Stepfamilies must decide how much money is to be pooled together, how much is to be divided for the needs and wishes of the biological children and stepchildren, and how to deal with the unexpected income and expenses." (Duncan, 2002) Each family has resources in addition to money. They include both time and affection. How these resources are distributed can create arguments, hurt feelings or jealousy. This is also a matter of great concern in step family formation - with, as it were, a more complex face.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Step-relationships are beset with trauma and stress. Since human nature is in essence adaptive, it seeks for equilibrium always and this atimes may be through the adoption of coping strategies. Also patterns of interpersonal relationships can be different in different situations and circumstances.

In the light of the above, this study sought to find out the coping strategies

adopted by people in step relationship as well as examine the pattern of interpersonal relationship between step children and step parents involved in the two predisposing circumstances of death and divorce.

HYPOTHESIS

The 2 hypothesis tested at the significance level of 0.05 are:

1. The coping strategies adopted by step children as not significantly different from those adopted by step parents
2. There is no significant difference in the pattern of interpersonal relationship between stepchild and stepparent arising from death circumstances and that arising from divorce circumstances.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The expo facto survey design was used for the study, since no variable was manipulated by the researcher.

Subjects

Sixty six step children - 33 of whom were males and 33 were females, and 48 step parents (24 males and 24 females) were used for the study. The age range of the step children was between 12 years & 19 years with the mean of 14.5 years. The ages of the step parents ranged between 25 years and 45 years with the mean standing at 31.3 years.

Instruments

A 26 item questionnaire describing a broad range of cognitive and behavioral strategies people use to manage self in stressful situations was used to measure coping behaviour. The instrument which followed the Likert format had response options on a 4 point scale ranging from often used, (4), sometimes used (3), sparingly used (2) to does not apply (1). Factor analysis was employed to establish the validity of the instrument with factors obtained for each strategy. The co-efficient alpha which point to the internal consistency (reliability) of the items ranged between 0.52 to 0.87.

The second instrument is a 24 item stepchild stepparent interpersonal relationship questionnaire where the background section elicited information on whether the respondent became a step person due to the divorce of the spouse (in the case of a step parent) or the death of a biological parent (in the case of a step child). The item section adopted a 4 point Likert scale format using cordiality as the anchor concept to elicit information on the interpersonal relationship pattern between the subjects.

Using the Kr20 formula, the reliability index of 0.79 was obtained for the instrument.

The items focused on six major values namely: Finance (e.g. prompt payment of school fees, giving of pocket money), Food (e.g. freedom with food of choice, entertaining friends), house chores (e.g. cleaning the house, going shopping, running errands), dressing (e.g. wearing the latest style, freedom with cosmetics), going out (e.g. freedom to visit friends, keeping late evenings), career choice (freedom to choose career of interest).

Procedure

The two questionnaires were completed by each subject. Some of the subjects were the clients of the researcher who were undergoing psychotherapy. The majority were relevant subjects who were willing to complete the questionnaires

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that there is significant difference between step parents and step children in the use of aggression as a coping behaviour. Stepparents with a higher mean use aggression more frequently than stepchildren. This result may indicate that that the stepparent use their vantage position as the adults in the relationship to unleash aggression on the stepchildren, and stepchildren aware of their position use it less often than stepparents. Though the result on the use of denial is not significant, but parents with their higher mean figure appear to deny the situation more than children, behaving as if nothing has happened. This again may be a function of maturity. Fantasy appears more often used by children than by stepparent. Children appear better able to escape into the world of "Cinderella" and fantasy as alluded to by (Atwood 2001).

The use of rationalization shows no significant difference between step parents and stepchildren, though stepparents have a higher mean score than stepchildren, thereby indicating that they use rationalizations more often than stepchildren. The last option use coping strategy is reaction formation where there is significant difference between stepparents and stepchildren.

Going by the results presented in table 1 hypothesis 1 which states that the coping strategies adopted by stepchildren are not significantly different from those adopted by stepparent is not rejected.

Whatever the trend of coping strategies adopted, one thing that is clear from the result is that both stepparent and stepchildren go through some trauma in their relationship which necessitates their adopting certain coping behaviors. This situation calls for a psychological adjustment the parties involved in step relationships are

individuals who need to adjust to one another's presence. Each party is coming into the relationship with a history of how they handled the end of the earlier relationship. Very often there is a feeling of guilt and sense of insecurity.

A times the difficulties stepchildren have in adjusting to the new realities of the relationship can cause them to have problems in school e.g. doing poorly in subjects, in which they normally do well, isolating themselves from friends and withdrawing from activities (Gerlach 2002). Stepparents are often not immune from some of these problems as well. Thus the coping behaviours being adopted are important for psychological adjustment.

Table 1
FREQUENTLY USED COPING STRATEGIES OF STEPCHILDREN
BY GENDER

VARIABLE	Source of	N	MEAN	SD	t	df	Remarks
AGRESSION (e.g. fighting for my right)	Variation						
	Parents	33	6.0				
	Children	33	2.806	3.618	3.194	32	Sig.
DENIAL (e.g. went on as if nothing happened)	Children	33	40.00				
	Parents	33	44.34	27.817	0.896	32	NS
FANTASY (e.g. wished the situation would go away)	Parents	33	20.01				
	Children	33	31.37	25.870	6.322	32	Sig.
RATIONALIZATION (e.g. I am claiming my right)	Parents	33	40.00				
	Children	33	37.85	12.863	1.503	32	NS
REACTION FORMATION (e.g. Encouraging other step people not to give up)	Parents	33	13.95				
	Children	33	24.00	11.412	2.328	32	Sig.

P < 0.05

NS = Not Significant

HYPOTHESIS 2

Table 2 presents the result of hypothesis 2. From the Table, it can be seen that there is significant difference on all the factors except that of food. In all the significant cases, the mean scores are higher for the step relationship arising from death circumstances. It would thus appear that there is a more cordial relationship between

stepchildren and stepchildren where death was the predisposing factor the step relationship than in situations where divorce was the predisposing factor. This result could be a pointer that the stark reality of no one else to run to which is posed by the situation of death made the stepchildren warm up to their stepchildren and stepparents strike a cordial relationship. Could it also be on the side of the stepparent that the issue of death made them more sober, more sympathetic and more understanding, with these, with the attributes resulting in greater cordiality on all the studied factors involved in the step relationship?

The opposite would appear to be the case in the situation of divorce where especially in the case of step children, the possibility

Table 2

STEPCHILD - STEPPARENT RELATIONSHIP ARISING FROM DIVORCE AND DEATH CIRCUMSTANCES

VARIABLE	Source of Variation	N	MEAN	SD	t	df	Remarks
FINANCE	Death Divorce	48	8.63 8.03	1.86 1.90	2.66	47	Sig.
FOOD	Death Divorce	48	23.48 23.59	9.64 9.11	-0.18	47	NS
HOUSE CHORES	Death Divorce	48	14.27 12.51	2.06 1.81	2.45	47	Sig.
GOING OUT	Death Divorce	48	24.17 22.14	9.07 9.62	-3.34	47	Sig.
DRESSING	Death Divorce	48	19.35 13.49	20.40 16.61	2.05	47	Sig.
CAREER CHOICE	Death Divorce	48	12.00 7.10	7.27 7.98	5.72	47	Sig.

P < 0.05 NS = Not Significant

of running back to the other parent could bring about none cordiality in the step-relationship. In step-relationship's, the partners choose each other, but the children have to relate to step-parent and possibly step-siblings with whom they have no natural rapport. This may have a lot of implications for the children especially for those who's other parents are still alive as in the case of step-relationships arising from divorce circumstances. One thing however is clear, that everyone in a step family has opined by Duncan & Brown (2002) is caught in the middle from time to time, and this situation calls for psychological adjustment.

CONCLUSION

Step-relationships bring about new situations to which the actors in the relationship have to adjust. It is almost like searching for a new identity as stated by Emeke (1997). Depending on the prevailing and previous circumstances, feelings of guilt, insecurity, failure, confusion and even hatred may attend a step-relationship. While step-parents may think that they have become instant parents to their step children, the step children may feel that there is an intrusion into their psychological space. All these and many more make psychological adjustment an imperative. In an attempt to adjust psychologically, some coping behaviors may be adopted.

This study has shown that there are 5 often used coping behaviors employed by actors in step-relationships. While some have higher indication of use by step-parents (through the higher means cause) than by step-children, the clear picture is that both step-parents and step-children adopt about the same types of coping behaviors.

This study has also revealed that interpersonal relationships marked by the concept of cordiality appear to be better enhanced in step-relationship that arose from death circumstances. This situation also calls for psychological adjustment.

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