
INFLUENCE OF MARITAL STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES ON DEPRESSION AMONG SINGLE PARENTS IN SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract: *This study investigated the influence of marital stress and coping strategies on depression among single parents in South-Eastern Nigeria. It comprised a cross-sectional survey of 13 single parents drawn from Enugu South in Enugu State, Nigeria. Application of 2x2 Analysis of Variance F-test as statistical test revealed no significant influence of marital stress on depression, $F(1, 9) = 0.80$ at $P > 0.05$. In addition, coping strategies did not influence depression, $P(1, 9) = 0.02$ at $P > 0.05$. It was concluded that marital stress and coping strategies were not determinants of depression among these sample of single parents.*

Keywords: Marital Stress, Coping Strategies, Depression and Single Parenthood.

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Biographical Note: Ejike H. Mgbenkemdi was prudently trained at some of the best Universities in Nigeria and has crowned the training with years of research, teaching and practice. He studied Philosophy which has formed part of his character, he also studied introduction to Psychology and Clinical Psychology at Claretian Institute of Philosophy, Nkeke, Owerri, Imo state, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, and Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Nigeria, where he obtained B.Phil, PGD, MSc., and Ph.D in Clinical Psychology respectively. Dr. Ejike H. Mgbenkemdi is a certified Psychotherapist. He teaches Abnormal/Clinical Psychology with special passion for Mental Retardation in the Department of Psychology, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Enugu, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The family is regarded as the most basic unit of socialization and the socialization of children is highly dependent on it. The role of the father and mother in bringing up children are complementary. However, one of the parents is usually not present in the single parent family. A single parent is a parent, not living with a spouse or partner, who has most of the day-to-day responsibilities in raising the child or children. (Oxford Dictionary, 2003) A single parent is usually considered the primary caregiver. Life in single parent family can be extremely stressful, in socio-economic, psychological and emotional terms leading to depression (Ebin, 2005). The most problematic factor hindering the proper upbringing of children of single parents is the inadequate financial position of single parents leading to problems such as malnutrition, poor educational training, and lack of medical care (Rosenstock, 2000). The single parent has greater

difficulty in providing the needed discipline for the proper upbringing of the child (Cairney, Boyle & Offord, 2003).

In the past, single parenthood was practically inconceivable and extraordinary. Even at the early stage of its sneaking into the fabrics of our society, it was anything but good; nothing positive was associated with it (Ikegwonu, 2013). In this 21st century, the prototypical nuclear family has yielded indiscriminately to modified structure including the one-parent family. One-parent families in the past were usually the result of the death of a spouse, personal choice (teenage mothers, wanting to raise a family without a partner) and divorce. To this end, either of these causes has a major effect on the family living and will require the whole family to make adjustments on the emotional aspect of the family. Many times the parent who was left to raise the siblings often feels guilt, despair and even resentment causing serious marital stress leading to depression (Vitti, 2007). Consequently, Jun & Acevedo, (2007) presented 5 stages of grief of single parents as follows:

- **Denial:** This stage comprises of feeling guilty and denying what has occurred. The feeling of "he/she is just away, and will come back" is the usual reactions of this stage.
- **Anger:** This is generally felt towards the person who has left or has died.
- **Bargaining:** Often this is where the person tries to negotiate with God if their partner has died. Dealing with the partner who has left and trying to negotiate and promising to change what went wrong in the relationship.
- **Depression:** This stage comprises of the near-realization that the situation will not change. This is where the acknowledgement of what had happened starts.
- **Acceptance:** This stage is the acknowledgement and acceptance of the grief.

The effects of single parenting are widespread and not only felt by now single spouse but it vibrates through to the whole family, especially children. Recent studies have shown that many children have felt as though they have been taken advantage of, betrayed, abandoned and even depressed and inadequate as result of their parent's separating (Davies, Avison & McAlpine, 1997).

In a related study by American Psychological Association (2009) observed that single parent families deal with many other pressures and potential problem areas that the nuclear family does not have to face. Some of these are:

- Visitation and custody problems;
- Less opportunity for parents and children to spend time together;

- Effects of the break up on children's school performance and peer relations;
- Disruptions of extended family relationships;

Problems caused by the parents' dating and entering new relationships. Considering all these findings, homes have really changed especially in South Eastern Nigeria where this study was conducted. Many old customs and traditions which were taught and practiced for several years are becoming obsolete. The modern culture has changed and outgrown values and beliefs that were thought to be the core. Even though moralists and conservatives are expressing disgust over the currently evolving belief and cultural orientations, the fact is, however, what has been unacceptable in our society is now becoming fast and rapidly rising trends. One of the debilitating incongruous problems confronting our society and killing the beauty of the family life today is the problem of single parenthood. For instance a critical observation of the Nigerian Entertainment/Music Industry depicts that most of our actors, actresses, musicians among other reasons are all single parents either by immature choices, crippling circumstances or despicable ways of life. This is worrisome creating serious marital stress.

However, that notwithstanding, while children raised by single parents are less likely to be stigmatized, many are still at risk of certain psychological, emotional and developmental problems. (Ikegwuonu, 2013) For instance, children from single parent families may be more likely to drop out of school, and they are also more vulnerable to alcohol and drug use causing stress and depression on their single parent. However it all depends on the coping strategies adapted by these single parents. Coping strategies means any effort we make to manage the situations we have appraised as potentially harmful or stressful as measured by scores on Moos, Cronkite & Finney (1990). A single parent with adequate resources may provide a stable, nurturing home in which children thrive just as well as those who have two parents. On the other hand, a single parent who is just scraping by and has little time, energy or skill for parental duties might have children who are at risk of a variety of problems as such the single parent would be affected psychologically and emotionally leading to depression.

Considering the results of this study, these revealed no significant influence of marital stress on depression and in addition, coping strategies did not influence depression among this sample of single parents. This study has suggested that Africans especially people in South-Eastern Nigeria should continue to protect and promote our cultural values such as helping and identifying with people in need. For instance, the single parents if not because of these cultural values systems, the result would have been the contrary.

METHOD

Participants were thirteen (13) single parents drawn from Enugu South in Enugu State, Nigeria. Cross sectional survey design was used. These single parents were not living with spouses or partners and had at least one child.

INSTRUMENT

Three instruments were used in this study which included Omoluabi (1994) 50-item Marital Stress Inventory. These 50-item yielded split-half reliability of 0.9219 Cronbach alpha co-efficient; Spearman Brown split-half = 0.9238 and Gutman split-half co-efficient = 0.9226. A response of slight effect = 1, mild effect = 2; moderate effect = 3; severe effect = 4; and very severe effect = 5.

Moos, Cronkite & Finney (1990)'s 28-item coping strategies scale validated by Omeje (2000) measuring coping strategies, with reliability and validity index of 0.68 and 0.82 respectively. The items in the inventory were rated on a four point scale. Thus; rarely = 1, sometimes = 2, often = 3, and always = 4.

Radloff (1977) 20-item epidemiological studies depression scale (CES-D) validated by Okafor (1997) with reliability index scoring of 0.85, Ugwu (1998) with concurrent validity index of 0.41 and Omeje (2000) with reliability and validity index scoring of 0.85 and 0.92 respectively measuring depression in a general population. The scale has 20-item designed to determine the presence or absence of depressive symptoms among parents of mentally retarded children. However, the scale was scored on a four point scale ranging from 1-4 for example rarely = 1, sometimes = 2, often = 3, and always = 4. But items 4, 8, 12, and 16 reflected positive outcomes and are scored in the reverse order, for example (rarely = 4, sometimes = 3, often = 2, and always = 1). The remaining 16 items reflected negative outcome. The participants were instructed to report the frequency with which the 20-items were experienced within the previous 6 months. If any participants scored above 20, that indicated that the participant had experienced depression.

PROCEDURE

A total of 22 copies of the questionnaire measuring marital stress, coping strategies and depression were administered using cross-sectional survey techniques among single parents from Enugu South in Enugu State. To determine the causes of stress among couples and to evaluate their stress reaction; marital stress inventory (Omoluabi, 1994) was used to assess the stress level of the parents. The inventory was administered to the parents with the following instructions; the following is a list of issues, problems and experiences which couples encounter in marriage. The issues are potential sources of misunderstanding, conflict, fighting or possible separation in marriage. Please indicate how each issues has disturbed the peace of your marriage and your peace of mind in the past one year by shading only one of the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 in front of each issue.

Consequently, the Health and Daily living Form: Adult Form B (Moos, Cronkite & Finney, 1990) was equally administered. This scale measured five categories of coping strategies namely: Logical analysis, information seeking, problem solving, Emotional discharge and regulation. These were grouped into two namely; Problem-focused and Emotion-focused coping strategies. The logical analysis, information seeking and problem

solving items constitute problem-focused coping strategies while emotional discharge and emotional regulation formed the emotion-focused coping strategies. As such the highest score in problem-focused coping strategy plus the lowest score on emotion-focused coping strategy items placed a participant as problem-focused coping strategies, while the highest score in emotion-focused coping strategy plus the lowest score in the problem-focused coping strategy placed a participant as emotion-focused.

To also determine the presence or absence of depressive symptoms among these single parents the same method was adapted using Center for Epidemiological studies-Depression (CES-D). This scale was developed at the American Institute of Marital Health designed to measure depressive symptoms in the general population (Radlof, 1977).

However, of the 22 copies of questionnaire distributed, 13 copies were properly completed and returned with the help of research assistant. 9 copies of questionnaires were discarded on the ground of improper filling. The 13 copies that were properly completed and returned were used for analysis.

DESIGN/STATISTICS

Cross-sectional survey design was used. 2X2 Analysis of Variance F-test as statistical test was applied for data analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1: Mean & Standard Deviation of Influence of Marital Stress and Coping Strategies on Depression among Single Parents

Marital Coping Strategy	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
High problem-focused	38.3333	3.21455	3
Emotion-focused	40.3333	11.67333	6
Total	39.6667	9.42072	9
Low problem-focused	39.5000	2.12132	2
Emotion-focused	36.0000	7.07107	2
Total	37.7500	4.71699	4
Total problem-focused	38.8000	2.58844	5
Emotion-focused	39.2500	10.41633	8
total	39.0769	8.09796	13

Table 1 above shows that participants with high marital stress obtained higher mean of 39.67 (SD = 9.42) on depression, while participants with low marital stress obtained lower mean of 37.75 (SD = 4.72) on depression.

The table also shows that participants who used problem-focused strategy in coping obtained a lower mean of 38.80 (SD = 2.59), while those who used emotion-focused

strategy obtained a higher mean of 39.08 (SD = 8.10) on depression. However, 2x2 ANOVA F-test was employed to test the significance of these differences.

Table 2: ANOVA Summary of Influence of Marital Stress and Coping Strategies on Depression among Single Parents

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	30.423	3	10.141	.121	.946
Intercept	15844.907	1	15844.907	188.505	.000
Marital stress	6.685	1	6.685	.080	.784
Coping strategy	1.500	1	1.500	.018	.897
Marital stress/coping strategy	20.167	1	20.167	.240	.636
Error	756.500	9	84.056		
Total	20638.000	13			
Corrected total	786.923	12			

Table 2 above indicates non-significant influence of marital stress on depression, $F(1, 9) = .08$; $P > 0.05$. This means that there is no significant difference between high and low marital stresses on depression.

The table also indicates non-significant influence of coping strategies on depression $F(1, 9) = .02$, $P > 0.05$. This means that there is no significant difference between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies on depression among single parents. Moreover, no significant interaction was indicated. Therefore, the two independent variables did not interact to influence depression.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicated no significant influence of marital stress on depression. And in addition, coping strategies did not influence depression too. These findings have indicated that among these single parents who were critically examined in this study in depression, it was revealed that marital stress and coping strategies were not determinants of depression.

Ordinarily one would have expected an interaction of marital stress and coping strategies to influence depression among these single parents. According to Silver, Heneghan and Bauman (2006) lack of family stability, divorce and indecent way of life among other factors remain common reasons why single parents are more likely to experience other disruptions that could affect their depression. Similarly, children raised by single parents are also more likely than their peers to exhibit problems like increased aggression and anxiety and to have trouble getting along with their parents. These problems could be a long-lasting leading to depression (McGrath, Keita & Strickland, 1990). Consequently, uncertainty and emotional turmoil could increase the chance of psychological pitfalls as such these are factors responsible for the ugly reality of single parenthood, which gives a long way to psychologically, emotionally and developmentally affect the child predicting

depression on the single parent (Lutenbacher, 2000). Moreover, the economic situation of single parents is another one of the main factors that can make families vulnerable. Half of all risk to these children stem from many problems. The relation between strained finances and children doing poorly in school can be direct, as with a child who feels obligated to drop out of school to help make ends meet. Or, the impact can be indirect; a single parent working two jobs may simply have less time to help with homework and have less control over his or her children. All these are stress variables and factors that affect the single parents psychologically, sociologically, emotionally, financially, medically, and physiologically leading depression.

Considering the results of this study, which revealed that marital stress and coping strategies were not determinants of depression, this study has suggested ways and strategies these sample of participants in South-Eastern Nigeria might have adopted in cushioning the effects single parenthood have. For instance, talk and listen to children: Explain any changes/circumstances that are taking place in the family. Studies revealed that in only 5 percent of cases did parents explain to their children why they were divorcing or in conflict. Some of these children could be very useful, thoughtful, and very intelligent irrespective of their age. Don't ask them to take sides.

Pay attention to your own feelings and look up: One may be burdened with guilt and self-loathing because one's marriage, business or relationship failed. These attitudes could be contagious and emotionally damaging. One could learn how to control his/her emotions and be ready to accept clinical suggestions.

Accentuate the positive: Children in a single-parent home often take in more responsibility, which could teach them independence. Be sure to recognize their contributions and be generous with praise.

CONCLUSION

Africans especially people in South-Eastern Nigeria should continue to protect and promote our cultural values such as helping the single parents. If not because of the above cultural values and attitudes, the results of this finding would have been the contrary.

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