EFFECTS OF MARITAL BREAKDOWN ON CHILD PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *The institution of marriage is highly valued in Nigeria. Couples enter into marriage with the hope of staying happily married. Unfortunately, this is hardly the case as previous researches on marital breakdown in Nigeria revealed that marriages are ending in divorce and separation at a very fast rate. The research objective is set at exposing the nature and causes of marital breakdown and also to highlight the effects on the personality development of children. The paper revealed that marital breakdown in Nigeria is commonly associated with economic, social, cultural and gender factors and creates a lot of stress and dilemma in children adversely affecting their personality. Children from broken homes exhibit behavioral difficulties much more than children from stable homes. The paper therefore recommends that educational and religious institutions should persuade parents to treat marital tensions sensibly without instigating their children to take sides. This will reduce post traumatic effects on children.*

Keyword: Marital, Breakdown, Child, Personality, Development

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is the composition of social norms that determine and control the relations of a wedded pair to each other, their kinsmen, their offspring, and society at large. It is the institution that shapes the nature and activities of the association called family (Afonja & Pearce, 1984, p.62). Marriage is a component part of culture usually formalizes by customs and occasionally solemnized by religion. Marriage and family are very important to human existence, but their character has changed dramatically over the past several decades. The rate at which marriages are breaking down has risen significantly attributing to an increase in single parent families and reconstituted families created by remarriage (Giddens, 2001, p.172). Comprehensive statistical evidence of marital breakdown in Nigeria rarely exists. This is because; evaluating family situations in Nigeria has proven difficult as a result of lapses of courts in recording divorce rates in rural and urban areas. Also complicating the difficulties of evaluation is the instance of marital separation which may or may not indicate dissatisfaction among the affected couples. Finally, Separation as a result of an unsatisfactory marriage is more prominent than a legal divorce especially in

rural areas and also among those who had a traditional or customary marriage (Afonja and Pearce, 1984, p. 64-65). It is important to note that statistical data of court marriages do exist but those of traditional or customary marriages may not be readily available.

Religions like Islam and Christianity discourage divorce. But unlike Christianity, Islam makes provision for divorce as a last resort while biblical doctrine binds couples in commitments which can only be terminated by death. Irregardless of religious and societal expectations of marriage, couples normally expect that the bonds of marriage will be a lasting one; but unfortunately, this is hardly the case as many marriages are breaking down and ending up in divorce, separation or in an 'empty-shell' marriage. Sociological researches as revealed by several authors in Calhan, Light & Keller (1997, p.311) disclose that some marriages are more inclined to a divorce (breakdown) than others. These includes marriages where the spouses reside in urban areas, have low income, married early and not for too long, a wife with an egalitarian attitude towards division of labour and spouses who do not have strong religious convictions. Also included in this category are spouses who have liberal attitude, are pessimistic about life and one or both have a parents who is divorced. Despite religious condemnation and public denunciation of divorce, marital breakdown in Nigeria is still on the rise as people are taking a less rigid view of the whole issue. The decision to end a marriage is no longer a choice based on morality but on personal feeling/needs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

There are many explanations and intervening processes being proposed to account for why marital breakdown have negative effects on children personality. The theory forwarded by Sigmund Freud (1933) explains the various stages of psycho-dynamic development. These stages are; oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital. At each stage, the child is critically sensitive to certain stimulations(stimuli satisfying experiences) should the child not receive adequate and appropriate stimulation of care, love, bonding etc or proper experiences, the child's development will be impaired in some ways. Freud has argued that appropriate attachment is one of the principal factors causing the human being to become socialized to internalized the values of the society, to feel and have concern for others, and in maturity to have a well balance personality. There is clinical evidence that impaired relations between parents and children in the critical period of infancy function as a cause of adult disorders like withdrawal, hostility, sexual maladjustment, alcoholism and inadequate maternal/paternal behavior (Brown, 1965:p37)

THE CONCEPT OF MARITAL BREAKDOWN

Marital breakdown is a situation where the interpersonal relationship between married couples is damaged to the extent that they are unable to ordinarily restore the relationship. It is a complex process that often affects the children, in-laws and other individuals involved. After a marriage breaks down, there may cease to be a relationship between the couple or there may exist only a long term relationship at a distance (wikipedia, 2009, para 1).

Haralambos and Heald, (1980, p.360), opine that marital breakdown can be divided into three categories: Divorce, separation and 'empty-shell' marriage. Divorce or dissolution as it is increasingly becoming known is a legally designed, judicially administered process that legally ends a marriage no longer considered viable by one or both married couples. A divorce permits the couples involved to remarry. The status of divorce varies from country to country and is often based on the predominant religious belief. For instance, among the Roman Catholics worldwide, a marriage conducted under religious rites should never be dissolved by legal means and remarriage is not permitted. Philosophical and political theories generally maintain that marriage is predominantly a civil contract and that therefore it is subject to dissolution. Divorce on various grounds is acknowledged among Buddhists and Muslims as well (Levy, 2008, para1&16). Separation on the other hand is the physical dissociation of the spouses. This implies that they no longer share the same dwelling. Separation can also be legalized and when this happens, it is referred to as a 'legal separation' or 'judicial separation'. This is the legal process; granted in the court whereby, a married couple may opt for a de-facto separation while still remaining legally married (Wikipedia, 2008, para 1). In Nigeria, most cases of separation are done informally this is, out of court. Haralambos and Heald, (1980, p.360-362) describe an 'empty shell' marriage as one where married couples live together, remain legally married, but their marriage exist only in name. In the past, it was believed that spouses who no longer loved each other and found living together displeasing should at least live together for the sake of their children and their societal status. This is unlike the case today where empty shell marriages are more likely to end in separation and divorce.

THE CONCEPT OF PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

Personality can be described as an individual's unique and relative stable pattern of behaviour, thoughts and feeling. It deals with specific dimension along which individuals differ in consistent but stable ways (Baron, 2006). Personality development on the other hand describes the emergence of the distinctive styles of thoughts, feelings and behavioral patterns which make each human being a unique individual. It is important to note that how an individual interact with others can affect who they becomes (one's distinctive style of behaviour). This can in turn affects the nature of one's social relationship (Weaver, Loftus and Wortman, 1999). The understanding of personality is buttressed on the fact that some of our behaviour tendencies are inherited, while others are learned through experience (Nature and nurture interaction). One of the basic perspectives of personality development is that of Sigmund Freud popularly called the psychoanalysis theory. Freud opines that the first few years of life are filled with turmoil and aggressive urges and the anxiety associated with them. How a child chooses to respond to these impulses would continue to influence the child's behaviour throughout life. The family and other social settings are the arenas in which these challenges unfold. Each challenge has an outcome, either favorable or unfavorable which affects a person's social and personality development. A favorable outcome produces positive outlook and feelings which make coping with subsequent challenges easier (Agiobu-kemmer, 2005) and

unfavorable outcome in contrast leaves a person troubled at a disadvantage in future development.

A variety of factors influence child development. Heredity guides every aspect of physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and personality development. Family, peer groups, the school environment, and the community influence how children think, socialize, and become self-aware. Biological factors like nutrition, medical care, and environmental hazards affect the growth of the body and mind. Economic and political institutions, the media, and cultural values all guide how children live their lives. Unfavourable life events like a family crisis or a national emergency can modify the growth of personality and identity. Also of important is children's significant contribution to their own development. This occurs as they strive to understand their experiences, respond in individual ways to the people around them, and choose activities, friends, and interests. Thus, the factors that enhance development emanates from both outside and within the person (Thompson, 2007, para 3)

FACTORS ENHANCING MARITAL BREAKDOWN IN NIGERIA
Economic Factors
Haralambos and Heald (1980, p.365) proposed that there is an inversed relationship between income and marital breakdown. The less income a family receives, the higher the rate of separation or divorce. Low income places anxiety on a marital relationship especially on the husband who is deemed a failure in his role as a breadwinner. Insufficient income can affect sustainable livelihood which in turn may cause tension and stress between couples leading to quarrels, conflicts and misunderstanding. When these trends persist, the marriage may be terminated as a way out.

Social Factors
Haralambos and Heald, (1980, p.365-366) suggested some social factors that serve as determinants to marital breakdown. They opined that the lower the age of marriage, the higher the chances for a divorce. Secondly: If one or both couples have parents who are divorced, there exists a greater likelihood that their marriage will also end up in a divorce/separation. Thirdly: Couples who come from different social backgrounds (different social classes or ethnic group) may face conflicts arising from disagreement in role expectations which may emanate from a subculture of their individual social groups. Fourthly: The nature of one's occupation can enhance marital breakdown. For example, spouses who have jobs that require frequent separation from their spouses. Such jobs lessen the dependence of spouses on each other and provide especially the husband with the greater chance of meeting members of the opposite sex when away from the company of his spouse. Some jobs are also task demanding to the extent that spouses are unable to satisfactorily get involve in their marriage. Situations like these may eventually lead to a marital breakdown.

Gender Roles

The present day society has and is providing greater opportunities for women to actively participate in economic and political development. This development has taken wives and mothers from the home front thus decreasing their traditional domestic role and granting them the possibility for financial independence. Acquiring such a status can decrease women's dependency on their husbands both economically and emotionally The mere fact that a woman has a job does not result to a divorce but simply implies that she is less likely to remain in a troubled marriage than is a dependent wife (Calhan etal 1997, p.310).

Cultural Factors

In many countries nation wide, marriage is often linked to childbearing. This explains why the word matrimony comes from the Latin word "motherhood". As a result of the traditional link of marriage to childbearing, a child born out of wedlock is often shunned and term illegitimate (even though single parenting is becoming prominent and ceasing to be viewed as a social problem) (Macoinis, 2009a, p.352). In a typical African society, marriage is all about children. Procreation is a paramount priority in marriage as they are considered instrumental in creating a lasting family.

Liberal Laws

Changes in the law have made divorce easier to attain. In the United States of America, a "no-fault divorce" policy is in existence. This policy permits divorce for no specific reason and grants divorces as desired by the couples on grounds of irreconcilable differences. This was unlike the past where divorces were only granted when one or both couple claimed in court that the other was at fault of wrecking the marriage either through abandonment, infidelity, physical abuse, amongst other reasons. Divorce was considered a moral issue and a wrong had to be committed for a divorce to be granted. Coupled to this fact is that public attitude towards divorce is becoming more liberal thus making it easier for couples to walk out of a marriage (Macionis, 2009a, p.359-360). In a comparative analysis of the trends of divorce in Nigeria, Afonja and Pearce (1984, p.64) acknowledged Iro (1976) as blaming the liberalization of the matrimonial cause's decree of 1970 which recognizes the concept of irretrievably broken marriages as a major contributing factor to the increased rate of divorce in Nigeria.

Effects on Marital Breakdown on Child Personality Development

When a marriage breaks down, one or both parent leaves often against the wishes of their children. This can be very traumatic for the children as they have to adjust to disturbing changes. Most children recommence normal development after the initial crises period, but others undergo prolong negative effects from the divorce/separation. As disheartening and disturbing as a marital breakdown is for children, it is worthwhile to know that a child who lives in a stable home that is continuously full of marital tension is almost certainly not better off and may suffer even worse problems (Calhan *et al,* 1997, p.312).

Children react differently when their parent marriage ends in a divorce or a separation. Some reactions will be positive while others will be negative. Certain factors determine the extent to which children will react to a divorce/separation. These factors include age of the child, gender, the extent to which they child was drawn into the marital conflict, the gender of the custodial parent, the relationship they had with parents before divorce, the child's history of coping with stress amongst other factors. The effects of divorce on children can be immediate and increase gradually over the years before declining. And in some cases, re-emerges years later. During and after a process that leads to the termination of marriage, the couples as well as their entire family go through a series of sudden changes. The changes generate a lot of stress for children and will often be reflected in their voices and actions. Short term effects of divorce may include: anger, sadness, depression, aggression, non-compliance, life stress, less parental supervision, less consistent discipline, lower self concept, social adjustment difficulty, and other numerous and negative virtues and responses (Matthews, 1998, para 13).

Matthews 1998, para revealed research findings by (Wallerstein, 1985) on a five year follow up study of children from divorced homes; some children under study had a persistence of anger at the parent who had instigated the divorce, a strong desire for the absent parent, a persistence desire to reunite the family and mild to severe clinical depression in more than one third of the original sample. Using the same children in a ten years follow-up, findings revealed that the 'children' still haboured a prevailing feeling of sorrow about their divorced parent, had persistent emotional problems like: Fear of betrayal, abandonment, loss and rejection; anger, resentment and hostility. In later life, the 'childrens' social relationship portrayed a reduction in their ability to develop and sustain a loyal friendships and dating relationships; had early sexual activities, engaged in delinquent behaviour, fear of commitment and intimacy, less trust in future spouse, feel less affection towards their parents and kept less contact with them (particularly as adult). The same study also disclosed that children who adjusted well after the divorce of their parents had a mutual parent- child relationship with the custodial parent,

Future Trends for Marriage and Family
Family life will continue to change and these changes will be accompanied by conflicts caused by traditional values verses personal choices. Sociologists have suggested five likely trends for family life. First, that divorce rates are likely to remain high even when evidence continue to show that marital breakups put children at a higher risk of poverty. Secondly, there will be a lot of diversities of family life in the future as more people will opt to cohabit rather than marry, become single parents and/or prefer a gay/lesbian marriage. Thirdly, Men will play a limited role in childrearing. For example, in the USA where child custody is usually granted to the mother, the ties between fathers and their children is often weakened. Fourthly, Families will continue to feel the effects of economic changes as both parents may be involved in their occupations at the expense of family interaction. Finally, new reproductive technologies like in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and surrogate

motherhood will continue to affect the traditional experience of parenthood (Macionis, 2009b, p.391-392).

CONCLUSION

In the past, Divorce/separation was deemed a moral issue both in religious and secular settings and was completely condemned even when it seems to be the last and only resort out of a troubled marriage. The world today is experiencing disturbing trend of divorce and separations which use to be distinctive to the western world but is now common in the developing world. As a result of the declining stigma attached to being divorce/separated, people are hasty to get married having already conceived the notion to end the union the moment they deem it unsuitable. This they do without giving consideration to the children involved and the social, economic and emotional effects it can have on them. The termination of a marriage poses a problem for children who experience the departure of a parent from their social world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having reviewed relevant materials on the topic under study, the researchers recommend as follows;

- Parents (through educational and religious institutions) should be persuaded to treat marital tensions sensibly without instigating their children to take sides. This will lessen post traumatic effects on children and their personalities.
- Religious institutions should be encouraged to register marriages under the court of law.
- The Nigeria legal system should adopt the covenant marriage law as is practiced in a few states in the USA. A covenant marriage is harder to dissolve than a conventional marriage as it requires that a couple should seek marital counseling before a divorce and that a divorce should only be sought for limited reasons like adultery, felony, abandonment after a prolong period of time.
- Professional help should be sought for children who are adversely affected by the divorce.
- Non-custodial parent should be encouraged to maintain regular presence with their children through visitations and phone calls.
- Quite a number of divorce/separated couples will end up remarrying. They should therefore mentor their wards to accept the step parent.

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