

QUALITY OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF FAMILY STRUCTURES AND GENDER-ROLE ORIENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Since the whole human population are products of the family, it may be deduced that a substantial proportion of the social- vices besieging the modern world emanate from maladaptive socialization process of the family domain. To achieve a capable and positive functioning socialization process, harmonious and healthy relationships must be ensured among and between each member of the family. Taking into consideration the overarching positive influence of valuable family relationship on healthy family lives, it is highly essential to investigate the predicting factors of good family relationships. Accordingly, this study tested whether family structures and gender role orientations would predict quality of family relationships. Ninety-eight participants who were selected using cluster sampling method from Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, completed self-report instruments comprising of Index of Family Relations (IFR), Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) and the Personal Data Sheet (PDS). Hypotheses were tested using one-way ANOVA and multiple regressions. Findings suggest that participants from traditional marriage families reported better family relationships than those from single-parent, divorced and court/legal marriage families. Additionally, the expression of feminine traits by family members (regardless of sex) seems to account for a well knitted family relationship than the expression of the nearly feminine trait, androgynous trait and nearly masculine trait. Results were discussed in line with previous literature and it was recommended that traditional/customary marriage should not be jettisoned in the process of family formation but should be done in conjunction with court/legal marriage. Similarly, the expression of feminine traits by each family member regardless of their sex should be encouraged to forestall family conflicts and ensure good family relations.

UDC & KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

The family has always been regarded as the bedrock of the society since each individual of the human race is a product of the family. It may be inferred that good products from the family make good societies while bad products make bad ones. This suffice that, most of the social problems besetting the modern society are due to maladaptive socialization process of the family. Thus, building healthy families is a sine qua non to building good societies.

Research has indicated that healthy family life is dependent on the quality of family relationships or attachments (Fahey, Keilthy & Polek 2012). Healthy family relationships bring about trust and respect which is then reflected in warmth, love, affection, support and cares received by each family member (Australian Early Childhood Mental Health Initiative, 2008). The quality of family relationships in terms of

connectedness between parents, parents and children, and among children themselves has major impacts on the lives of each person in the family (Brown 2010; McLanahan, & Sandefur, 1994; Acock and Demo, 1994).

Family structure is somehow regarded as a major predictor of family relationships, even though this is scarcely reported or investigated in research literature. In particular, children from intact family structure (that is, families in which both biological parents are married and living together) have been found to report higher levels of family attachments, which serve as deterrent to illicit drug use in comparison to children from non intact family structure (that is, step or single parent and divorce families) (Sokol-Katz, Dunham, and Zimmerman, 1997). The study of Sokol-Katz, Dunham, and Zimmerman, (1997) inherently suggests that theoretically, family structure may not have direct effect on child outcome, but probably mediated by family relationships. That is, variations in family structures may account for differences in family relationships which eventually determines to child outcomes. This means that, it is possibly through quality of family relationships or bonding that family structures influence child outcomes. Hence, children who are products of good family relationships are expected to be well psychologically adjusted and have better developmental outcomes in comparison to those who have poor family relationships. These differences, perhaps, is an aftermath of the attention, care and support received by children from well adjusted or intact families as against the non intact family characterized by maladjustments.

Even though past research has shown that relationship exists between family structure and child outcomes, whereby adolescents from non-intact families were behaviorally deficient as compared to adolescents from intact families (e.g. Schneider, Atteberry, & Owens, 2005; Needle, Su, & Doherty 1990, Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel & McLanahan, 2001), what remains to be examined is the determination of the mechanism by which family structure influences child outcomes. Thus, the present study theoretically conceives that, the major pathway by which family structures may perhaps influence child outcome is through quality of family relationships. It is expected that if family structure influences quality of family relationships, then assumptions could be made that family relationship is a possible mediator or moderator of the nexus between family structure and child outcomes. Hence, it is important to establish the influence of family structure on family relationships.

According to the gender role theory, being a biological male or female comes with some expected societal or cultural behavioral expectations. Failure to show these expected behavioral patterns may not only result into cognitive dissonance for people but pose potential chaos in social interaction. For example, in many cultures, the man is strictly expected to be the bread-winner whiles the woman a home keeper; the female child is expected to assist in the kitchen while the male child should engage in animal hunting; men

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are entitled to inheritance while women are not; men are expected to be strong-willed while women are expected to be feeble-minded.

The dissensions in these gender-role based behavioral expectations may possibly lead to conflict in family interactions between husbands and wives; parents and children because the gender role dichotomy is an important aspect of people's lives and relationships (Donaghue & Fallon, 2003; Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009). As posited in the gender-role theory, people come to "internalize cultural expectations about their gender because social pressures external to the individual favor behavior consistent with their prescribed gender role" (Kidder, 2002, p. 630).

Based on the gender-role theory, every individual consciously or unconsciously develops gender-role orientation or beliefs about their responsibilities in social interaction as a result of being a biological male or female. Traditionally, males are expected to possess the masculinity traits (e.g. leadership, physical strength and courage) whereas, it is expected that females should show the femininity traits (e.g. empathic, caring, home-keeping and submissive).

However, these traditional gender role beliefs may not be the same for all individuals especially in our modern society. That is, a female individual may not necessarily identify with the feminine traits and a male individual may not necessarily possess the masculine traits. According to Livingston&Judge (2008), compliance or identification with the traditional role of being a male or female can be at varied levels for each individual. For example, in the typology of Bem (1974)'s gender role perceptions, individuals (irrespective of sex) are classified as having anyone of masculine (or nearly masculine), feminine (or nearly feminine), androgynous and undifferentiated gender role orientations. The masculine individual is high on the masculine traits; the feminine individual is high on feminine traits; the androgynous individual has high degree of masculine and feminine traits while the undifferentiated individual is low on both masculine and feminine traits.

In less recent past, studies have attempted linking gender-role orientations and family relationships. For example, families in which partners were strictly oriented towards the traditional gender roles were far from being tightly knitted in their relationships. As demonstrated by Ickes and Barnes (1978), the masculine man and feminine woman dyadic group have lesser degree of liking for each other as shown in their manner of talking, eye to eye contact, smiling and gesturing in comparison to other dyadic groups who are not strictly attached to the traditional gender-role orientation. It is also established that women in masculine man and feminine woman dyadic group report significantly higher levels of depression, lower levels of self-worth and life satisfaction in contrast with other dyadic groups (Shaver, Pullis, and Olds, 1980, cited in Ickes, 1993). It may be inferred from the findings of Shaver et al (1980) that the negative feelings of women in the masculine man and feminine woman dyadic group might be due to poor family relationships experienced in their traditionally-oriented gender role families. According to Shaver et al (1980), these women reported impaired relationship with their husbands in terms of being under-loved and having less satisfactory sex lives. Based on review of past studies, Lamke (1989) noted that androgyny and most especially, possession of feminine traits (by both husbands and wives) are ingredients of good family relationships; thus, leading to high marital adjustment as against the traditional gender-role orientation.

Considering the foregoing, it may be hypothesized that both family structures and gender-role orientations are predicting factors of family relationships. Specifically, this study tested the hypotheses that:

- i. individuals who are products of married biological parents will report better family relationships than those from single-parent or divorced families.
- ii. femininity will enhance better family relationships than other gender-role orientations.
- iii. Family structures and gender role orientations will jointly predict quality of family relationships.

Method

Research Participants

Using a cluster sampling technique, a total of ninety-eight participants (98) drawn from the population of Ekiti State University students, Ado-Ekiti were recruited for this study. The sample consists of 42 males and 56 females with age-range 15 to 30 years.

Research Design

This study investigated how gender-role orientations and family structures influence family relations. Since the predicting variables (i.e. gender role orientations and family structures) had occurred naturally in study participants and no manipulation was performed, this study adopts the ex-post facto research design. Thus, variation in quality of family relationships was examined based on pre-existing differences in family structures and gender-role orientations among participants.

Measures

To objectively assess the study variables, three standardized testing instruments were administered to participants. They are:

- i. The Index of Family Relations (IFR): The IFR was developed by Hudson (1982) to measure the severity of interpersonal relationship problems among family members. The IFR consists of 25 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "rarely or none of the time" (1) to "most or all of the time" (5). The sample of items in the scale include "The members of my family really care about each other (reversed coded)", "Life in my family is generally unpleasant," "I feel left out in my family." Total score for each test taker is obtained by summing scores on each item and subtracting 25 from it. Hudson (1982) reported alpha reliability coefficient of 0.95. for American sample while Afolabi (2014) obtained alpha reliability coefficient of 0.88. for Nigerian sample. High scores on the IFR indicate poorer family relations while low scores better family relations.
- ii. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI): The BSRI was developed by Bem (1974) to measure gender role perceptions in terms of masculinity, femininity and androgyny. The BSRI consists of 60 items in which the test taker is asked to judge the degree at which he or she possesses both masculine and feminine traits and rated on a 7 point likert scale ranging from "Never or almost never true" (1) to "Always or almost always true" (7). Samples of items include, "Acts as a Leader", "Forceful" "Sympathetic" "Soft-spoken." The BSRI has demonstrated a high test-retest reliability for Masculinity ($r = .90$) Femininity ($r = .90$) and Androgyny ($r = .93$) (Bem, 1974). Similarly, Holt and Ellis (1998) provided coefficient alpha .95 and .92 for masculinity and femininity respectively.

- iii. Personal Data Sheet (PDS): The PDS was developed by the researcher to obtain the demographic information of participants. These include information about gender, age, marital status, "Are your parents currently Married (Legally), Married (Traditionally), Separated (Not staying together but traditionally or legally married), Cohabiting or Widowed?"

Procedures

After obtaining informed consent and assuring confidentiality, researchers administered one hundred and twenty copies of research instruments consisting of the IFR, BSRI and PDS to selected participants in one of the University's lecture hall. Despite providing adequate information as regards the completion of the instruments, about twenty-two participants made some errors while responding to some of the items. Consequently, data for 98 participants were available for data analysis. Participants were appreciated for taking part in the study by providing ₦100 worth of airtime.

Results

Table 1: One Way ANOVA analysis testing the effect of Family Structures on Family Relationship							
Variables	Level	N	X	S.D	Df	F	Sig.
Family Structure	Court/Legal Marriage Families	50	44.56	15.36	35,490	4.65	P < 0.01
	Traditional/Customary Marriage Families	25	35.12	15.64			
	Single-Parent Families	10	50.5	9.48			
	Divorced Families	13	49.85	8.17			
Dependent Variable: Family Relationships							

$F(3, 97) = 4.65, P < 0.01$

Table 1 shows that there is significant difference between types of family structure in regard to quality of family relationships [$F(3, 97) = 4.65, P < 0.01$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Fisher LSD test revealed that individuals from traditional marriage families reported better family relationships than those from other family structure types (i.e. legal marriage, single-parent and divorced families).

Table 2: One Way ANOVA analysis testing the effect of Gender-role Orientations on Family Relationships							
Variables	Level	N	X	S.D	Df	F	Sig.
Gender-role Orientations	Feminine	8	25.25	4.46	35,490	5.13	P < 0.01
	Nearly Feminine	7	40.14	18.61			
	Androgynous	79	45.53	14.23			
	Nearly Masculine	4	44.75	16.42			
Dependent Variable: Family Relationships							

$F(3, 97) = 4.65, P < 0.01$

Table 2 shows that there is significant difference between types of gender-role orientation in regard to quality of family relationships [$F(3, 97) = 5.13, P < 0.01$]. Post hoc comparisons using the Fisher LSD test revealed that individuals who possess feminine traits reported better family relationships than those possessing other traits (i.e. nearly feminine, androgynous and nearly masculine).

Table 3: Regression analysis showing the influences of Family Structures and Gender-role Orientations on Family relationships							
Variable		T	Sig.	R	R Square	F	Sig.
Family Structures	1.76	1.24	P > 0.05	0.37	0.13	7.24	P < 0.001
Gender-role Orientations	8.21	3.5	P < 0.0001				
Gender-role Orientations							

Table 3 shows that both family structures and gender-role orientations jointly predict family relationships [$F(2, 96) = 7.24, P < 0.001, R^2 = 0.37$]. However, only gender-role orientations has a significant independent influence on family relationships [$t = 8.21, t = 3.5, P < 0.0001$] but not family structures [$t = 1.76, t = 1.76, P > 0.05$].

Discussions

The results of this study have demonstrated that family structures and gender-role orientations are both predicting factors of family relationships. In particular, participants whose parents are married in the traditional or customary way reported their family relationships as more adaptable, harmonious and peaceful than those from court marriage families, single parent families and divorced families. Overall, individuals from homes where the biological parents are traditionally or legally married and living together seem to report better family bonding as compared to those from single parent and divorced family set up, with participants from single parent families reporting the most inflexible family relationships. This result is in tandem with Sokol-Katz, Dunham, and Zimmerman (1997) work in which children living with their married biological parents reported better family attachments than those from divorce or single parent families.

A foremost question is why the traditional marriage families seem to predict better family relationships in comparison to the court/legal marriage families? In traditional marriage families, couples and their child (ren) are probably given more societal recognition and acceptance because the formation of such families was based on the awareness, consent and blessings of parents and the community as against court marriage families. This singular fact, that the family is culturally accepted and consented to by the community may unconsciously create in each family member an aura of genuineness of their family existence which may positively translate into better family relationships than court marriage families. Since interactions of couples in court marriage families are governed by written formal laws, their behaviors toward each other may be more wary, artificial and mechanistic so as to prevent dissolution of their marital relationship in the court of law. These wary behaviors may be shifted to or modeled by the children, thereby leading to a less harmonious family relationship. In contrast, because there are no formal or written rules governing traditional marriage families, couples relate with each other as freely as possible with fewer restrictions, thus amounting to rich family relationship. Succinctly, while traditional marriage "authenticates" and legitimates marriage, court marriage only "legalizes" marriage within the African context.

The reason that may be attributed to better family relationships in traditional marriage families over single and divorced family structures is the difference in quality of time spent and opportunities for interaction as family members, which form the basis for emotional support and attention. In the former, there are more opportunities for interaction and relationships since both parents are available to provide socio-emotional care and support for each other, as well as to the children. Unfortunately in the latter, interaction is always between the single parent (which may be either the father or the mother) and the children, thus resulting to reduced opportunities for family interactions in terms of provision of social and emotional support. In view of the fact that the single parent does not have spousal support, unaided handling of family distress emanating from child-upbringing and socioeconomic deficits may be

overwhelming, thereby causing reactant behaviors and family rifts.

Apart from demonstrating the influence of family structures on family relationships, this study also revealed that gender role orientation predicts family relationships. Distinctively, the feminine traits appear to be the major factor for good family relationships than nearly feminine/masculine traits or androgynous trait. This result is a corroboration of the work of Lamke (1989) in which possession of feminine traits by both males and females ensure better family relationships than other gender-role orientations. For the reasons that feminine traits are characterized by submissiveness, tenderness, loving and compassionate feelings, it is more likely that the expression of these traits by both parents and children brings peaceful coexistence in family relationships. In contrast, possession of other gender-role orientations; for example, masculinity (in terms of aggressiveness and domination) may breed an atmosphere of authoritarianism and autocracy, thereby ensuing subjugation, oppression and counterproductive behaviors in the family. Additionally, the possession of androgynous traits by family members may not yield good family relationships because the display of a high degree of masculinity and femininity within and across situations could amount into behavioral inconsistencies on the part of the family member concerned. These inconsistencies in behavior may create distrust and signal the notions of unreliability and undependability of such family member in family interaction.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study suggests that family structure and gender role orientations are two important predicting factors of family relationships. Specifically, traditional marriage families and expression of feminine traits by family members (regardless of sex) seem to account for a well adjustable or good family relationship.

This outcome has many implications for family therapists and living successful family lives. Though, it is undoubted that court marriage is a very important means of wedlock, nevertheless, the importance of customary marriage should not be de-emphasized. As evidenced in this study, families built on traditional marriage system tend to predict better family relationships than those on court marriage system. It is as if the tool of wedlock originating from the Nigerian native cultures seems to be more advantageous for family life than the one embraced from the western world. Hence, court marriage should always be done in conjunction with traditional marriage to ensure good family relationship.

Together with other psychotherapeutic techniques, family therapists should recommend the expression of feminine traits to disordered families to forest all conflicts and ensure good family relations. The expression of femininity will bring about submissiveness, tenderness, loving and compassionate feelings toward individual family members.

Lastly, as this study suggests that family structures and gender-role orientations are predicting factors of family relationship, future research in this area should investigate mediating effects of family relationships on other family variables such as child outcomes.

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