PARENTS’ PERCEPTION OF INTERACTIONS EXISTING IN FAMILIES WITH BIOLOGICAL AND ADOPTED CHILDREN IN ANAMBRA STATE

By

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Abstract

This study investigated parental perception of family interactions in families with biological and those with adopted children. The purpose of the study was to ascertain parental perception of family adjustments in the two types of families. The study was carried out in Anambra State using the descriptive survey design. One research question and one hypothesis guided the study. The population of the study comprised 3,767,903 parents in the area. The sample comprised 352 parents selected through purposive sampling technique. A researcher-developed instrument duly validated by experts and whose Chronbach Alpha was 0.84 was used in data collection. The researcher together with 24 research assistants collected the data. Mean ratings and t-test were used in data analysis. It was found that parents of biological and adoptive families differed in their mean ratings on their family interactions. It was among others recommended that biological and adoptive parents should attend regular counselling and family retreats for improved family interactions.

A family provides a sense of security and identity for the child and is the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members particularly children. It is within the family unit that one generally learns to walk, talk, and interact with others. Family members teach each other love, forgiveness, kindness, and sacrifice. According to Fields (2003), families are often the first and frequently the last source of support for individuals.

Silburn, Zubrick, De Maio, Shepherd, Griffin and Mitrou, (2006) and Xu, (2009) observed that families are considered the hub of wellbeing, and how they function is crucial. Family functioning refers to the family's level of competency related to interaction patterns, values, coping strategies, commitment, and resource mobilization

Family functioning has been a global concern in recent times. The United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2008) noted that inadequate family functioning is detrimental to providing a quality of life for families. Igbinedion (2006) found that poor family functioning is the plight of many families in South-West Nigeria and this fostered a negative trajectory leading to child prostitution, trafficking and other forms of child abuse.
Juffer and van Ijzendoorn (2005) and Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) have identified family interaction as an important variable for family functioning. Family interaction in this regard is used to describe trust, initiatives, family relationships, emotional support, assistance, and sharing of feeling among family members.

Deater-Peckard and Petrill (2004) defined family interaction in terms of how families help, trust and confide in one another. Tolerance, understanding and value for one another are also features of family interaction. High levels of family interactions manifest where the relationship between members is cordial, members relate as if they are friends and they tolerate, motivate, and cooperate freely with one another. In such families, parents are flexible in handling family affairs. Lamb and Lewis (2005) specified that interactions comprise the cordial relationship among family members which is characterized by mutual soul baring exchanges between children and parents. Williams (2011) described family interactions to include leisure activities, assistance with homework, and parents setting rules for governing children's leisure time and other activities.

Interaction is a critical element of family functioning. This is because LaRenzie, (2010) referred to the family as a base from which its members eave to or to which its members retreat for most of their social interactions. Nwokolo (2007) described family interactions as making the family the primary milieu in which the child develops. In essence, family interactions present the family as the base, which provides the growing child with models of behaviour and values and socializes the child to conformity to approved family norms. Odu and Paulina (2008) noted family interactions exercise the first and most direct influence on the children. It is through daily interactions that a family serves as a pivotal institution for the growing child.

Family interaction, of course, is central in overall socio-economic development of the child and they have a powerful influence over family members' psychological well being. Poor interaction in a family can contribute to negative well-being of family members, while an ideally functioning family can protect any family member from many of the psychological risks that he or she might face.

An important issue that arises in considering family interaction is the extent to which it operates in biological and adoptive families. Biological families are those in which members are directly linked by birth (United Nations, 1991). In biological families, the children are the direct offsprings of the parents; hence the children are biologically related to the parents through procreation. Adoptive families on the other hand are those where there are placements (often legal) of children within families that are not related to them, which discontinue the relationship between the children and their biological parents (Patterson, 2009). In adoptive families, the parents possess the child or children through transferred parental rights and responsibilities. The view taken in this study is that biological families are those with their own biological children while adoptive families are those with their non-biological children (excluding caregivers/house-helps).
The records of adoptive families is on the increase in Nigeria, thus changing the family situations in which children in the country are cared for and raised (Oladokun, Arulogun, Oladokun, Morhason-Bello, Bamgboye, Adewole & Ojengbede, 2009). The Society for Family Health (2006) noted that the number of adoptive families in Anambra State will continue to increase because more families are seeking to adopt children for a variety of reasons including: infertility, late marriages, and sex preferences.

Furthermore, some governmental reports reflect the idea that adoptive families do not function well because they are regarded as inauthentic or nonstandard. The Nigerian Population Commission (2003), for example, explicitly excludes adoptive families from the broad category "traditional nuclear family" (a family in which a child lives with two married biological parents and with only full siblings if siblings are present)" (p.71). Adoptive parents also may receive negative feedback from family and friends who question the authenticity of their roles as parents. Consequently, some adoptive parents may lack a sense of entitlement to their children and have lower levels of self-acceptance as parents, thus affecting the levels of their family functioning.

In Nigerian history, the practice of adoption has served two societal purposes: to protect and guide parentless children, and to provide heirs to childless couples (Oladokun et al., 2009). Adopted children were desired and often essential to families trying to fill a demand for household and farm labour. For the most part, adoption was used to address the problem of caring for children whose mothers gave birth out of wedlock and who were deemed for various social and economic reasons to be unable to care for their children (Ezeugwu, Obi, & Onah, 2002). At this time single mothers were often counselled that placing their children for adoption was in the best interests of the children.

Studies have also indicated a low level of family functioning in Anambra State (Nwokolo, 2005; Nwabunwanne, 2010). There are increasing cases of spousal abandonment of their families and many children carry with them the trauma of maltreatment, sadness, anger, and problems of un-acceptance from their family members (Ezeugwu, et al., 2002). Problems of poor interactions, cohesion and material investments in families have increased the number of children who run away from their homes because they have been neglected and abused, physically and/or sexually. Many families have witnessed or experienced family violence, disunity, conflicts, extreme deprivation, and malnutrition.

How these problems of family functioning apply to both biological and adoptive families need to be further investigated because there is lack of empirical data in Nigeria due to the absence of empirical data in the area. In the light of the projected increase in adoption in Anambra state as reported by Ezeugwu et al.,(2002) and Umeora, T., Mbazor, D., & Okpere, S. (2007), the increasing cases of disruptive behaviours among adolescents, and the fears of non acceptability of adopted children, it
is important to conduct a research on family interactions in biological and adoptive families of these children function compared to biological families.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

One research question and one null hypothesis guided the study.

**Research Question**

What is the extent of interactions existing in families with biological and adopted children in Anambra State as viewed by both parents?

**Null Hypothesis:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings family interactions by parents of biological and adoptive families.

**Method**

The research design adopted in this study was a descriptive survey in order to collect information from families with biological and adopted children in Anambra. The population for this study comprised parents in about 3,767,903 families with children aged 11 to 18 years in Anambra State.

The sample consisted of 352 participants (176 biological parents and 176 adoptive parents) selected through purposive sampling technique. Condition for eligibility is that a family has two parents that are alive and the target child (referred to as the adolescent; aged 11-18 years and in secondary school). However, only one of the parents (either the father or the mother) was expected to respond to the questionnaire.

Study eligibility was limited to families living with a father, mother, and an adopted child aged between 11 and 18 years. One hundred and seventy-six such families were located. These families have adopted children reading across 88 secondary schools in Anambra State. Hence, these 88 schools were chosen for the study.

One hundred and seventy-six eligible biological families were randomly selected from the same 88 secondary schools where adopted children had been identified and selected. This was done to avoid raising suspicions from the adopted children.

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire is titled "Family Functioning Assessment Scale- Parents (FFAS -P). The instrument was structured on a 5-point response scale of Very High Extent, High Extent, Moderate extent, Low Extent, and Very Low Extent. Five lecturers in the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, validated the instrument. The Cronbach alpha method was used to test for reliability of the instruments in terms of internal consistency. The Cronbach alpha for FFAS-P was 0.94. This index is high indicating internal consistency of the instruments. The researcher was assisted by
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twelve social welfare officers and twelve school counsellors to collect data during Parents-Teachers' Association meeting in the selected schools on different dates.

To answer the research question, mean ratings were used in analyzing responses to the questionnaire items. The responses of parents in biological and adoptive families for each item were analyzed separately. To test the hypothesis, the t-test was applied to compare the mean responses of parents in families with adopted children with those with biological children. The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 significant level.

Results

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Biological and Adoptive Parents on their Family Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Biological Parents</th>
<th>Adoptive Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N = 176</td>
<td>N = 176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>RMKS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>We value family relationships more than material possessions.</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Family members keep their feelings about failures to themselves</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Family members relate well with one another.</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>We try new ways of helping our family</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>We really do trust and confide in each other in our family</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>LE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>We explain to our family members the “rules” about acceptable ways to act</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Family members support and care for one another when ill.</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>We assist our child with school work</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>We often shout at family members over little mistakes.</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>LE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cluster Mean: 3.63 HE 3.56 HE

Note*: Reverse scored items; RMKS=Remarks

Table 1 reveals that the mean ratings of items 1 to 4 and 6 to 8 are within the ranges of 3.77 and 4.42 in the column for biological parents. This means that biological parents perceive a high extent of interaction in their families in these 7 items. By
Adoptive parents perceive items 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 to a high extent with mean scores within 3.85 and 4.43. These parents perceive low extent of items 2, 5 and 9 with mean ratings within 2.36 and 2.40. The cluster means for both biological and adoptive parents were also 3.63 and 3.56, which indicates that both parents perceived a high extent of interaction in their families.

Table 2: t-test on the Mean Ratings of Parents of Biological and Adoptive Families on their Family Interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Cal-t</th>
<th>Crit-t</th>
<th>P&lt;0.05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biological</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>Not Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoptive</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that at 0.05 significant level and 350 df, the calculated t is 0.68 while the critical t is 1.96. Since the calculated t is less than the critical t, the null hypothesis is accepted. Therefore, there was no significant difference in the mean ratings on family interactions by parents biological and adoptive families.

Summary of the Findings

From the presentation and analysis of data, the following findings resulted:
1. Both biological and adoptive parents perceive a high extent of interaction in their families.
2. There was no significant difference in the mean ratings on family interactions by parents of biological and adoptive families.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that parents and children from biological and adoptive families perceive high extents of family interactions. In essence families with biological children and those with adopted children perceive similar levels of interactions in their families. This finding is consistent with Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes's (2002) observation that similar levels of interaction could be obtained in biological and adoptive families, because these interactions characterize the daily processes and interactions that take place in the home.

Further, the views of adoptive and biological parents on their family interactions did not differ significantly. The levels of family interactions obtained in biological families were comparable though not equal to that obtained in adoptive families. This finding differs from that of Gaines (2008) who found that adoptive families had significantly more positive family interactions than biological families. One explanation for the differences between Gaines' study and the present one could be that the work of Gaines focused on American parents with adopted little children (less than 10 years). Very little research has addressed or documented disadvantages in
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family interactions of adoptive families with adolescent children. It could be that interaction differences existed significantly when adopted children were still children but not until later in development, such as during adolescence when individuals' social identities are more fully established. Further research incorporating such developmental considerations would be needed in order to better unravel these effects.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that both biological and adoptive parents perceived a high extent of interactions in their families. In addition, biological and adoptive families did not differ significantly in their mean ratings on their family interactions. This study clearly shows that biological and adoptive families experience similar though not equal aspects of family interaction.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have formed the basis for the following commendations:

1. The family interactions of biological and adoptive families in Anambra State need to be significantly maintained.
2. Family planning specialists and religious bodies should organize seminars for adolescents on the advantages enjoyed by adopted children to encourage victims of unwanted teenage pregnancy to put up their children for adoption.

References


