

**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF
NIGERIAN SINGLE PARENTS**



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Abstract

Being married, living together as husband and wife and having children who are looked after by both parents, is the dream, pride and joy of a typical Nigerian. In fact, single parent family setting in the strict sense of the term, was formally a taboo among Nigerians. However, the increasing rate of divorce, separation and teenage motherhood has brought about this pattern of family. Headed by a man or a woman, single family system is still frowned at among Nigerians.

This study was carried out therefore, to find out the differences in the psychological as well as the social adjustment problems that the single mothers encounter when compared to those of single fathers. Eighty-one single parents (forty-one single mothers and forty single fathers) formed the subject of the study. The mean age of the single mothers was 34.5 years while that of the single fathers was 38 years. The two research hypotheses that there would be significant differences in the level of (1) the psychological and (2) the social adjustment of single mothers when compared to those of single fathers, were accepted. The results showed that single mothers suffer more intense psychological as well as social adjustment problems than the single fathers. The family counselling implications were discussed.

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Introduction

Single parenthood is a situation whereby only one parent (either the father or the mother) is leaving with and physically taking care of the children.

According to Mendes (1976), single-parent family consists of one parent and dependent children living in the same household without the assistance of a co-parent. Among Nigerians single parenthood was very rare in the olden days. It was regarded as a 'taboo' unless it was due to the death of a spouse.

The traditional Nigerian family is the extended family system where the grand fathers, grandmothers, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces and even the in-laws are all considered as part of the family. In most cases, they lived together in large compounds and raise their children together as a big family unit. In such family setting, the issue of single parenthood was quite unusual even when someone's spouse had died, other members of the family would willingly take care of the children (Nwachukwu, 1998).

The reasons for single parenthood could be due to temporary separation as a result of work (transfer), separation due to contagious or mental illness, separation due to incompatibility/misunderstanding/violence or it may be total separation due to divorce or death of a spouse.

Most societies have persistent negative attitude towards divorced women Wattenberg and Reinhardt (1979) arranged as follows, in descending order, the societies attitude towards the single women. The widow has been valued more highly; the divorced or separated woman less highly; and the never – married woman has been valued as immoral. The single mother is obviously aware of the society's attitudes towards her. Such negative attitudes provoke, psychological crises. Many single mothers have been observed to complain of physical and mental exhaustion, hypertension, alcohol and/or drug abuse, mental fatigue and absent mindedness. They frequently complain that when they look back they regret missing opportunities and brood on their failures. All these result in disequilibrium and poor psychological as well as social adjustment.

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In Nigeria many factors have gradually contributed to the growth of single parenthood. Some of these factors include:

- a. the emergence and development of urban communities, which had been strongly influenced by patterns from the Western World. The oil boom of the late 1970's gave rise to the rapid expansion of urban centres;
- b. the availability of employment opportunities in the cities exerted a strong pull on the young people with their propensity for trying out new things;
- c. apart from the economic factors, the city served as an escape route for those whose village life was problematic as well as those who felt unwanted, unsuccessful, disgraced or out of favour with local village authorities. Because the city inhabitants were from a variety of ethnic groups, they were not bound by the same traditional taboos and tended to change conventional village beliefs and customs including marital ties;
- d. city dwellers enjoyed a great sense of individualism. Owing to the distance from the extended family circles in the villages and the impersonality of the city. They were no longer in a close – knit, tightly organised community in which their every action was subject to scrutiny. The lessening of social control which results from a weakening family ties and traditional authorities, facilitated the development of delinquency, crime, prostitution and divorce.
- e. another contributing factor is the long and protracted rule of Nigeria by the military. The military governments promoted the culture of the young. They suspended the national constitution and many cultural societies and associations. They suspended, dismissed and appointed many traditional rulers. Some military rulers had arrogant attitude towards the aged and the tradition they jealously guided. Consequently, people's attitude towards

some old beliefs including prohibition of divorce was eroded. Many divorced and separated persons felt free to propagate and raise children on their own;

- f. lastly, the Nigerian Civil War, which has variously been described as one of the most ferocious, the most brutal and the most blood-letting wars of all times (Shimony 1969), left in its wake hundreds of thousand of widows with over a million depended children to cater for.

Statement of the Problem

Single fathers experience difficulties caring for their children and keeping their jobs. Feeding and preparing the children for school and at the same time being on time for their jobs every morning is not easy. According to Hammer and Turner, (1985), the synchronization of work, supervision of children and household management seem to be a major problem to most single fathers. Home management is, perhaps, their greatest headache. Many express difficulty in looking after the family, cooking, washing, arranging the furniture, having to wake up from sleep at night to attend to the children etc. Most single fathers have great difficulty crossing the male sex roles to which they have been used, into the areas of female sex roles.

Finance is the next difficulty. The entire family has to depend on the earning of the single father for the supplement from the wife is missing. Unlike the female gender, single fathers generally do not seek for help or child support from their ex-wives.

Defrain and Eirick (1981) observed that single fathers experience difficulty in establishing meaningful social life, and the formation of intimate interpersonal relationships. Many complain of feelings of loneliness, inadequacy and lack of personal social worth. Some have an overwhelming sense of failure. There may be irritability, restlessness and a tendency to engage in useless over-activity.

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Single fathers experience much adjustment problem in relationship with children regarding child rearing and child cares (Schlesinger 1978). The father must reorganise life in such areas as job, social life etc, to suit his new roles. He has to make solid engagement regarding who will take care of his children when he is out for job and he has arrangement to make sure that in his absence the children are properly taken care of.

Many fathers share household management with their children, especially the rest of the children. Often, the child has a say in the running of the household and resume more responsibility in taking more care of themselves than in two-parent families. Many single

fathers are ill-prepared to handle sibling rivalries, petty quarrels fights. Provision for the emotional development of the children is more tasking for many fathers than home-making role. Many find it embarrassing discussing sexual matters or giving instruction on sex to their daughters.

Divorced persons have specifically been studied by many social scientists. Smit and Smit (1981) observed that divorced men go through a predictable sequence in isolating themselves socially. At the onset of divorce, the father would isolate himself from outside interaction and use lack of time as an excuse. After a year, he starts to readjust and may begin to look for a wife if he opts to remarry.

In a classic study by White and Bloom (1981) on factors that relate to the adjustment of divorce men, the researchers discovered that half of the subjects tested high on physical and emotional separation stress. After about a year and a half, the complaint about loneliness and guilt decreased remarkably and an improvement in social life sexual integration occurred.

Single Mothers face an up-hill task of trying to make ends meet financially. Most of the women in our country depend very much on the financial earnings of their husband. Traditionally, the husband is the breadwinner and the wife looks after the children and the household. Compared to single fathers generally, single mothers have less education and low paying jobs (Sokunbi, 2000). As regards divorced single mothers, very few ex-husbands are known to be faithful in paying for child-support and alimony. In a study by Wattenberg and Reinhardt (1979) it was found that only 14% of divorced women received alimony and even then only a half of that number collect it regularly. Alimony, however, is not known to improve considerably the financial conditions of a single-mother family.

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Factors that affect adjustment to single parenthood

Single parenthood, no matter how it is brought about, is an anomaly in many traditional settings. No provision or anticipation is made for single parenthood during early upbringing. Perhaps, that is why many societies' reaction to it is negative. Although sex differences have been noted in adjustment to single parenthood, Paterson and Cleminshaw (1980) have identified the following three common factor that affect single parents' adjustment to normal living.

- a. **The severity of the marital separation crisis:** If the parties involved showed high degree of separation anxiety, emotional stress, and a high degree of anger towards others,

then the adjustment process will be difficult. On the other hand, if the separation or divorce was worked out with mutual understanding then the adjustment process will be easy and of short duration.

- b. **The degree to which the single parent perceives the stigma as negative:** The crisis will be less severe or moderate if the single person due to his or her education sees the situation as something purely private and personal. A single parent who sees divorce as indicative of his or her failure in life will find it hard to adjust.
- c. **Degree of disintegration:** Possession of such qualities as marketable skills, high levels of education, substantial income and emotional maturity, generally facilitate coping with single parenthood.

Some people have an extremely unpleasant reaction to loss, whether it be that of a husband, a wife, money and job. The person who has this unpleasant reaction to loss may show quite marked depression in spirits, loose interest in the people around him, and refuse to take interest in his work for a lengthy time while another person faced with the same loss will after a short time regain his balance. A person's personality make-up is the major determining factor regarding the way the person reacts to the problem of single parenthood. The more mature a person is, the more the psychic durability. While others "break" when confronted by the same condition, such a person will still be able to move on with life.

Research Hypotheses

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Two research hypotheses related to this study were tested.

1. There is a significant difference between the level of the psychological adjustment of single mothers and that of the single fathers.
2. There is a significant difference between the level of the social adjustment of single mothers and that of the single fathers.

Research Procedure

The design of this research work was descriptive. The target population was all Nigerian single parents. The purposeful stratified random sampling technique was used to chose 81 single parents from the 3 major ethnic groups in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) resident in Lagos metropolis. Out of this sample, 41 were single mothers while the remaining 40 were single fathers. The former had a mean age of 34.5 years while the latter's mean age was 38 years. Adjustment to Single Parenthood Questionnaire(ASPQ). The research instrument to collect data

used in this study was the questionnaire which was constructed by the researchers has sections A and B.

Section A was used to get the biographical data such as name (optional), sex, home address, spouse's home address, marital status, number of children, number of children living with etc., Section B, however was made up of 20 statements (10 measuring the psychological adjustment and 10 measuring the social adjustment) which the subjects were to respond to by rating their adjustment level on a 4 – point scale: (very much like me = 4 points', like me = 3 points, unlike me = 2 points while very much unlike me = 1 points). The higher the score the lower the level of adjustment.

The Adjustment to Single Parenthood Questionnaire was pilot tested using 32 single parents (16 males and 16 females) to determine the psychometric properties. The content validity was .74 while the test-re-test reliability was .89.

The questionnaire was administered to the subjects and collected back by the researcher personally.

Data Analysis

The responses were collated and subjected to the independent t-test statistical analysis to determine the status of each of the 2 research hypotheses stated in this study.

Results

In testing the first hypothesis which states that “there is a significant difference between the level of the psychological adjustment of single mothers and that of the single fathers” table 1 shows the result

Table 1
Independent T-test Analysis of the Means and the Standard Deviation of the Scores of Single Mothers and those of the Single Fathers on the Psychological Adjustment part of Adjustment for Single Parenthood Questionnaire

	N	Mean	S.D	t-calculated	P
Single Mothers	41	43.29	2.03	11.12	*0.001
Single Fathers	40	38.06	2.15		

*Significant at 0.001, degree of freedom = 79

Since the observed t-value of 11.12 is greater than the t-critical of 3.50 at 0.001 level of significance, hypothesis 1 is accepted.

The research hypothesis 2 which states that “there is a significant differences between the level of social adjustment of single mothers and that of the single fathers was also tested using the independent t-test statistics and the result is as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Independent T-Test Analysis of the Means and the Standard Deviation of the Scores of Single Mothers and those of the Single Fathers on the Social Adjustment Part of Adjustment Single Parenthood Questionnaire

	N	Mean	S.D	t-calculated	P
Single Mothers	41	46.31	1.95	4.34	*0.001
Single Fathers	40	42.88	2.37		

*Significant at 0.001, degree of freedom = 79

Hypothesis 2 is also accepted at 0.001 level of significance since the 5 – observed of 4.34 is greater than the t-tabulated of 3.50.

Discussion

The statistically significant difference found in the level of psychological as well as the social adjustment of single mothers when compared to that of single fathers was an indication that single mothers had a lower psychological and social adjustment level than the single fathers even though they all had psychological and social problems.

Hammer and Turner (1985) hold that single-parent mothers tend to show more signs of temporary stress than single-parent fathers. The single mother have serious problems peculiar to them. Very often, what they get from the public is social disapproval, embarrassment and psychological isolation. They have no place in the larger society which has shown much indifference to their plight. Finding of a study by Thornes and Collard (1978) revealed that divorced mothers as compare with still married women tended to be shy with opposite sex, worried about appearances, quick-tempered, lacking in confidence, unable to concentrate, suffering from a repeated depression, and having difficulties in making friends.

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The Family Counselling Implications

The family is the primary socialization agent and consequently it plays significant roles in the personality development of the family members, hence the need for family counselling. The reciprocal nature of the family goes in a big way to determine how its members cope with problems and social pressures.

For a family such as a single-parent family, which has been fragment by divorce or separation, it is often possible and important to reassemble it in order to achieve some solution to some unresolved problems. The divorced mother with custody of her four children for instance, may ask for counselling only for herself and the children, but it may be necessary to involve her ex-husband if both of them are to cease from the usually covert warfare which they carry on through their involvement with their children. Ex-couple can work productively together during counselling for the benefit of their children if they understand that it is intended to improve existing relationship, and not to re-establish old ties, (though some divorced parents are known to live together after therapy). However, in the beginning the ex-spouses often resist the idea of meeting together but a surprising number agree to work together for the benefit of their children. (Adedokun, 1998)

Single-parents families, whether they came about on account of divorce, the death of a spouse or by never-married men or women, are in the increase. These single-parents families are on great need of information, assistance, emotional and psychological support.

Single parents need help in coping with their own emotions, in feeling worthy again, in working out acceptable relationship with former spouse and in developing understanding of their children's actions and reactions.

When counselling single parents, it is important to pay attention and respond not only to the cognitive contents of the client's communication but also to the affective contents. Much information would be lost and an opportunity for effective counselling missed if the counsellor fails in these areas.

A positive identity or enhanced self-concept is quite necessary for the over-all adjustment of the single-parents. Counsellors should aid them in the three basic dimension of self-concept, namely: sense of belonging, sense of worth and sense of competence.

The counsellor should pay close attention to the family structure and the emotional climate of the family during home visits. Major relationships conflicts, if any, should be resolved. During counselling the individuals within the family have roles to play. Some parents may lack the understanding necessary to help the children to address the problems that confront them. In such situation, the counsellor should give the parents the necessary information during individual counselling.

Need for further research works

It is only recently that psychologists have started to study directly the nature and problems of single-parents. The findings of this study revealed that the single parents have problems that require urgent attention. Finding ways to help them adjust to their situations is a duty that steers at the faces of all helping professionals, especially the counselling psychologists and the society at large. More research work is needed in the area of the effective use of counselling strategies to help single parents adjust to their status.

Group counselling, family counselling, home visits and supportive associations are potentially helpful intervention strategies.

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