

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS AND GENDER AMONG NIGERIANS

A PAPER PRESENTED

AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON GENDERING THE MILLENNIUM HELD AT
UNIVERSITY OF DUNDEE SCOTLAND , UNITED KINGDOM

BY

CONFERENCE PAPER

DR. (MRS) AYOKA MOPELOLA OLUSAKIN

*(SENIOR LECTURER AND THE /SUB-DEAN OF EDUCATION FACULTY)
DEPT OF EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS (GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING)*

**UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS
AKOKA - LAGOS**

NIGERIA.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS AND GENDER AMONG NIGERIANS - DR (MRS) AYOKA MOPELOLA OLUSAKIN

ABSTRACT

In most societies, the gender stratification system tends to favour males although this is a matter of degree. At one extreme, women's power is minimal and confined to the household. At the other end of the continuum are relatively egalitarian social systems in which power differences are narrowed and women have important roles in non-family institutional spheres. There is a culturally universal belief that females are entrusted with child care and other tasks that centred on the household. In contrast, males are assigned roles that involve risks. The logic behind this division of labour is related to a mother's need to remain as a nurse to the family. Stressful life events of men also involve more changes and are of greater magnitude than those of women due to the nature of men's jobs involving decisions and higher risks than women's work compared to the boring and repetitious nature of house-work in which most women are involved. The fact that women are often dependent upon men for economic support and for their sense of personal worth is also indicative of magnitude of the stressful life events of men.

A woman in the traditional setting was expected to raise her own children and also cater for the extended family.

The nature of Nigerian women's family roles particularly the housewife roles, is also indicative of the fact that women would experience less anticipation of and control over the occurrence of their stressful life events than men. Apart from the routine life, she is also expected to subordinate her wish to earn an independent living since her need for personal fulfilment through productive activity is often sacrificed to the wishes and needs of her husband; she keeps the house, looks after the children and sees to other domestic affairs.

Today, this pattern is breaking up because of the changing roles of the woman in the contemporary society. Women with higher education or in specialized training find it increasingly difficult to give up their jobs on getting married. The gradual acceptance of feminine role shows that it is now very rampant and acceptable for a woman to think of the idea of work outside the home as a career woman.

This research work was designed to investigate the relationship between stressful life events and gender. 1,850 men and 2,040 women were used as sample for this study. All of them were married. The results summarized how a stressful life events paradigm can be used to explore and compare the everyday life experiences of women and men. In terms of overall intensity of stressful life events men scored higher than women. This was expected as a consequence of men's greater participation in instrumental roles as well as their greater involvement in decision-making and positions of authority both at home and at work. Further, in terms of content of stressful life events, women reported more stressful life events than men centering on the family and family-related activities, while men reported more stressful life events than women centering on work-related activities. The counselling implications were also discussed.

psychic durability

INTRODUCTION

There is gender inequality that has its strong foundation in the patriarchal oriented Nigerian culture. Right from birth the girl-child is discriminated against with the type of lukewarm reception that she receives compared with that of the baby boy whose birth is heralded by a joyful announcement by the midwife of the arrival of a "bouncing baby boy". Right from the early developmental stage the girl-child is made to believe that her role in life is primarily that of a wife/mother whose place is primarily in the kitchen. The type of toys bought for girls further reinforce this role discrimination. While dolls and baby related toys are bought for girls, boys are discouraged from playing with such 'feminine' toys, instead balls, computer related toys, toy-aeroplane, toy-cars and so on are purchased for them. Mothers would usually teach their female children how to perform household chores while the boys play with their friends and imbibe the superiority complex mentality of their fathers. Even choice of career is gender based to some extent (Uzoka, 1995).

The success of any woman in the Nigerian society is viewed in connection with her success in marriage and especially her child bearing and child rearing roles. In addition to her maternal obligations, the amount of resources which a woman controls determines her position in household decision making and her ability to resist manipulation and interference by members of her husband immediate and extended family. In combining all these roles, the Nigerian woman goes through a lot of stress and her ability to cope with the stressors determines her level of success in the male dominated society.

CONFERENCE PAPER

The Nigerian man in his bid to live up to the societal expectation of him as the head of the family strive to make ends meet. Some even compete with their rich wives to show their superiority over the female gender and thereby exposing themselves to excessive stress. Others stress themselves by acquiring more wives even when they are still struggling to survive with one wife, they would have more children than they could cope with and run from pillar to post to meet even the minimal needs of their large family.

Stress has been defined by Selye (1956) as "the rate of wear and tear within the body". Denga (1991) opines that there is a likelihood for stress to occur when the capabilities and resources of an

individual cannot adequately meet the demand imposed upon him by the environment . Maisamari (1996) however asserts that “ stress is a process in which environmental events or forces called stressors threaten an organism’s existence and well being. Ikeotuonye (1993) simply defines ‘stress’ as the pressure caused by the problems of living; the rate of wear and tear in the body ; a state of worry and anxiety caused by pressure; or a situation perceived as dangerous or threatening and the resultant effect on the individual.

CONFERENCE PAPER

Stress is an inevitable part of everyday living especially at this period of economic depression in Nigeria when there is heightened existential anxiety with its attendant problems. Any change or occurrence in an individual’s life, whether pleasant or unpleasant usually requires some kind of adjustment and when such adjustment disrupts the normal physiological or psychological stability of such an individual, he is likely to experience stress. The degree of stress a person actually experienceds depends on the nature, the intensity and the duration of the stress on one hand and the person’s pattern of responding or reacting to the stress (the individual’s psychic durability).

However, life without any stress would be boring and might even be unbearably monotonous. Hypotension could result from lack of stress and it could lead to death.

A moderate measure of stress is necessary to make life enjoyable and challenging for example, preparing for and attending a conference could be stressful but it is a necessary academic exercise to broaden one’s intellectual perspective. Too much stress or prolonged stress could lead to psychological break down or even mental disorder manifested in a variety of deviant behaviour, such as alcoholism, abseentism, job dissatisfaction, interpersonal frictions, inefficiency, diminished out-put, divorce and so on. Uncontrolled stress could also lead to some psychosomatic illnesses such as migraine, peptic ulcer, obesity, enuresis, phobic reactions, sleeplessnes, skin problems, hypertension, impotence and infertility. Therefore, the ability to cope effectively with or manage stressful life events is a major factor in determining someone’s psychological well-being.

Because stressors are intrinsically woven to man’s everyday life, they can be productive by motivation or destructive when they are accumulated. When the individual’s coping resources are insufficient to reduce or stabilize the effect of the accumulating stressors there are two immediate choices - flight

or fight could be the response. That is, the individual could remove himself from the aversive situation or stay to deal with it.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study was carried out to find out the relationship between stressful life events and gender among Nigerians.

HYPOTHESES

Two null hypotheses were tested in this study.

- (i) There is no significant difference in the intensity of stressful life events faced by Nigerian men and women.
- (ii) There is no significant difference in the family-related stressful life events of male and female Nigerians.

METHOD

Population of the study: Married Nigerian men and women formed the target population of this study.

Sample: The sample was made up of 3,890 Nigerians comprising of 1,850 men and 2,040 women from 36 states of the federation and Federal Capital Territory - Abuja. The mean age of the married men was 46 years while that of the married women was 42.5 years.

Instrument for Data Collection: The instrument was in form of questionnaire which was drawn up by the researcher and pilot tested on a smaller sample of 100 married men and women to get the construct validity and a test-retest reliability of .78. Copies of the questionnaire were administered at the state secretariat by the researcher and eight proctors who were undergoing their postgraduate degree programmes under the researcher's supervision.

The questionnaire was designed to elicit information regarding gender, age, marital status of the respondents on one hand and to get what the respondents considered as stressors from a list of stressful life events generated earlier on through a pilot study survey when 100 married Nigerians

were asked to form a list stressful life events.. The respondents were asked to rate these stressors on a point of 1-4 in order of intensity and to add any other one which they considered as stressors and were not included on the list.

CONFERENCE PAPER

TABLE 1

LIST OF STRESSORS	No. of Respondents					
	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Death of immediate family member	1845	99.73	2038	99.75	3883	99.82
Death of a close relation	1846	99.78	2034	99.22	3880	99.74
Death of a fiancé/fiancee	1845	99.72	2031	99.07	3875	99.61
Death of a friend	1842	99.57	2029	98.97	3871	99.51
Prolonged ill-health	1839	99.41	2015	98.29	3854	99.07
Divorce	1807	97.68	2031	99.56	3838	98.66
Miscarriage (wife)	1599	86.43	1986	96.8	3885	92.16
Loss of jobs/sudden retrenchment	1775	95.95	1631	79.56	3406	87.58
Rape	943	49.89	1875	91.46	2818	72.44
Unemployment	1600	86.49	1169	57.3	2769	71.18
Accident	1260	66.67	1509	73.61	2769	71.18
Poverty	1311	69.37	1448	70.63	2759	70.93
Armed robbery attack	1309	69.26	1436	70.05	2745	70.56
Confirmation of barrenness	1240	65.61	1501	73.22	2741	70.46
Marital separation	1098	58.1	1627	79.37	2729	70.15
Loss of property/Money	1239	65.56	1448	70.63	2687	69.07
Jail sentence/detention	1086	57.46	995	52.64	2081	53.5
Break of engagement	946	51.13	1116	57.71	2062	53.01
Break up of love affair	903	47.78	1158	56.49	2061	52.98
Job dissatisfaction	1200	63.49	855	41.71	2055	52.83
Infidelity of partner/spouse	1044	52.24	996	48.59	2040	52.44
Behavioural problems of children	855	45.24	1102	53.76	1957	50.31

LIST OF STRESSORS	No. of Respondents					
	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Fuel scarcity	1070	56.61	754	36.78	1824	48.89
Cut-off of electricity supply	938	49.63	905	44.15	1813	46.61
Shortage of cooking gas	552	29.21	1240	60.49	1792	46.07
Shortage of water supply	681	36.03	1103	53.8	1784	45.85
Trouble with in-laws	499	26.4	751	36.63	1250	32.13
Retirement	508	26.88	469	22.88	977	25.12
Traffic hold up/go-slow	494	26.7	466	22.73	960	24.68
Getting into debt beyond means of payment	611	32.33	318	15.51	929	23.88
Addition of new family member	305	16.49	527	25.83	832	21.39
Marriage of relation	279	14.76	545	26.59	824	21.21
Change of job	410	21.69	392	19.12	802	20.62
Pregnancy (of wife)	18	0.95	765	39.31	783	20.13
Trouble with boss at work	511	27.04	248	26.73	758	19.49
Involvement in a fight	329	17.92	424	20.68	753	19.36
Outstanding personal achievement	209	17.97	488	23.8	697	17.92
Son or daughter leaving home	218	11.53	430	20.98	648	16.65
Sudden gain of huge amount of money	120	6.35	439	21.41	559	14.37
Promotion/change of responsibility at work	94	4.97	383	18.68	477	12.26
Re-entering school	45	2.38	269	13.2	314	8.07
Graduating from school	38	2.01	199	9.71	237	6.09
Change of accomodation/residence	50	2.64	184	8.98	234	6.02
Too much noise	132	7.14	101	4.93	233	5.99

The results showed that men scored higher regarding the intensity of stressful life events while women reported more stressful life events than men in the area of family related stressful life events. So the two null hypotheses were rejected as shown in Tables II and III.

TABLE II

CONFERENCE PAPER

Means , Standard Deviation and T- Test Analysis of the intensity of stressful life events as reported by Male and Female Respondents

Respondents	N	\bar{x}	S.D	t
Males	1,850	168.07	2.43	49.29
Females	2,040	166.33	2.75	

df = 3888 t critical $P < .0005 = 3.29$

Since t observed (48.29) > t critical (3.29), the first null hypothesis was rejected.

Mean Standard Deviation and T-Test Analysis of the Scores of Male and Female Respondents regarding Family Related Stressors.

Respondents	N	\bar{x}	S.D	t
Males	1850	56.72	1.3	12.81
Females	2040	59.64	1.58	

df = 3888 t critical, $P < .0005 = 3.29$

Since t critical (12.81) is > t critical 3.29 the second null hypothesis was rejected.

DISCUSSION

Stress is a complex phenomenon which can emanate from diverse sources. The result of this study showed that stressors ranging from traumatic life experiences like death of a dear one to prolonged illness, divorce, retrenchment, rape, armed robbery attack and accident, to inadequate amenities like electricity, water, cooking gas and fuel among many others exert much stress on the Nigerian woman in addition to career related stressors. This findings support the submission of Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1991) and Ejiogu (1996) that women face a lot of home-based stressors and consequently many of them suffer from role-overloading when they take up outside jobs to supplement their husbands' income while some women found themselves playing the role of the major 'bread winner' for their families (both nuclear and extended).

The entry of women (whether single, married, or divorced) into the world of paid employment has had a profound effect (positive and negative) on their family life. The woman who is usually referred to as the weaker sex is now faced with more challenges in her day to day life as a wife to her husband, mother to the children, worker to her employer, daughter to her parents, sister to her siblings, daughter-in-law to her parents-in-law, sister-in-law to her husband's siblings and many other figures to some other people. McGoldrick (1988) maintains that women are especially vulnerable to anxieties, and tensions when there is problem in the family because they are rightly referred to as the "keepers" of the family unit. As shown in Table I, divorce was considered stressful by more women than men. This was in support of Aluede and Idialu (1996) that Nigerian women are usually embedded in marital relationships based on their orientation towards interdependence, their life long commitment to the marriage institution and the negative stigma that is usually attached to the issue of divorce within the Nigerian social-cultural context.

The Counselling Implications: Counselling as a help-based process through which a client comes to achieve self-understanding and self improvement by exploring and making use of the available avenues to find solution to his/her problems, should seek to help the female gender to realise their potentials to the maximum. Shetzer and Stone (1980) look at counselling as a reflection of the differences emphasized over the years and that it is a process in which the counsellor assists the client

to make interpretations of facts relating to a choice plan, or adjustment which he/she needs to make. Women in Nigeria, like their counterparts all over the world are taking on more and more responsibilities but without being relieved of any of the traditional roles.

The counsellor should understand the challenges of womanhood and the peculiar traditional roles expected of the Nigerian woman, help in identifying stressors and finding ways of either avoiding, managing or coping with such stressors. At times change in life-style or development of a new lifestyles may modify or reduce stress. In order to reduce the stress of life, a woman should accept herself as a complete human being who is capable of survival. She should plan her activities. In fact planlessness is a monstrous disease which every woman should try as much as possible to avoid. Because unless one plans one's activities realistically one may not achieve much within the set time frame. There is a popular saying that "nobody plans to fail but many fail to plan". The essence of planning can be captured in this statement that "planning is what you do before you do something so that when you do it, it is not all mixed up (Ejiogu, 1996). Priorities should be set and time effectively managed.

The woman can not do all things at all times, she should learn to delegate certain authorities where and when possible. The Nigerian woman should avoid overloading and develop sharing culture in groups of like-minded women. Time should be allowed in the Nigerian woman's tight schedule for leisure and relaxation. The Nigerian government should put in place the necessary social infrastructures to improve the standard of living of the Nigerian women.

REFERENCES

- Aluede, O.O and Idialu, E. (1996) Gender Issues in Family Life: Implication for Guidance and counsellors. *The Counsellors Journal of the Counselling Association of Nigeria* 14(2).
- Denga, D.I. (1991) *Stress Innoculation and Executive Depression: A Counsellor's Approach*. Calabar: Rapid Educational Publishers.
- Ejiogu, A. (1996) *Coping with Executive Stress and Living Healthy*. Lagos: Mukugamu Nig. Company.
- Goldenberg, I and Goldenberg H. (1991) *Family Therapy: An overview* (3rd Edition) California: Books/Coole Publishing Company.
- Ikeotuonye, A.I. (1993) *Stress Management Kit* Abuja: Corporate Concepts.
- Maisamari, J.Y (1996) Some Stress Management Techniques: Implications for Counselling. *The Counsellor. Journal of the Counselling Association of Nigeria* 14(1) 46-52.
- Selye, H (1956) *The Stress of Life*. New York McGraw-Hill.
- Uzoka, A.F. (1995) *The Family Induced Stress and Family Therapy*. Enugu, Nigeria: Abic Publishers.