

## INFLUENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DIVORCE AMONG PARENTS ON CHILDREN'S PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

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### ABSTRACT

Psychological divorce has become one of the most frequent environmental stressors experienced by adolescents. This study investigated the impact of psychological divorce on children's level of anxiety and depression. Sample comprised 69 children (32 males; 37 females), whose ages ranged between 13 and 18 years ( $M_{age} = 13.30$ ;  $SD = 8.28$ ). They were children of 18 couples that were experiencing marital conflict. The couples responded to measure of marital stress and children responded to measures of anxiety and depression. Results of the One-way ANOVA showed that psychological divorce among parents did not significantly influenced children's level of anxiety. However, children's level of depression was significantly associated with the level of psychological divorce among parents; such that children whose parents experienced the highest level of psychological divorce were the most anxious and depressed compared with those whose parents reported low or medium psychological divorce. The practical and research implications of the findings were highlighted.

*Key words:* Emotions, psychological divorce, children, well-being, adolescent

### INTRODUCTION

Marital problems may be related to numerous indexes of maladaptive behaviour, especially in children. Several factors responsible for this problem have been identified by different researchers in psychology and other related fields of study (Abekhale, 2010; Amato, 1994; Ayoub, Deutsch & Maraganorr, 1999; Formby & Charlin, 2014). The forms of such conflicts are largely varied in nature. One form of this conflict that has

destroyed and rocked several marriages in recent times is “psychological divorce” (Saposnek & Chip, 2004).

Psychological divorce is a conflict in which couples living together under the same roof are separated in all activities and responsibilities such as sexual activities and family up-keep (Saposnek & Chip, 2004). This type of divorce may not involve legal dissolution of marriage. While the legal form of divorce takes place as soon as the judge signs a marriage dissolution decree in the court of law, psychological divorce (Saposnek & Chip, 2004) occurs minimally over several years and maximally over the course of a couple’s life time.

Psychological divorce may be more traumatic than other forms of divorce such as the legal divorce, willful separation, and annulment or marriage dissolution (Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Greanings, 2006; Miller, 2013). This form of divorce among all others is the most prevalent, the most psychologically painful and the most silent destroyer of many of the victims and their children and indeed, the destroyer of most marriages (Ayoub *et al.*, 1999; Baydar, 1988). Marital conflicts in general and psychological divorce in particular affect not only the couples and their families but also societies and economies. It affects physical health, wage-earning potential and economic security, work-force impacts, welfare services, and outcomes related to age of first marriage (Kreager & Felson, 2013).

When there is conflict of any kind and particularly psychological divorce between couples, urgent task confronts everyone in the family starting from the husband, wife, children and even extended family members of the couple. Under this condition (Abekhale, 2010; Miller, 2013; Saposnek & Chip, 2004), couples usually adjust to doing things separately and helping their children to yield to their own opinions as against those of the other spouse; including even learning disruptive family behavioural patterns. Such couples further persuade their relations to accept their change statuses (Formby & Charlin, 2014).

Psychological divorce according to Formby and Charlin (2014) brings about a kind of depression known as dysthymia – a disorder mostly found in women. It can also result to stress that is linked to psychological symptoms such as nervousness, worrying, inability to get going and feeling of sadness and general body weakness in the couple and their children (Johnston, 1995). In other circumstances, it can result to frustration and violence, usually exhibited mostly by men through physical assault on the female partner; but sometimes also by the women, through verbal aggression (Amnesty International, 2005; Dawson, 2005); and all these have direct consequential effects on the physical and psychological health and well-being of the couple and their children (Ayoub *et al.*, 1999; Baydar, 1988).

The rate of psychological divorce in Nigeria like other parts of the world is indeed alarming (Abekhale, 2010; Dada & Idowu, 2006; IRBC, 2006). This may be brought about by the stringent laws that guide the dissolution of marriages especially in the Christendom and the courts of law (BAOBAB, 2003). In the law courts for example, divorce laws have complicated the process by helping to determine how property and assets of the spouse are shared as well as who takes custody of the children (IRBC, 2006). All these and other factors have contributed to making the rate of psychological divorce to reach an all time hike in Nigeria (Abekhale, 2010; Jegede, 1991; IRBC, 2006).

A growing body of research has indicated various reasons that are responsible for the dissolution of marriages in general and psychological divorce in particular (Abekhale, 2010; Dada & Idowu, 2006). It is believed that psychological divorce is mostly caused by a lack of trust and understanding between spouses which has mostly been found to be influenced by extended family members (in-laws, friends and significant others) (Dawson, 2005). Such studies have also held economic problems, lack of children in a marriage, sexual dissatisfaction, age of spouse, change in social status and insincerity on the part of one of the spouse as major causal factors for all forms of divorce including psychological divorce (Corcoran, 1997; Formby & Charlin, 2014; Saposnek & Chip, 2004).

Empirical evidence has further shown that children of psychologically divorced parents have bitter experiences that are physical, emotional and psychological in nature (Hegakull & Bohlin, 2003; Kotler, 2004). For example, Baydar (1988) in his study of the effects of parental psychological separation and reentry into union and the emotional development and well-being of children indicated that psychological separation or divorce has serious negative consequences on the psychological well-being of children. Shaw (2005) further found aggression in toddlers to be associated with parental marital relations. Typically children whose parents are going through the rough experience of psychological divorce try to engage in behaviours which are designed to help them feel secure; but in cases where it is beyond their control, this leads to negative psychological and emotional experiences such as depression, stress, anxiety, blame and guilt; anger and hostility, loss of self-control and self-confidence as well as feeling of loneliness in the child victim (Cohen, 2002; Corcoran, 1997).

In line with these contemporary studies, the aim of this particular study was to find out the extent to which psychological divorce influence the psychological and emotional well-being of children. The following hypotheses were tested.

### **Hypotheses**

1. Psychological divorce would significantly influence children's level of anxiety such that children of couples undergoing high psychological divorce will report the highest level of anxiety compared with other categories of children.
2. Psychological divorce would significantly influence children's level of depression such that children of couples undergoing high psychological divorce will show the highest level of depression compared with other categories of children.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and participants**

The study adopted a multiple group quasi-experimental design. Participants were 69 children (31 males; 38 females) of 18 couples that were experiencing marital conflict. The children were selected primary and secondary schools within Jos metropolis. Four of the schools were secular schools while the remaining two were religious schools (one was a purely Christian school while the other was a purely Muslim school). The ethnic composition of the participating families was 2 Igbo, 2 Berom, 2 Anaguta, 6 Hausa and 2 Yoruba families. Others were 2 Idoma and 2 Angas families. All respondents could speak Hausa and English fluently in addition to their dialects.

## Measures

*State-Trait Anxiety Inventory*, developed by Spielberger and Gorsuch (1989), was used to measure state and trait anxiety level of the respondents. It was a 20-item self-report inventory rated on a 4-point scale where 1= not at all and 4 = very much so. It is a cultural-fair test (Olagunju & Erinfolami, 2013). It had an alpha reliability coefficient score ranging from .84 to .91 and a validity score of .74. High score showed that that respondent was experiencing high level of anxiety whereas low score was a reflection of low anxiety.

*Beck Depression Inventory*, which was a 21-item self-report inventory developed by Beck, Steers and Brown (1996), was used to measure depressive symptoms. It is one of the most widely used screening instruments for detecting symptoms of depression (James, Omoaregba, Eze & Morakinyo, 2014). It was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 – 3. The test-retest reliability coefficient of the scale ranged from .82 to .89 with a validity score of .72, respectively. A low score indicated low depression; whereas a high score indicated severe depression.

*Marital Stress Inventory*, developed by Omoluabi (1994), was used to assess the level of psychological divorce and marital disaffection in marriage. It was a 50-item scale rated on 5-point scale where 1 = slight effect and 5 = very severe effect. Omoluabi (1994) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .92 for the scale. High score on the scale showed that the respondent was experiencing stress or psychological divorce in the marriage and vice versa.

## Procedure

Through the officials of the Social Welfare Unit of Jos North Local Government Council, the researchers got the identities of 18 couples who had marital conflict. The identities of children or wards of these couples were also collected. With the assistance of teachers and the school authorities, participants were informed in advance that the purpose of the study was to examine problems that children generally encounter at home which may affect their academic performance in school. All participants received the same instructions and were told that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. The 18 couples responded to Marital Stress Inventory. The children were specifically reminded that if they did not wish to be part of the study, they could leave the class or alternatively leave the questionnaire blank. They all agreed to take part in the study. The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and Beck's Depression Inventory were administered to the children through their teachers under the supervision of the researchers. The data were collected within three weeks. The 18 couples were divided into three groups of high, medium, and low psychological divorce based on their scores on the measure of psychological divorce. Each child's responses to the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory and Beck's Depression Inventory were tagged under his/ parents' group.

## RESULTS

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested with two sets on One-way ANOVA. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1:

**Summary of One-way ANOVA on Anxiety and Depression**

DV	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Anxiety	Between	149.52	2	74.76	0.39	>.05
	Within	12837.79	67	191.61		
	Total	12937.30	69			
Depression	Between	453.53	2	226.77	2.06	<.05
	Within	7367.95	67	109.97		
	Total	7821.48	69			

The results in Table 1 show that psychological divorce among parents did not significantly influence children's level of anxiety [ $F(2, 67) = 4.34, p < .05$ ]. This shows that irrespective of parents' level of psychological divorce, children experienced anxiety. Hypothesis 1 was, therefore, rejected.

Similarly, psychological divorce among parents significantly influenced children's level of depression in such a way that children whose parents experienced the highest level of psychological divorce were the most depressed compared with those whose parents reported low or medium psychological divorce [ $F(2, 67) = 2.06, p < .05$ ]. This confirmed hypotheses 2.

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the patterns of psycho-emotional symptoms (anxiety and depression) among children whose parents were experiencing psychological divorce. Findings showed that there was a significant influence of psychological divorce on a child's level of anxiety. This outcome was not in line with the findings of previous studies (e.g. Cohen, 2002; Corcoran, 1997; Funder & Kinsella, 1991), which reported high rate of anxiety among children of separated, divorced or conflict ridden marriages. Other studies (Ayoub *et al.*, 1991; Kotler, 2004; Miller, 2013; Saposnek & Chip, 2004) posited that psychological divorce could create the following emotional experiences such as anxiety, distance, resentment, low self-esteem, doubt, shame and guilt among children in high conflict marriages. Funder and Kinsella (1991) also submitted that divorce of any form may be related to long-term social and economic disruptions in the lives of nearly one in every five young people under the age of 20.

Kotler (2004) concluded that chronic unresolved parental conflict is associated with greater emotional insecurity in children including fear (anxiety), distress, and a continuous moody appearance. Corcoran (1997) in her own study further demonstrated that marital conflicts have always had negative effects on children. To her, children in high conflict marriages are more likely to experience behavioural and academic problems including but not limited to, disobedience, aggression, delinquency, poor self-esteem, anti-social behaviours, and depression.

Young adults, who experience high level of marital conflict during childhood, are more likely to experience depression and psychological disorders (Miller, 2013; Shaw, 2005). In line with this, other researchers (e.g. Cohen, 2002; Corcoran, 1997; Saposnek & Chip, 2004) posited that children from divorce homes and high conflict marriages had high risk of developing headache, asthma, depression and other psychiatric problems. However, others observed that children's psychological reactions to their parents' psychological separation vary remarkably depending on three factors namely the quality of their relationship with each of the parents before the psychological separation, the intensity and duration of the parental conflict, and the parents' ability to focus on the needs of children during the conflict or psychological divorce.

The present study found that children; irrespective of gender share in the negative experience of psychological divorce. An explanation for this result could be based on the fact that children form attachments and psychological bond with their parents; and the family environment offers the psychological protection for that kind of bond (Hagekull & Bohlin, 2003; Greaning, 2006). As a result of this, when this perceived attachment and psychological protection are threatened or eroded by conflict, separation, or psychological divorce of the parents, they create heighten tensions and anxiety for the affected child. Considering the fact that the child is still in a state of transitional growth and development, both physically and cognitively, the effect of a divorce of any kind is indeed, devastating and lead to serious psychological problems such as high levels of anxiety and depression (Corcoran, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the outcome of this study has significantly shown that psychological divorce plays a significant role on the psycho-emotional well-being of children and adolescents. The study specifically concludes that psychological divorce has significant influence on the extent to which children express heighten anxiety and depression which are critical aspects of their development. In order to prevent psych-emotional disturbance in children, parents should ensure reduced marital conflict that may lead to psychological divorce.

The sample size of this study is rather small; external validity may be compromised. Future studies should expand the sample size of parents and children.

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