



INFLUENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF A CHILD WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY ON MARITAL STABILITY IN SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Marriages that are able to produce children are considered fruitful in Nigeria, and most often this determines the stability of such marriages. In Nigeria, it was observed that when a child is born with a disability, there is the tendency for the home to experience low level of instability. This study investigated the influence of the presence of a child with intellectual disability on marital stability in Nigeria. One hundred and five (105) parents of children with intellectual disability purposively selected from Lagos and Ibadan, Nigeria, participated in the study. A structured questionnaire developed by the researchers was used in collecting data. The findings showed that the majority of the parents (65.7%) were overwhelmingly shattered and (81.9%) were in a state of shock at the initial discovery of the child with intellectual disability, this however, surprisingly, did not affect their marital stability, rather, it further brought them closely together. The study also revealed that the siblings of the child with ID (75.2%) accepted and loved them which further strengthened the relationship, and as high as 85.0% of parents in-laws were not for separation or divorce of the couples. However, 45.7% of parent's in-laws did not support the couples psychologically and emotionally. Educating parents on factors that can be responsible for having a child with intellectual disabilities and parental counseling should therefore be encouraged so that preventive measures can be taken and families can maximally enjoy marital stability without much stress.

Key words: *Influence, child, intellectual disability, marital stability, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviour which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before age 18 (AAIDD, 2013). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2008) remarked that up to 3% or almost 200 million people of the world's population have intellectual disabilities and this is the most prevalent disability in the world. Parents are often expectant of children with no disabilities and when the child eventually turns out to have any form of disability, the parents' dreams for the child are shattered, and with this, parents experience a variety of intense emotions including initial shock, numbness, denial, guilt, fear and anger (Thompson, 2000). In the same vein, Ferguson (2002) noted that parents of children with disabilities have many reactions to their children's special needs, and these reactions may focus on positive or negative factors. According to Ferguson (2002), some parents go through several emotions roughly in a sequence. Others may experience only one or several discrete reactions, and in some, reactions may be minor and their approach pragmatic, and for others, their child's disability might affect their entire family structure and life. Blacher (2011) reported that even though there are no universal reactions to the added stress of raising a child with intellectual disability, several studies have noted that there are similar patterns or stages that the parents experience emotionally.

Marriages that bring forth children with developmental disabilities have often been portrayed as difficult, dysfunctional, unstable and particularly likely to end in divorce (Subsey, 2004). Marital stability could be defined as harmonious living together of husband, wife and children. Parental mental health, positive parenting, nurturing and stimulating home



environment among others are part of the parameters with which marital stability is measured (Agulana, 1999). Marital instability on the other hand is a family characterized by conflicts, discord, and which may end up in broken homes, separations, or divorce (Cherlin, 2002). Ikenyiri (2013) in the same vein described marital instability as an unstable home/marriage where parents live in disharmony, generate emotional and personal problems to the family members. Such homes feature frequent quarrels, fighting and outward disagreements. The general public perceives parents of children with disabilities to have experienced very high rates of marital difficulties and extremely high rates of divorce and this perception has been reflected in and reinforced both by mass media and professional literature. About 70% of United States of America couples with children with disabilities get divorced, and the divorce rate for the general population is typically estimated at 50% (Weiner, 1991). Research has shown that generally age may be seen as a factor in marital stability. Studies by Lehrer (1996) and Teachman (2002) respectively revealed that individual who marries at a younger age tends to be at a high risk of marital dissolution. However, literature is scarce on the relationship between age and marital stability of families having children with Intellectual Disability. While considering education as a factor in marital stability, the United States Bureau of the Census (1992) and White, Lynn and Rogers (2000) discovered that traditionally less educated person have higher divorce rates than the National average.

Parents of children with intellectual disabilities have an 80% chance of divorce compared with a National divorce rate that is little less than 50% (Griffin, 2000). Some estimates put the divorce rate among parents of children with autism as high as four of five marriages (Leimbach, 2006). For the family of a child with Intellectual disability however Robinson, (1976) said that the situation may be more complicated and more hazardous, and the rewards of parenting more likely to be lost sight of. The child's handicaps, his slow development, the special arrangements needed for physical care, training and companionship, the disappointments and the lost dreams, all combine to create pressures which tend to disrupt the family equilibrium. Furthermore, according to Robinson (1976), these pressures may be financial problems, tension created by the child's immature self-control, handicaps in communication, and the parent's own lingering doubts about their upbringing practices.

Gabel, McDowell, and Cerreto, (1983) enumerated some adjustment problems that were more frequent among parents of children with disabilities, than other families, such as marital dissatisfaction, frequent conflicts, sexual dysfunction, separation and divorce. On the other hand, Ziolkowski (1991) suggested some reasons for these difficulties; these are feelings of low self-esteem, helplessness, resentment over excessive demands on time and the burden of financial responsibility. These are prevalent in such families and place great strain upon the marriage. In the same vein, Pabst (1996) remarked that feelings of guilt, loneliness and despair often lead to broken marriages in the majority of families with severely handicapped and medically fragile children. Research has shown that 20% of all divorcing couples are parents of children with disabilities; and furthermore the research showed that most parents found the stresses associated with the care of their child with disability to be wide ranging, unrelenting, and sometimes overwhelming, such stresses increase the risk of marital breakdown (Morrod, 2014).

In a survey conducted by Brinchann (1999), living with multiple handicapped children was found to have a possible negative influence on the relationship with siblings and between parents. Mgbenkemdi (2013) remarked that in Nigeria, children are considered very important in marriage, and this often determines the stability of many marriages. Every parent looks forward to having a healthy child, unfortunately, when such parents give birth to a child with disability, especially intellectual disability, they are faced with a lot of disappointments, and depression which may eventually lead to marital instability.

Most African countries and in particular Nigeria, view the presence of a child with intellectual disability as a social stigma to the family. Coupled with the shame that goes with



this, Mgbenkemi (2013) further stressed that it brings about altered relationship with friends, major changes in family activities and intra-family strains. All these could lead to marital instability which may end in separation or divorce. This study is important in that the family is the unit of the society and for any society to function effectively, the home front must be stable. Every parent must therefore guide against factors that may be responsible for intellectual disabilities which may bring about instability in marriages. This study is important in that it will help the professionals to counsel prospective parents on how to guide against having children with intellectual disability. This study therefore examined the extent to which the presence of a child with intellectual disability in the home can influence marital stability. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

1. When did the respondents discover the child's intellectual disability?
2. What was the reaction of the respondents towards the discovery of the child's intellectual disability?
3. What was the state of marital stability of respondents before the arrival of the child with intellectual disability?
4. What was the state of marital stability of the respondents after the arrival of the child with intellectual disability?

Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between educational status of respondents and marital stability before the arrival of the child with intellectual disability.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between the educational status of the respondents and marital stability after the arrival of the child with intellectual disability.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate the influence of the presence of a child with intellectual disability on marital stability in two cities (Lagos and Ibadan) South-West Nigeria. The cities were purposively chosen because they are more progressive in the area of education and welfare of persons with disabilities in Nigeria when compared with some other states. (Odewumi, 2000).

Sampling technique/ Sample

One hundred and five (105) parents of children with intellectual disabilities from Lagos (47) and Ibadan (58) respectively that were readily available in the sense that they either came to drop or pick up their children from the selected schools and were willing, participated in the study. This was because it was not all the parents of children with intellectual disability in the selected schools were willing to participate in the study. Parents of children with intellectual disabilities and other forms of disabilities such as visual and hearing impairments generally in Nigeria have been observed to be reluctant in participating in studies relating to their children.

Instrument

A structured questionnaire developed by the researchers was used in collecting data for the study. This was in five sections. Section A dealt with the demographic data such as age, sex, educational status etc. Section B contained eight (8) items which elicited responses on the discovery of the child's intellectual disability. Section C contained seven (7) items which elicited responses on the reaction of the respondents towards the discovery of the child's intellectual disability. Section D was on the status of marital stability of the respondents before the arrival of the child. This was made up of six (6) items and section E, made up of eight (8) item questions elicited responses on the state of marital stability of respondents after the arrival of the child.



The reliability of the instrument for each of the sections containing the items, that is, (section B, C, D and E) were 0.59, 0.60, 0.76, and 0.84 respectively using Cronbach Alpha. Cronbach Alpha is generally used as a measure of internal consistency (Streiner and Norman, 1989).

Method of data collection

Four post graduate students were employed as research assistants to administer the questionnaire in Lagos and Ibadan (Lagos and Oyo states). This was carried out within three weeks. Where necessary, the research assistants assisted the non-literate respondents in filling the questionnaires. The 105 questionnaires that were well filled were all retrieved afterwards.

Method of data analysis

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency count and simple percentages for the four research questions, while Pearson Moment Correlation Coefficient was used in analyzing the three hypotheses.

RESULTS

Research question 1:

When did the respondents discover the child's intellectual disability?

Table 1: Discovery of the child's intellectual disability (ID)

Items	Yes		No	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
I discovered that my child had ID. at birth	42	40.0	63	60.0
I discovered that my child had ID. after 1 year of birth	37	35.2	68	64.8
I discovered my child had ID. when he/she started school	51	48.6	54	51.4
My wife first discovered and told me	56	53.3	49	46.7
My husband first discovered and told me	19	18.1	86	81.9
We both discovered the disability the same time	43	41.0	62	59.0
I discovered through the doctor in the hospital when the child was delivered	48	45.7	57	54.3
I discovered my child's ID through the class teacher when he/she started school	26	24.8	79	75.2

Table 1 reveals that 42 (40%) of the respondents discovered the child's Intellectual Disability (ID) at birth, as high as 63 (60.0%) said they did not discover it at birth. About 51 (48.6%) said they discovered the child's ID when he/she started school. About 56 (53.3%) of the respondents said their wives first discovered and told them. As low as 19 (18.1%) respondents said their husbands discovered the child's ID first and told them as against 86 (81.9%) that said it was not their husbands that first discovered. 43 (41.0%) said they both discovered the child's ID the same time but as high as 62 (59.0%) said they did not discover at the same time. About 48 (45.7%) of the respondents said they discovered their child's ID through the doctor in the hospital after the delivery of the child while 57 (54.3%) however said, the discovery of their child's ID was not through the doctor in the hospital.

Research question 2

What was the reaction of the respondents towards the discovery of the child with ID?

**Table 2: Reaction of respondents towards the discovery of the child's intellectual disability**

Items	Yes		No	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
I was totally in a state of shock	86	81.9	19	18.1
I was shattered completely	69	65.7	36	34.3
I was in a state of denial	45	42.9	60	57.1
I accepted it as my own cross from God	73	69.5	32	30.5
I broke down in an uncontrollable tears	47	44.8	58	55.2
My spouse reacted the same way as I did	69	65.7	36	34.3
My spouse blamed me for the birth of the child	25	23.8	80	76.2

Table 2 showed that majority (81.9%) of the respondents was totally in a state of shock as against (18.1%) that were not. As high as 69 (65.7%) said they were completely shattered at the discovery. On the other hand, majority (69.5%) of the respondents said they accepted the child's ID as their own cross, in other words, they accepted it as a situation they are destined to live with all through life. About 47 (44.8%) said they broke down in an uncontrollable tears at the discovery of the child with ID, and lastly, 45 (42.9%) said they were in a state of denial at the discovery.

Research Question 3

What was the state of marital stability of respondents before the arrival of the child with intellectual stability (ID)?

Table 3: State of marital stability of respondents before the arrival of the child with intellectual disability

Items	Yes		No	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Our home was like heaven on earth	58	55.2	47	44.8
My family was closely knitted together	76	72.4	29	27.6
My spouse loved me unreservedly	74	70.5	31	29.5
Our home was like hell on earth	15	14.3	90	85.7
We were always fighting	11	10.5	94	89.5
Nagging each other was the regular way of life	12	11.4	93	88.6

Table 3 Shows that 55.2% of respondents said that their homes were like heaven on earth, 72.4% said that their families were closely knitted together, 70.5% of the respondents said that their spouses loved them unreservedly. Majority of the respondents (89.5%) and (88.6%) respectively said they were not fighting, nor nagging each other before the arrival of the child with ID.

Research question 4

What was the state of marital stability of respondents after the arrival of the child with ID?

**Table 4: State of marital stability of respondents after the arrival of the child with intellectual disability**

Statements	Yes		No	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
The presence of the child further brought the family closely together	69	65.7	36	34.3
The presence of the child brought about separation of my husband/wife and I	29	27.6	76	72.4
My husband/wife blamed me for the birth of ID and this led to divorce	22	21.0	83	79.0
Having to spend more money on the child with ID affected our finances and this constantly cause friction in the home	47	44.8	58	55.2
Our other children (siblings) in the home are miserable and are not ready to associate with the child with ID and this constantly causes crisis in the family	11	10.5	94	89.5
Our other children (siblings) love and accept the child with ID fully, and this further strengthens our relationship.	79	75.2	26	24.8
Our other children (siblings) are happy despite the presence of the child with ID in effect contributing to the happiness of the whole family.	78	74.3	27	25.7
Other children are hostile to the child with ID making the home environment to be unbearable.	26	24.8	79	75.2
My parents in-law blame me for the birth of a child with ID and are making life difficult for me	22	21.0	83	79.0
My parents in-law insisted my husband/wife should be separated from me and he/she did	22	21.0	83	79.0
My parents in-law enforced my husband/wife to divorce me and he/she did	20	19.0	85	81.0
My parents in-law support us psychologically and emotionally and this has kept us together as a couple	57	54.3	48	45.7

Table 4 showed that 65.7% of the respondents said that the presence of the child further brought the family closely together. As high as 72.4% said the presence of the child did not cause any separation between them as spouses. As high as 79.0% of respondents said their spouses did not blame them for the birth of a child with ID, and 44.8% of the respondents said that having to spend more money on the child with ID has affected their finances and this causes constant friction in the home, while 55.2% said that this does not cause any friction in their marriage. Findings further revealed that the siblings of children with ID (75.2%) love and accept them fully, and were not in any way hostile (75.2%) to the children with ID and this further strengthens the marital relationship.

A majority (79.0%) of the respondents said their parent's in-law did not blame them for the birth of the child; as high as 81.0% respectively responded that their parents- in-law did not ask the spouses to separate nor divorce each other. Only 21.0% and 19.0% respectively said their parents-in-law did say the spouses should be separated and divorce. Interestingly, 54.3% as against 45.7% said their parents-in-law supports them psychologically and emotionally.

Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant relationship between the educational status of respondents and marital stability before the arrival of the child with intellectual disability.

The 6 items on stability before the arrival of a child with intellectual disability were added together, the result is assumed to be at interval scale, while educational status is on ordinal scale, so, one of the variables is on the interval and the other on ordinal scale, therefore Kendall Tall (non-parametric statistic) correlation was determined between the two variables as presented in Table 5

Table 5: Relationship between the educational status of respondents and marital stability before the arrival of the child with intellectual disability.

		Stability Before
Educational Status	Correlation coefficient	.258
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001**
	N	105

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)



The table shows that the higher the educational status of respondents, the higher the stability before the arrival of the child with ID.

Hypothesis 2:

There is no significant relationship between the educational status of the respondents and marital stability after the arrival of the child with intellectual disability.

The 12 items on stability after the arrival of a child with intellectual disability were added together, the result is assumed to be at interval scale while educational status is on ordinal scale, so, one of the variables is on the interval and the other on ordinal scale, therefore Kendall Tall (non-parametric statistics) correlation was determined between the two variables as presented in table 6

Table 6: Relationship between the educational status of respondents and marital stability after the arrival of the child with intellectual disability.

		Stability After
Educational Status	Correlation coefficient	.016
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.835
	N	105

The Table above showed that there was no significant relationship between the educational status of respondents and marital stability after the discovery of the child with ID.

DISCUSSION

The study investigated the influence of the presence of a child with intellectual disability on marital stability in Lagos and Ibadan, Nigeria. The discovery of the child's intellectual disability by respondents is varied. For instance, only a few of the respondents discovered the child's ID at birth. Some said they discovered when the child started school. In most cases, it was the mothers of the children that discovered the ID first and a lower percentage of the respondents said their husbands discovered first (see Table 1). The responses of mothers are not strange because mothers are often in most cases more emotionally attached to their children irrespective of the situation of the child than fathers, and also in most cases are more observant.

The findings of this study also portrayed various reactions exhibited by the respondents. Majority of the respondents were totally in a state of shock at the discovery of the child's intellectual disability, and in most cases, the spouses reacted the same way towards the discovery. A higher percentage responded that they accepted the child's intellectual disability as their own "cross". Despite the reactions of the spouses, it was interesting that majority of them did not shift the blame of the child's intellectual disability to one another. This is encouraging in that it could be assumed that the spouses are knowledgeable about the causative factors of intellectual disability as against what obtained some decades ago when disabilities were more or less attributed to some cultural beliefs or taboos. The reactions portrayed by these spouses are in line with the findings of Ferguson, (2002) that many parents of children with intellectual disability have many reactions which may be positive. Thompson (2000) remarked that parents experience a variety of intense emotions which include the initial shock, guilt feelings and denial. Blacher (2011) however



pointed out that studies have shown universally that the patterns of emotional trauma that parents experience are similar.

In this study, the marital stability of respondents before the arrival of the child with intellectual disability was also investigated. Findings revealed that majority of the respondents responded in the affirmative. For instance, majority said that their homes were closely knitted together and that their spouses loved them unreservedly. Majority of the respondents also said that fighting nor nagging each other was not a common thing between them.

The responses may not be surprising, because in most African countries, such as Nigeria much value is placed on marriage, and especially those that have produced children. This agrees with the findings of Mgbenkemdi (2013) that in Nigeria, children are considered very important in marriage and it often times determines the stability of that marriage.

This study also investigated the marital stability of respondents after the arrival of the child with intellectual disability. Interestingly, most of the respondents said that the presence of the child further brought the family closely together and that they never thought of separation. Findings also revealed that the spouses did not blame each other for having a child with intellectual disability. A few number of the respondents however remarked that the expenses on children with intellectual disability was seen to be much more than what is expended on other children and this brings about constant friction in the home. In this study, it was revealed that siblings of children with ID love and accept them fully, and were not in any way hostile to the children, this further strengthens the marital relationship. The parents-in-laws were found to be positively disposed to children with intellectual disability in their families. Most of the parents-in-law as reported by the respondents support them psychologically and emotionally, while a few said their parents-in-law were the factors behind their separation and divorce. The findings in this study is in contrast to the findings in studies such as Subsey (2004), in which it was remarked that marriages of parents of children with intellectual disabilities have often been portrayed as very difficult and dysfunctional and most often leads to divorce.

Morrod (2004) in the same vein reported that research has shown that 20% of all divorcing couples are parents of children with intellectual disability; and this is associated with overwhelming stress experienced as a result of the care of children with intellectual disabilities. The relationship between the educational status of respondents and marital stability before and after the discovery of the child's intellectual disability were also considered. The findings revealed that, the higher the educational status of respondents, the higher the stability before the arrival of the child. The strength of relationship was higher before than after. Also, there was no significant relationship between the educational status of respondents and marital stability after the discovery.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study highlighted the influence of the presence of a child with intellectual disability on marital stability in Lagos and Ibadan, Nigeria. Parents reacted differently to the presence of the child with ID in their families; however, this did not seem to affect marital stability in most homes, only a few had some marital challenges. However, the emotional trauma that is often experienced by parents and even children with intellectual disability can very much be prevented if necessary measures are taken such as educating parents on factors that can be responsible for having a child with intellectual disabilities and parental counseling. With this, families can maximally enjoy marital stability without much stress.

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