



## **Family Stress And Divorce In Nigeria**

**AJAYI, Johnson Kolawole**

**Department of Public Administration, The Oke-ogun Polytechnic, Saki (TOPS), Oyo state, Nigeria. [Kolaaajavi4christ@yahoo.com](mailto:Kolaaajavi4christ@yahoo.com). 08065566691**

**OLAKUNLE, Micheal Kayode**

**Department of Public Administration Administration, The Oke-ogun Polytechnic, Saki (TOPS), Oyo state, Nigeria**

**AHMED, Jeleel Abioye**

**Department of Public Administration, The Oke-ogun Polytechnic, Saki (TOPS), Oyo state, Nigeria. 08035834152, [AhmedJella@yahoo.com](mailto:AhmedJella@yahoo.com)**

**ABEGUNRIN, Adebayo Olugbenga**

**Department of General Studies, The Oke-ogun Polytechnic, Saki (TOPS), Oyo State, Nigeria [olubayolmask@yahoo.com](mailto:olubayolmask@yahoo.com)**

### **ABSTRACT**

Whether in developed or developing countries of the world, the family is seen as a very important institution in the society. This is because it is one of the most important primary group of socialization. It is also referred to as the cornerstone of any society as an ideal family provides stability, support and continuity of the values of such society. Several of the research show the extent and seriousness of family problems that has led to divorce. The alarming single families and the number of reconstituted families in which there is a stepparent stepchild relationship revealed that the family is doomed. Thus, this research work adopted documentary method of data collection, determine the causes of marital crises in Nigeria with antecedent effects. It adopted structural functionalism theory and recommends that couples should avoid and circumvent all the factors responsible for marriage divorce in order to have a happy and loving family.

**Keywords:** Divorce, Marriage, Social problem, Marital instability, socio-cultural factors.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Marriage is an institution ordained by God and it has a special significance in our society. Obi (1990) defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman that lasts the duration of the man's life and the woman's life, as well as a social structure that promotes an association and agreement between two families. In other words, marriage is predicated on the mutual consent of a man and a woman to live together as husband and wide. Ordinarily, an ideal marriage will remain united, undivided, and unbroken. This is the pan written by the mind of the creator when He gave Eve to Adam as his permanent partner in the Garden of Eden. Therefore all efforts must be made to encourage couples to stay together or get back together, even when they have separated. It is therefore imperative that marriage be contracted for life or for an indefinite period. In spite of the significance of marriage, every society is faced with situations in which marriage fails and the couples cannot tolerate living together. The aftermath of this is divorce. According to Grath (2001), divorce is a legal or customary decree that a marriage is dissolved in other words, divorce is a permanent separation of married people as a result of unexpected marriage outcome. Mbiti (2007:145) argue that;

*Divorce is a delicate accident in marital relationships. What constitutes a divorce must be viewed against the fact that marriage is a process. In many societies that process is complete only when the first child is born, or when all the marriage presents have been paid or even when one's first children are married. Once the full contract of marriage has been executed, it is extremely hard to dissolve it.*

In Nigeria as well as other parts of the globe, many divorced people remarry and about half of those who do are already parents. This results in the creation of "blended families" also called "stepfamilies". For instance, in 1992, over 11% of all American children were living with one biological parent and one step parent. Estimates are that a fourth of American children will live with a step parent before reaching the age of sixteen (Cherlin and Furistanbery, 2000). In the same vein, Nigeria in recent years has witnessed a high rate of divorce as a result of urbanization and industrialization (Adegoke, 2010). The periods triggered to a monetary industrial economy. Thus, the extended family that used to resolve conflicts or misunderstanding between couples was no longer function effectively like in the past. The extended family structure eventually broke-up in the process; and there was a shift towards the nuclear family system characterized by less involvement of members in the resolution of marital conflicts.

It can be argued that, perhaps the most important factor in the increase in divorce throughout the twentieth century has been the greater social acceptance of divorce. In particular, this increased tolerance has resulted from relaxation of negative attitudes toward divorce among various religious denominations. Although, divorce is still seen as unfortunate, it is no longer treated as sin by most religious leaders (Gertel, 1997). Many states including Nigeria have adopted more liberal divorce laws in the last two decades. Divorce has become a more practical option in newly formed families, since they now tend to have fewer children than in the past. Adegoke (2010) observed that the search for employment by family members in the labour market or their inability to find work can be considered as a disruptive force in maintaining marital stability. More so, a general increase in family income coupled with the availability of free legal aid for some poor people, has meant that more couples can afford the traditionally high legal costs of divorce proceedings. It is also believed that, as society provides greater opportunities for women, more and more wives are becoming less dependent on husbands economically and emotionally. They feel more able to leave on their own if the marriage seems hopeless.

Marriage Divorce will continue to be on the increase in Nigeria if its causes and effects are not properly identified and controlled. It is on this premise that this study is consummated. to understand the real secrete of family happiness (Watch Tower Bible and Tract society of Pennsylvania, 1996).

It is against the foregoing background that this study set out to investigate marital crises in the Nigeria society with a .view to determining their causes and effects so as to recommend strategies for proper management. And the methodology adopted for this work was documentary dealing with martial crises is always difficult and solutions do not come easy. A saying in business that "anyone *making no mistakes is not doing anything*" can well apply to all other human endeavours, which include marriage that would always experience common crisis and the level of response of the couple is a decisive parameter for the success or failure of such marriages.

In the words of Scobie (2009), the union between man and woman is a reflection of the image of God in us and can only be sustained through lifelong devotion. That is to say that any libertine behaviour is against the covenant itself.

### **Literature Review**

In the past decades, the rate of divorce in Nigeria was very minimal. Husbands and wives knew that marriage was contracted to keep the family genealogy going. Moreover, both husband and wife knew their roles in the family. More importantly, in Nigeria, marriage was never regarded as an individual affair. The family members had much influence on what went on in the family. However, these trends changed immediately after the Nigerian-Biafra war, when people became increasingly individualistic and took the laws into their own hands. This was the time that family values started eroding, which eventually resulted in an increase of divorce in the contemporary society.

Husband and wives in the early periods knew that marriage was sacred, indissoluble, and stable. Christ said, "What God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6). Oforchukwu (2000) observed that no couples have the right to discontinue the Christian relationship. During the nuptial exchange of vows, couples promise each other to remain in marriage for better or worse, until death do them apart. In the Igbo traditional society, marriage used to be for life. Today, things have changed, and marriage, an institution that used to be stable, is no longer steady. Oforchukwu (2000) observed that married partners are often faced with problems that might dissolve their relationship. He urged couples to be careful when this became the situation in partners' relationship. Unfortunately, life has changed since the end of Nigerian-Biafra War in 1970. These changes are obvious in social, educational, political, religious, and economic aspects of Igbo existence. Our people who travel abroad have seriously been influenced by cross-culturalization, which has affected the attitudes of our people with regard to marriage and divorce.

### **Causes of Marital Crises**

Marital crises could originate from different sources some of which could be psychological and / or psychosomatic in nature. Tobin (2004) attesting to the above claim retorts that more and more marriages run into crisis and eventually pack up because one partner has a borderline personality disorder such as narcissist, antisocial, psychopathic personality disorders. These sort of people are abusers by nature where as some are even unaware or unconscious of their near helpless conditions.

#### *- Social Incompatibility of Marriage Partners.*

There is no doubt that some marriages have absolutely no foundation or basis for being contracted at the first instance. This is so because the pair is socially incompatible and may only manage to get along for a short while before signs of incompatibility would start to manifest. It would then be discovered that the couple are strange bed fellows - socially, religiously and ideologically. Crises are bound to ensue in a situation where a marriage partner sets high and unrealistic standards in the home. The fallibility of man is unquestionable and as such it is not possible that such idealistic standards are realized. This is capable of degenerating into crisis in the home. Many married people become disillusioned when they discover that their union is not all they had expected and that their spouse is not quite what they had envisioned him/her to be (Awake, 2008). Additionally, some couples unrealistically expect to get more out of marriage than they put into it.

#### *- Sexual Incompatibility*

Poor sexual-satisfaction on the part of a marital partner may spice up crisis in the union which not properly- and timely detected and managed could lead to extramarital sexual affairs - a situation that if on its own leads to disaffection and loss of trust.

#### *- Extreme Sexual Orientation*

Extreme sexual orientation of one of a marriage partner is capable of endangering a marital union. Such orientations like homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, sodomy, oral sex, excessive sexual appetite especially when the other partner is at the other extreme of the scale can generate crisis in the homes. Most of the time, such extreme sexual behaviours or orientations are discovered rather too late or midway into the marriage that it becomes very difficult to pull out of the engagement. And when once a partner cannot get along crisis ensues.

#### *- Extended Family Affairs/Issues.*

Some once upon -a-time happy couples have had their marriages rocked for their inability to properly manage extended family issues. In most cases, women find it difficult to accommodate relations of the husband (especially mothers and sisters - in-law) and *vice versa* on the part of some husbands, a situation most marriage partners may find difficult to accommodate. Some men/women often quarrel with spouses whose interests are only on the betterment of their own relations.

#### *- Lack of Mutual Respect between Partners*

Mutual respect for one's spouse is critical for marital union sustenance and lack of it is a crisis factor capable of rocking even the strongest marital foundation of hitherto blissful homes. The Holy Bible admonishes couples thus: wives respect your husband who in turn should love their wives as they would their own body. One can quickly assume that each of the above mentioned conditions is a *sine qua non*

for the other since a husband might find it difficult to continue to love a wife who doesn't respect him or his authority; neither would a wife respect the husband who does not love her. Respect and love are reciprocal variables in every marital union and as such, a spouse owes it an obligation to respect and love his/her marriage partner, failure which fans the embers of marital discord and discontent.

- *Dishonesty and Moral Decadence*

Dishonest behaviour coupled with moral decadence in the family can generate crisis in the home. A situation where a couple cannot tell each other simple truth is not healthy for the union. Once such morality gap is discovered in any of the spouses, mistrust sets in and confidence gradually gets eroded with crisis eventually taking over the home front. Poor morality or decadent moral culture may unwittingly be imbibed by the children of such a family in which case the entire family fabric weakens due largely to an atmosphere of mutual mistrust that eventually envelops it. (Buckwell, 2010).

- *Negligent Behaviour of Spouses*

Negligent behaviour on the part of marital partners is a critical crisis factor. In taking marital vows, a couple normally would promise to oblige the partner of his/her responsibility towards him/her, while avoiding indulgences that could mar their union. But experience has shown that soon after, some marriages collapsed on the strength of negligence of such avowed obligations. On this, a partner would start to feel cheated thus giving opportunity for tension to build up.

- *Poor Marital Communication*

A factor that has occupied central position in all discourse concerning successful marriage is 'marital communication' (Edger, 1996). Inability of spouses to communicate effectively with each other is very unhealthy to the union. Effective marital communication entails that couples discuss issues, respond to questions, call for explanations and accept same timely (when given), as any delay may send out a wrong signal which a partner is bound to interpret same way. Effective marital communication can in fact assuage many other marital disquiets before they could degenerate into crisis situations. Put differently, poor marital communication has been blamed for some other marital problems that have even culminated into divorce or separation of spouses. Purposeful open dialogue between couples often tends to be overtaken by incessant arguments about anything, everything, and nothing; misinterpretation generates misunderstandings; verbal attacks are countered by keeping silence especially on the husband's side (Awake, 2008)

- *Unwholesome Social Behaviour*

Bickering, unnecessary criticisms, gossip or what may simply be tagged nagging has rocked some good families. It is not an over statement that majority of the women take to nagging instead of politely confronting their husbands with issues. Most men in turn do not take kindly to such threats and would go a long way to crushing such tendencies. This case of attack and counter attack is crisis prone, as no reasonable man would want his authority as the family head be usurped.

### **Consequences of Marital Crises**

Marital crises may have had some deleterious consequences on couples, their children and the society at large. Available literature reveal as follows:

- *Social Vices and Crimes*

Social vices and crimes may become the order of the day as delinquent children from crisis-ridden or broken homes ultimately graduate into irresponsible adult population. The adolescence is a stage at which human beings are highly emotionally unbalanced, character formation not yet stabilized and as such people can always tilt to either side of the scale at the slightest pressure. This is the singular reason why robbery gangs, kidnap and assassination squads, and prostitution are mostly populated by people in their adolescence and early adulthood. Living with their parents did not offer them the opportunity to develop as good citizens with good scales of conscience.

### **Management of Marital Crises**

Couples who are going through a marriage crisis are often tempted to brood over the days when they still saw each other through the blissful eyes of love. At the earlier stages of all marriages, partners are always caught in a whirlwind of passionate emotions thus making them incapable of finding any fault in each other. This is because this highly idealistic phase of marriage temporarily obscures the truth that a marriage is made up of two separate people with differing perspectives on life ([www.savemymarriagetoday.com](http://www.savemymarriagetoday.com)). But sooner or later, such partners will eventually come face to face with the realities of their differences and the experience can be very traumatic for some spouses; some are downright disgusted by suddenly realizing that their marriage is in fact far from the ideal perfect.

That a marriage which started out so wonderfully well could end up in such a woeful state is an experience that has kept many a disillusioned couple from denying the existence of marriage crisis starring them in the face. This situation often compels some marital partners to opt to reminisce a trouble-free past, wishing things could go back to what they were before. But notably, this kind of wishful thinking is damaging in the long run because one need to acknowledge all the aspects of the relationship, be it good or bad. However, dealing with the negative tendencies has to be constructive

([www.saygymama.getoday.com](http://www.saygymama.getoday.com)). Affected couple should rather consider the root causes behind their present woes and address them accordingly. It must however be appreciated that relationship problems are not same as say a problem with your car or laptop which requires a straight-forward solution. Marriage is a complex socio-psychological relationship and consequently, a marital crisis is anything but simple. Consequently taking the first step to deal with it is often the hardest.

However, it must be done; otherwise, refusing to acknowledge and understand it is counterproductive..

### **Theoretical Framework**

For this study, the functionalism school of thought was adopted in the explanation of the topic under investigation.

#### *Functionalism*

The structural functionalism theory is associated with the works of Durkheim (1897), Merton (1968) and Parson (1951). The basic assumption of the theory sees the society as a living organism made up of component parts, which function harmoniously for the survival of the whole system. If any part fails to contribute to an identifiably useful function, neither does it promote value consensus among members of the society – it will not be passed on from one generation to the next.

Functionalist theorists emphasize the two concepts of structure and function. Indeed, the model is often called structural functionalism rather than just functionalism. The structures are the various parts of the system. In the case of the society, the principal structures usually are considered to be the society's institutions – family, government (Executive, Legislature and Judiciary), economy, religion and educational system; analysis focused upon the inter-relations among these institutions. Each structure and each part within the larger structure is conceived to have a function in assisting the society to operate and in preserving its stability.

The basic tenets of structural functionalism include the following: firstly, it entails interaction among various parts within the system. What this means, is that, social phenomenon can be explained in terms of the part they play in the existence and survival of the larger society. Furthermore, there is inter – dependence of various parts within the system.

This means that the function of a part of a system usually affects the system as a whole. Moreover, there is the need for the system to maintain equilibrium in order to survive. This means that the social system tend towards equilibrium. That is, when one variable of the system changes in magnitude or in quality, the other variables are subjected to strains and are transformed. As a result, the system changes its pattern of performance and the dysfunctional components are disciplined by a regulatory mechanism and the equilibrium of the system is re-established.

Malinowski (1944) saw functionalism in terms of the postulate of universal functionalism, which rests on the assumption that any and in fact every continuing social pattern or custom must have positive functions to the maintenance of the established ways of life and therefore to the welfare of members of the society.

He argued that every custom, material objects, ideas, beliefs etc. fulfills some vital functions, has some tasks to accomplish and represents an indispensable part within a working whole.

Radcliffe – Brown (1944) on the other hand, developed the postulate of functional unity. His argument is that the function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total system. This view implies that a social system has a kind of unity which is referred to as functional unity. That is, a condition in which all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency.

Functionalism is seen as the main theoretical framework for the system approach and views the social system as possessing inevitable sub-systems or institutions that exist due to their functions for the sustenance and the survival of the system. Parsons popularized the concept of functionalism in sociology. He observed that a social system consists of plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a defined and structured manner to meet certain functional prerequisites (Haralambos and Holborn 1995). Parsons identified Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration and Latency as the four functional prerequisites that are imperative for the survival of any system and the function of any part of the system is its contribution in meeting the functional prerequisite.

The marriage institution is a unit, a structure or an institution within the system. Whatever happens in the marriage institution has an overriding effect on the other units of the system. In the same vein, happenings or occurrences in other units of the system in no small measure play a decisive role in the stability or otherwise of the marriage institution. The presence or absence of money (economic institution) has been found to be a cause of the increasing rate of divorce in Nigeria. Similarly, emphasis on prosperity amongst preachers of the gospel of Christ (religious institution) rather than on holiness and sanctity of marriage has in no small ways weakened the marriage institution, thus leading to the alarming rate of divorce.

It must also be pointed out that the legal institution tacitly approves of divorce as long as certain criteria are met. These have also encouraged divorce in the Nigerian society. In sum, a disequilibrium in any unit of the social system invariably leads to an increase in the divorce rate in the society.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Traditionally in African society, marriage was considered a lifelong contract. Indissoluble, as it was looked upon as a permanent, social, and spiritual bond between a man and his wife, as well as their respective families. Marriage was almost universally stable, and divorce was rare. As a result, divorce did not play a significant role in African society. In the early African societies, the community usually settled quarrels and disputes, which precluded divorce in most cases. A husband's family members were required to hear about his decision for divorce and judge the case on its merit, weighing all the consequences of the outcome. As a result, it was not easy for a man to divorce his wife during the early period. If divorce was allowed in traditional African society, it generally was on the grounds of adultery, which is considered a sin against God, nature, and society. Ultimately, no matter the outcome, marriage is not one man's business in traditional Africa society.

Due to the importance of producing children in African marriage, sterility is an issue that may promote divorce. If a married couple realized that the wife was sterile or the husband was impotent, and then strains and stresses could develop in the marriage. These strains could have prompted a divorce. However, it is important to note that sterility did not provide justifiable grounds for divorce in African society. Rather, it more often prompted a husband to seek a second wife. Sometimes the first wife herself took the initiative in procuring a second wife for her husband as in the case of Sarai and Abram. Ultimately, divorce was seldom permitted in traditional African society, and the rate of divorce was generally very low. But today, marriage divorce is a growing social ill in our societies. This is due to several factors, which include- childlessness, adultery, quarrelling, alcoholism, socialization and technological advancement, financial difficulties, immaturity, mixed marriage, adverse influence of in-laws, religious affiliation, and educational attainment.

Marriage divorce has serious adverse effects on both the children and parents. The children lack parental love and affection and run the risk of discontinuity in their emotional and intellectual development.

Furthermore, the greatest cause of juvenile crime is a broken home. It has been found that parents also suffer from the injury done by divorce. Divorce is regarded as a stigma. It may be difficult for both husband and wife to cope from the emotional and psychological effects of divorce. Parents may be crushed by a sense of shame, fear, and hatred. Therefore, it becomes difficult for them to live a secured and meaningful life. Sometimes, divorced parents may go to the extreme and seek an unfulfilling life through drunkenness and sexual immorality. Women suffer especially when divorce becomes inevitable. It is difficult for them to get financial support. In view of the above discussions, it is recommended that couples should avoid and circumvent all the factors responsible for marriage divorce in order to have a happy and loving family.

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