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Children's Views on Family Communications in Families with their Biological Children and those with Adopted Children in Anambra State

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Abstract

This study investigated the perception of children on family communication in families with biological and those with adopted children. The purpose of the study was to ascertain children's perception of family communication in the two families. The descriptive survey design was adopted in the study. One research question and one hypothesis guided the study. The population of the study comprised about 188,3952 children in Anambra State. The sample comprised 352 children selected through purposive sampling technique. A researcher-developed questionnaire duly validated by experts was used in data collection. The reliability co-efficient of 0.82 was found using Chronbach Alpha. The researcher together with 24 research assistants administered the instrument. Mean ratings and t-test were used in data analysis. Findings indicate that both children in biological and adoptive families perceived a low extent of adjustment in the families. It was therefore recommended

that adoptive parents should make personal efforts to improve their family communication in order to help the children adjust well in their families.

Introduction

A family is a household consisting of father, mother, sisters and brothers. It basically consists of married parents and their children and in some cases, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews. The family as a social unit, is the foundation of the society. According to the National Population Commission of Nigeria (2003) the family is a basic and vital institution in Nigerian society. It provides a sense of security and identity for the child and is the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members particularly children. It is within the family unit that one generally learns to walk, talk, and interact with others. Family members teach each other love, forgiveness, kindness, and sacrifice. Fields (2003) noted that families are often the first and frequently the last source of support for individuals.

Families are considered the hub of wellbeing, and how they function is crucial. Family functioning refers to the family's level of competency related to interaction patterns, values, coping strategies, commitment, and resource mobilization (Silburn, Zubrick, De Maio, Shepherd, Griffin & Mitrou, 2006; Xu, 2009). In other words, family functioning is about how members communicate, relate, and maintain relationships, and how they make decisions and solve problems.

Researchers such as Juffer and van Ijzendoorn (2005) and Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) have identified communication in the family as one important variable for family functioning. Family communication refers to the effectiveness and extent of the family's communicative competence. It involves family discussions, transmission of verbal and non-verbal messages, disclosure of relevant information, polite complaints, messages and responses, and effective use of criticisms in families.

According to Becker, Butler, and Nachtigall, (2005), communication is a process of relaying information and ideas in order to influence the activities family members. Uwe, Asuquo and Ekuri, (2008) communication is a process by which family members attempt to share meanings through the transmission of symbolic messages. These definitions present communication as a process of sharing information by family members. It involves the process of conveying information with the aim of influencing the attitudes and actions of family members through proper expressions, guidance and directives to achieve a desirable goal.

In communicating, biological and adoptive families are expected to apply effective strategies, and processes through which messages are relayed. Hence family communication is better understood in terms of the strategies, skills, attitudes, manner and dispositions which members employs while transmitting ideas to another with a view to influencing the other. Family communication involves free expression of

feelings and decisions. Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, and Carrano, (2006) subscribed to this view of communication as an interchange by describing communication as conveying of information or knowledge from one person to another in a family. Desirable family communication include listening and responding politely to one another, talking about problems, and deciding on their resolutions, having mutual conversations, passing useful information and discussing family interests (William, 2011). According to Erich, Kanenberg, Case, Allen, and Bogdanos (2009), the ability to give evidence of openness, originality and then seek consensus when working with family members in solving a particular issue is an example of effective communication in families.

There has been an increased interest among family life professionals in exploring the subjective perceptions and attitudes of members of the adoption triangle - birthparents, adoptive parents, and adoptees - toward adoption. Hence, several conceptual notions exist regarding the various variables in the functioning of families with adoptive and biological children.

Children differ significantly in many aspects. In some occasions, the way a child behaves is influenced by the relationship between him or her parents. One of such factors is whether the child is adopted or biological. According to Ku (2009) biological children feel that they belong and are accepted in their families, their life styles become laden with pride, lack of guilt, and lack of fearful inhibitions, resulting in a decreased responsiveness to punishment and an increased resistance to parental and societal norms. There are increasing cases of spousal abandonment of their families and many children carry with them the trauma of maltreatment, sadness, anger, and problems of un-acceptance from their family. How these problems of family functioning apply to children in both biological and adoptive families needs to be further investigated because there is lack of empirical data in Nigeria due to the fact that no studies appear to have been conducted on family communication among families with adopted children and those with biological children. It is against this background that the present study deemed it crucial to ascertain family communication in families with biological children and those with adopted children in terms of their functioning.

Statement of Problem

Problems of poor communication, interactions, cohesion and material investments in families has increased the number children who run away from their homes because they have been neglected and abused, physically and/or sexually. Children in many families have witnessed or experienced family violence, disunity, conflicts, extreme deprivation, and malnutrition. The extent children view communication in their families in Anambra State is not known. The problem of the study therefore was to determine children's perception on the extent of

communication in families with their own biological children and those with adopted children in Anambra State.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to determine children's perception on the extent of communication in families with their own biological children and those with adopted children in Anambra State.

Research Question and Hypothesis

One research question and null hypothesis guided the study.

Research Question: What is extent of communication in families with their own biological children and those with adopted children as perceived by the children?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of biological and adopted children on their family communication.

Method

The research design adopted in this study was a descriptive survey. In a descriptive survey research design, data are collected from a sample of the population in order to find out the relative opinion, belief, attitude and status of that population or the phenomenon. This design is most appropriate for the study because the researcher collected data from respondents in order to ascertain the extent of communication in families with their own biological children and those with adopted children in Anambra State. The population for this study comprised children in Anambra State. This consisted of children in about 188, 3952 households with children aged 11 to 18 in Anambra State.

The sample consisted of 352 participants (176 biological children and 176 adopted children) selected through purposive sampling technique. Condition for eligibility is that the child is living with and the target child (referred to as the adolescent; age = 11-18 years and in secondary school). One hundred and seventy-six eligible biological families were also randomly selected from the same 88 secondary schools where adopted children had been identified, selected and used for the study.

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire was titled "Family Functioning Assessment Scale- Child (FFAS - C) which consisted of two parts. Part 1 is the introductory part and contains open-ended statements on biographic formation of the child. Part 2 of the instrument comprised structured on a 5-point response scale of Very High Extent, High Extent, Moderate extent, Low Extent, and Very Low Extent.

Five lecturers in the Department of Guidance and Counselling and Measurement and Evaluation, all in Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, validated the instrument. The Cronbach alpha method was used to test for reliability of the instrument in terms of internal consistency. To do this, copies of the instrument were distributed to 20 children (10 biological and 10 adoptive) in Asaba, Delta State. These children were not included in the final study. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the instrument was found to be 0.82 and this was considered adequate for the study. The researcher was assisted by twelve trained social welfare officers and twelve school counsellors to collect data.

To answer the research questions, mean ratings were used in analyzing responses to the questionnaire items. The responses of the children to each item were analyzed separately for biological and adoptive children. The average mean scores for adopted and biological children on each cluster of items were presented and interpreted separately. To test the hypothesis, the t-test was applied to analyze the mean responses of biological and adopted children. All the hypotheses were tested at 0.05 significant level.

Results

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Biological and Adoptive Parents on their Family Communication

S/N	Items	Biological Children N = 176		Adopted Children N = 176	
		X	RMKS	X	RMKS
1.	Family members listen and respond nicely to one another no matter how busy they are	1.58	LE	2.65	AE
2.	When any family member feels bad, he/she finds it easier to talk to people outside our family.	1.76	LE	1.60	LE
3.	We talk about problems that we have in our family and how to resolve them	2.25	LE	2.04	LE
4.	Family members shun or yell at one another during conversations	1.81	LE	1.53	LE
5.	Parents pass information to family members without much opportunity for discussion.	1.83	LE	1.74	LE
6.	We freely exchange a lot of loving gestures, jokes, and humours with family members.	3.70	HE	3.66	HE
7.	We discuss our hobbies and days' activities among family members with interest.	3.55	HE	3.63	HE

8. We praise one another over abilities, promotions or accomplishments.	3.74	HE	3.65	HE
9. We clearly express our criticisms and complaints to family members without restrictions.	2.08	LE	1.63	LE
Cluster Mean	2.48	LE	2.46	LE

Table 1 shows that by rating items 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 within the ranges of 1.53 and 2.25, both biological and adopted children perceived a low extent of their family communication as stated in these items. Items 6, 7 and 8 however got mean ratings within 3.55 and 3.74 in both columns, thus depicting that biological and adopted children perceived high extent of communication in their families with respect to these 3 items. With a mean rating of 1.58, biological children perceived a low extent of item 1, whereas adopted children perceived a moderate extent of the item by a mean rating of 2.65.

The cluster mean for both biological and adopted children were 2.48 and 2.46 which fell within the range of low extent. Therefore, there was a low extent of communication in families with biological children and those with adopted children as perceived by both children.

Table 2: t-test on the Mean Ratings of Biological and Adopted Children on their Family Communication

Children	N	X	Sd	df	Cal-t	Crit-t	P<0.05
Biological	176	2.48	0.88	350	0.20	1.96	Not Significant
Adopted	176	2.46	0.83				

Data presented in Table 2 shows that at 0.05 significant level and 350 in the calculated t of 0.20 is less than the critical t of 1.96. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. The researcher concludes there was no significant difference in the mean ratings on family communication by biological and adopted children.

Summary of the Findings

From the presentation and analysis of data, the following findings were included:

1. There was a low extent of communication in families with biological children and those with adopted children as perceived by both children.

2. There was no significant difference in the mean ratings on family communication by biological and adopted children.

Discussion

Children in biological families perceived a major communication handicap in comparison to adoptive families; their family members do not listen and respond to one another no matter how busy they really are. This could be one of the reasons why just as their adopted counterparts, they find it easier to talk to people outside their families whenever they feel bad. Such external people could be counsellors. This finding suggests that children in biological and adoptive families need counselling services to talk about the problems which they lack the avenues of talking about in their families.

The adopted children were not found to have lower perceptions of the communication variables measured than their biological counterparts, as there were no significant differences between their family communication and those of the matched group of biological children. Moreover the biological and adopted children reported that their family members praise one another over abilities, promotions or accomplishments; they freely exchanged a lot of friendly gestures, signs, jokes and humours among family members with scores that were as positive as those reported by the adoptive and biological parents. In other words, both biological and adopted children with their families function well in some areas of communication.

This finding disagrees with Eanes (2005) who noted that many adolescents rarely see anything good in how they communicate in their families because they see most communication acts as conflicts, disdain, instruction or miscommunication. Presumably, both the biological and adopted children appear to appreciate praises, signs, jokes and humour and discussion of hobbies among family members as communication activities that bind them together as a family. This finding is commendable because in using praises, discussing hobbies, and exchanging jokes and humours, both biological and adopted children are likely to see their families as places wherein members provide emotional support and there is a strong family coalition.

Similarly both groups of children indicated a high extent of family members passing information to others without much opportunity for discussion and shunning or yelling at one another during discussions. For adopted children, perhaps, their parents felt that passing on information with detailed discussion could lead adoptive parents to unknowingly disclose the adoptive structure of their children to them. They could have expected the children to accept their parents' regulatory messages, even if they are offered without much opportunity for discussion. Oshadumo (2011) also noted that many parents only inform their family members of major decision issues

without actually involving them in the communication process. Even when children for instance go to them for clarifications, they do not listen to the children nor make clarifications to help them understand what they are expected to do. With such limited communication, one is not surprised to observe that members of many biological or adoptive families do not talk about their family problems and their resolutions, they yell at or shun one another during conversations, and they do not express feelings and complaints without restrictions. There was also a low extent of family members speaking their minds during discussions without being shunned and free expression of criticisms and complaints. This finding could be because that conversation without limits is not traditionally accepted in families in Anambra State. Parents might have felt that communication without control from parents leads to poor child adjustment, regardless of adoption status.

Further, the biological children reported opinions much like those of their adoptive counterparts in that when any family member feels bad, they find it easier to talk to people outside their family. This finding is understandable for biological families because in response to research question one, they indicated that they were proud of talking about their families with other families and they felt that friends and relatives were friendly or liked their families. The finding however becomes contradictory for adoptive families when one considers that adoptive families indicated lack of pride in talking about their families with other families and felt that friends and relatives were unfriendly or disliked their families. While this apparent mismatch may be further investigated, it might be caused by the inability of some family members to listen and respond to others, prevalence of yelling and shunning during conversations, lack of in depth discussion of information and low extent of talking about and resolving problems. Such negative communication acts are capable of producing communication problems and catastrophe among family members thus compelling them to avoid letting other family members know about their personal problems.

However, biological children differed from adopted children in one area of communication. While biological children perceived that to a low extent, their family members listen and respond to one another no matter how busy they really are, adopted children perceived that this happens in their families to a high extent. This view is in stark contrast to Sun (2003) who reported more use of negative communication among adoptive families than biological families. These results, then, present a consistent view of adopted adolescent children as having a similar view of family communication at par with biological families.

Conclusions

The findings of this study show a low extent of communication in biological adoptive families as perceived by both parents and children in the families. In

addition, biological and adopted children did not differ significantly in their mean ratings on their family communication. This study clearly shows that biological and adopted children experience similar though not equal aspects of family functioning.

Recommendations

The findings of this study have formed the basis for the following commendations:

1. Communication in both biological and adoptive families in Anambra State needs to be significantly improved through regular counselling and family retreats to be organized in that respect for families by non-governmental organizations and religious bodies.
2. Media discussions should be organized by social workers and family life educators to make people aware of growing evidence regarding the low extent of communication in families in Anambra State.
3. Parents should make personal efforts to improve their family communication.
4. The Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare and the UNICEF should organize workshops for parents to strengthen their communication capacity and skills in their families for improved family functioning.

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