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ARTICLE

Parenting styles and family characteristics as correlates of psychological distress among Nigerian adolescents

102

Alika Henrietta Ijeoma, Akanni Deborah Omolara and Akanni Oluyemi Oluwatosin

Full Length Research Paper

Parenting styles and family characteristics as correlates of psychological distress among Nigerian adolescents

Alika Henrietta Ijeoma^{1*}, Akanni Deborah Omolara² and Akanni Oluyemi Oluwatosin³

¹Department of Educational Evaluation and Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Education, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

²Springfield High School, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

³Department of Clinical Services, Federal Neuro-Psychiatric Hospital, Uselu, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

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Many factors could be co-related with psychological distress in secondary school adolescents. Few of such factors are the style parents adopt in raising their adolescents, and the family characteristics in which adolescents are nurtured. This study was designed to look at the relationship between parenting style/family characteristics and adolescents' psychological distress. Specifically, the study was designed to investigate the styles that parents adopt in raising their children, the family characteristics of adolescents, such as the family type, the family size and parental figure, and how these variables can contribute to psychological distress among secondary school adolescents. To guide the study, six hypotheses were formulated. The descriptive survey was adopted for the study, in which five schools were randomly selected for the study; selection of schools was restricted to only mixed gender schools in order to make comparisons easier. 40 students were selected from each of the schools making a total of two hundred (200) respondents. The respondents completely filled a questionnaire comprising a socio-demographic and family-related data sheet, a 12-item General Health Questionnaire, and a 30-item Parental Care Scale. The results showed that authoritative ($p < 0.01$, $r = 0.633$) and authoritarian parenting styles ($p < 0.01$, $r = 0.303$) significantly and respectively correlated inversely and directly with psychological distress in adolescents. Permissive parenting styles and family characteristics did not correlate with psychological distress. These findings suggest that higher levels of control, which is characteristic of both authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles, may be a critical factor in the development of psychological distress. It is suggested that counsellors may help parents gain the knowledge and skills necessary to support their adolescents to fulfil their psychological needs. Counselling programmes can be designed for parents in line with the findings, parents' discussion group and other means can be created with the aim of educating and enlightening parents on how the practices/styles that they adopt could have implications on the psychological wellbeing of their children.

Key words: Parenting style, psychological distress, family characteristics, adolescents, secondary school correlate.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence which corresponds to the period between the ages of 10 and 19 years is often a critical phase in the life cycle of each person because it marks a period of

biological, social and psychological transition between childhood and adulthood (WHO, 2013). The period is a time of strain and stress fraught with many problems, and

thus, characterised by instability and susceptibility to the development of psychological distress (Garaigordobil, 2006). Psychological distress refers to a vulnerable emotional state or mood, characterized by feelings of sadness, tension, anxiety, irritability, and self-consciousness (Lahey, 2009).

This distress, which is commonly depression and/or anxiety, results when adolescents poorly negotiate learning more about the 'real world', and trying to strive for both independence from parents and inclusion in social groups (Garaigordobil, 2006). Since the later part of the twentieth century, several factors have emerged from research work to be related with psychological state in adolescents. Such factors include the styles that parents adopt in raising their children (parenting styles), other family characteristics outside of parenting style such as type, size, income, cohesion of the family etc.

Parenting styles can be described as all strategies (behaviours, attitudes and values) parents use to interact with their children and influence their physical, emotional, social and intellectual development (Baumrind, 1991). It is the environment in which parent-child interactions occur.

Baumrind (1991) has been credited for defining three specific parenting styles and their consequences for children. These are authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive styles of parenting, and are based on levels of warmth and control used by the parent in disciplining the child.

Authoritative parenting is characterised by high expectations of compliance to parental rules and directions, an open dialogue about those rules and behaviours, and a child centred approach. Authoritative parents combine high support and responsiveness (warmth and sensitivity to the child's needs) with supervision and firm expectations for behaviour. Dimensions of warmth and control are both high in this approach. Similarly, authoritarian parenting style is characterized by high expectation of conformity and compliance to parental rules and directions but do not explain the rules at all, unlike the authoritative parent. It is about low responsiveness and support (warmth) combined with high levels of control. On the other hand, permissive parenting is characterized as having few behavioural expectations for the child. It is an indulgent or lenient parenting with high responsiveness and low levels of control; parents are nurturing and accepting, but non-demanding. A fourth type of parenting style has however been identified by Maccoby and Martin (1983), referred to as neglectful or uninvolved, in which parents are undemanding and unresponsive (Lamborn et al., 1991). Parenting practices have been repeatedly linked to

adolescent psychological state.

In general, authoritative and permissive parenting styles are both associated with positive psychological state in adolescents (Lamborn et al., 1991; Anyanwu, 2010; Lipps et al., 2012), though the role of permissive parenting style has been conflicting (Taiwo, 2011; Lipps et al., 2012). Authoritarian parenting style is associated with greater psychological dysfunction such as depressive and anxiety symptoms, failure to initiate activity, and weak communication skills (Anyanwu, 2010; Lamborn et al., 1991; Santrock, 2004), while permissive parenting style maybe related to poor self-control, social incompetence, inability to handle independence, low self-esteem, immaturity, and delinquency (Lamborn et al., 1991; Santrock, 2004). Even though the combination of strong support and control (authoritative style) is positively related to psychological well-being in children and adolescents, higher self-reliance, social competence, and lower psychological distress (Baumrind, 1991; Darling and Steinberg, 1993), it has been documented in adolescents' samples of minority American, as well as Arab and Asian, that authoritarian style (high levels of control and low levels of warmth) is adequate parenting practice (Chao, 2001; Dwairy et al., 2006).

In addition, it is important to note that recent studies conducted in South European countries as well as South American countries also found that children and adolescents of permissive parents did perform equally or better in several youth outcomes than adolescents who describe their parents as authoritative (Calafat et al., 2014; García and Gracia, 2014; Rodrigues et al., 2013).

These inconsistencies in research findings have been linked to ethnic and cultural differences (Garcia, 2015). In other words, the optimum style of parenting should be interpreted in the context of culture.

The family is indicated to be the first environment that has one of the most important roles in the shaping of the future behaviour of children and their psychological well-being. Variation in family characteristics, such as household income, family processes, family structure have been reported as risk factors for the development of psychological problems later on in adolescents. For example, lower family income (Akpan et al., 2010), polygamy (Fatoye, 1998), lower socio-economic class (Frigerio et al., 2009; Sawyer et al., 1990), divorce and separation (Myklestad et al., 2011) correlate with psychological problems in children and adolescents.

Statement of the problem

Psychological distress has been reported among

*Corresponding author. E-mail: henrietta.alika11@gmail.com.

adolescents worldwide, and prevalence rates have varied across countries. High prevalence rate of psychological distress has been reported among Nigerian secondary school students with rates varying between 15 and 50% (Adelekan et al., 2016; Fatoye et al., 1994; Taiwo, 2011). Consequences of psychological distress are similarly myriad and serious; for example, hindrances to academic functioning and success have been observed among school going adolescents (Akinsola, 2011; Barclay, 1994; Osasona, 2011).

Various factors around adolescents have been intimately linked to the development of psychological distress of which parenting styles and family characteristics (such as size, type and parental figure) have been studied. In Nigeria, the relationship between psychological distress and parenting styles/family characteristics (particularly parenting styles) have not been well researched, though the Baumrind's model of parenting with three typologies which captures the ways parents socialize with their children have been described in Nigeria (Adegoke, 2008; Akinsola, 2013). The only known published study relating parenting style to depression, a form of psychological distress, which was carried out among 362 school-going adolescents in the North Central region of Nigeria found a relationship between the two (Aberge, 2014). Authoritarian parenting style was found to directly correlate with depression while authoritative and permissive parenting styles were inversely related to depression. Based on the uncertainty of an existing, and direction of relationship, the following null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study.

Hypotheses

1. Authoritative parenting style will not have significant relationship with psychological distress among adolescents in secondary schools.
2. Authoritarian parenting style will not have significant relationship with psychological distress among adolescents in secondary schools.
3. Permissive parenting style will not have significant relationship with psychological distress among adolescents in secondary schools.
4. Family size will not have significant relationship with psychological distress among adolescents in secondary schools.
5. Family type will not have significant relationship with psychological distress among adolescents in secondary schools.
6. Parental figure will not have significant relationship with psychological distress among adolescents in secondary schools.

Rationale for the study

Considering the magnitude of the impact of parenting and

family environment on adolescents' outcome, and the severity of the consequences of psychological distress, the study was aimed to investigate the styles that parents adopt in raising their adolescents, the family characteristics of the adolescent, such as, the family type, the family size and parental figure, and how these variables can contribute to psychological distress among secondary school adolescents. The Baumrind's parenting model with three typologies was used in the study because most of the studies on parenting styles in Nigeria adopted the same model. A good understanding of this relationship is expected to be of benefit to counsellors in providing guidance to families, especially for parents/guardians. In addition, it may also address the gap in knowledge about the subject and add to existing report. Finally, the study is expected to stimulate interest and offer a reference point for future research that might investigate the same variables in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and location

The study is a descriptive (correlation) survey design. It was carried out among students in senior secondary schools in Benin City, the capital city of Edo State, Nigeria. The city is spread across three Local Government Areas (LGAs) namely Egor, Ikpoba-Okha and Oredo.

Sample and Sampling techniques

The sample size was calculated to be 196 by using the Fisher's formula (Vaughan and Morrow, 1989); 15% as prevalence rate of adolescent psychological distress from a previous study (Taiwo, 2011) and degree of accuracy of 5%. However, the sample size was rounded up to 200 to improve the power of the study. Sampling was done in stages: the first stage was the selection of Egor LGA by simple random sampling (balloting). The second stage of sampling was carried out by stratifying the schools into two groups; public (government owned) and private schools. Five schools were randomly selected of which three were public and the rest were private. Selection of schools were restricted to only mixed gender schools to make comparison of findings easier since almost all the private schools in Benin-city are mixed schools. In the final stage, 40 students were drawn from the five selected schools to form a total of 200 which participated in the study. They were systemically drawn to include pupils in the senior secondary (SS) classes I and II while the SS III were excluded because they were not available at the time of study due to the final year examination.

Research instrument

It consisted of three sections:

Section A: It contained structured questions about some demographic variables and also family characteristics of the students such as the family type, size and parental figure. Family type could be monogamous or polygamous; family size was defined by the number of children in the family which could be small (1 to 4), middle (5 to 7) or large size family (>8); and parental figure referred to the individual(s) whom the adolescents lives with which

was categorised as both parents, single parent, or guardian.

Section B: It consisted of the Parenting Care Scale which was developed by Baumrind (1991). The 30-item inventory is designed to measure the three principal styles which children perceived as approaches their parents use to take care of them. The participants' rated their parents on the items using a four point likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). The scale scores are from 10 to 40 for each dimension with high score indicating a high level of parenting style in each dimension. The Cronbach alpha values for the parenting style subscales in the present study were satisfactory and as follows: authoritative (0.71), authoritarian (0.70), and permissive (0.79); while the total scale was 0.90.

Section C: This section comprised of the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). This is a screening instrument for detecting psychological distress and it has an advantage of being ideal for quick screening. The participants' were asked to choose one response which best fits how he/she felt recently from four responses. It utilises 2 scoring methods: bimodal scale (0-0-1-1) and a 4-point Likert-type scale (0-1-2-3). Total scores are calculated by summing up the total scores for each item and higher scores indicated greater psychological distress. It has been widely used in a number of psychological distress surveys among adolescents in Nigeria (Akanni and Otakpor, 2016; Osasona et al., 2011). The coefficient of alpha for the scale in this study was 0.85. Certain modification was made on the instrument for difficult words by putting in bracket beside them less difficult words to simplify wordings for the adolescents to understand. For example 'strain' in item 5 was supplemented with 'tension'.

Procedure

Approval to embark on the study was obtained from the authorities of the schools. The purpose and content of the questionnaire was carefully explained to the students in order to ensure proper responses. Consent was obtained from the students who were 18 years and above, and from the teachers for those below 18 years, in addition to their assent. Thereafter, the first researcher personally administered the questionnaires to participants in the class rooms. Data collected was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 19. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies was used to summarize the data and presented in tables. Inferential statistics such as Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to test hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 using the total scores of psychological distress. Hypotheses 4, 5 and 6 were tested using the Chi square with psychological distress scores grouped into present and absent using the bimodal scale (0-0-1-1 for the 4 responses) and a cut off of 4 (Makanjuola et al., 2014).

RESULT

The data analysis reveals 102 (51.0%) females and 98 (49.0%) males; giving an approximate female to male ratio of 1:1. One hundred and twenty (60.0%) were in public schools while eighty (40.0%) were in private schools giving an approximate public to private schools ratio of 3:2. The largest group of the respondents were in the age group 14 to 16 (62.5%) while age bracket 17 to 19 was least represented (17%). Ethnicity breakdown shows that Bini (39.9%) was the most represented group, followed by the Ibos and Yorubas (each was 10%), and

Esan (9.0%); other groups shared the rest. Majority of the respondents were Christians (93.5%), Islam accounted for 5.5%, and the remaining was African tradition religion. Majority of the respondents (79.0%) had a monogamous family background while 42 respondents (21.0%) were from polygamous homes. A greater part of the respondents (85.0%) were living with their parents (either both or single) while 30 respondents (15.0%) lived with guardians. About half (53.0%) were from a small size family while the remaining were from either a middle (36.5%) or large (10.5%) size family.

Table 1 shows that authoritative parenting style correlated inversely and moderately strong ($r = 0.633$, $p < 0.01$) with psychological distress, while authoritarian parenting style correlated directly and weakly ($r = 0.303$, $p < 0.01$), permissive parenting style was not significantly correlated with psychological distress. Hypotheses 1 and 2 which were: authoritative and authoritarian parenting style will not have significant relationships with psychological distress among adolescents in secondary schools were rejected; while hypothesis 3 which states that permissive parenting style will not have significant relationship with psychological distress among adolescents in secondary schools was accepted. Table 2 shows that there is no significant relationship between psychological distress and the family size ($\chi^2 = 1.17$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.56$), family type ($\chi^2 = 0.11$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.74$), and parental figure ($\chi^2 = 1.98$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.37$). Thus, hypotheses 4, 5 and 6 relating family characteristics to psychological distress were accepted.

DISCUSSION

Parenting styles and psychological distress among adolescents

The findings from this research show that authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles correlated with psychological distress while no relationship existed between permissive parenting style and psychological distress. The relationship between authoritarian parenting style and psychological distress was direct; meaning that as the level of authoritarian parenting increases, psychological distress increases, whereas an inverse relationship was found between authoritative parenting style and psychological distress and it means that, a higher level of authoritative parenting will lead to a lower level of psychological distress. Some of these findings have been previously reported such as the positive benefit of adopting authoritative parenting style (Abege, 2014; Anyanwu, 2010; Lamborn et al., 1991; Lipps et al., 2012) and the harmful nature of using the authoritarian parenting style (Abege, 2014; Anyanwu, 2010; Lamborn et al., 1991), though there are conflicting findings to these reports particularly from Asian and American minority (Chao, 2001; Dwairy et al., 2006). The role of permissive

Table 1. Inter-correlation of the parenting styles and psychological distress.

Variables	1	2	3	4
Psychological distress	1	-	-	-
Permissive	-0.061	1	-	-
Authoritarian	0.303**	-0.323**	1	-
Authoritative	-0.633**	0.310**	-0.078	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level 2-tailed.

Table 2. Comparison of family characteristics with presence of psychological distress.

Variables	Psychological distress			Significant test
	Absent	Present	Total	
Family type				
Monogamous	101(63.9)	57(36.1)	158(100.0)	$\chi^2 = 0.11$
Polygamous	28(66.7)	14(33.3)	42(100.0)	df = 1
Total	129(64.5)	71(35.5)	200(100.0)	p = 0.74
Family size				
Small	72(67.9)	34(32.1)	106(100.0)	$\chi^2 = 1.17$
Middle	44(60.3)	29(39.7)	73(100.0)	df = 2
Large	13(61.9)	8(38.1)	21(100.0)	p = 0.56
Total	129(64.5)	71(35.5)	200(100.0)	
Parental figure				
Single parent	24(64.9)	13(35.1)	37(100.0)	$\chi^2 = 1.98$
Both parent	89(66.9)	44(33.1)	133(100.0)	df = 2
Guardian	16(53.3)	14(46.7)	30(100.0)	p = 0.37
Total	129(64.5)	71(35.5)	200(100.0)	

parenting style on psychological distress has been mixed; while some have reported it to be hurtful (Lamborn et al., 1991; Taiwo, 2011), others have found it to be beneficial (Abege, 2014; García, 2014; Lipps et al., 2012; Rodrigues et al., 2013). This study reported no association suggesting a further investigation into the role permissive parenting style play in psychological distress among adolescents.

Cultural (and ethnic and socio-economic) context have been used to explain the inconsistencies in research reports regarding parenting practices and outcomes in the youth (Garcia, 2015). The promotion of different values in different cultures would affect child outcomes in such cultures because each culture, apart from having different conditions of socialization, would have different goals and expectations for children (Akinsola, 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2013). As such effective parenting style in one culture may not be as effective as in other cultures. Nigeria is predominantly a hierarchical and patriarchal nation, whose culture values respect given to parental authority in the family; therefore the levels of strictness

and impositions are high in parenting. However this traditional society may be giving way to the forces of westernization as many of the parents accompany such demands for obedience and compliance with instructions, with responsiveness, love, care, sensitivity, reciprocal dialogue, and explanations for parental disciplinary actions (Akinsola, 2013). This may explain why the findings in this study are similar to reports from Western countries.

Generally, the levels of support and warmth that parents show towards their children understandably influence their psychological state (Baumrind, 1991). One may safely infer from this study that higher levels of control which is characteristics of both authoritarian and authoritative parenting style may be a critical factor in determining the psychological state of adolescents. Apart from the fact that children brought under authoritative parents tend to have better coping abilities and social skills which are frequently related with lesser psychological distress during adolescence, it can be hypothesized that when the style is further applied in the

context of strong support and warmth as seen in authoritative, the resultant effect on adolescents' mental health is good. The opposite is the likely consequence when the parents practice low responsiveness and support as in authoritarian; thus, the demands of control and discipline which adolescents perceive as unpleasant is further worsened by the lack of warmth shown by their parents.

Family characteristics and psychological distress among adolescents

Family type had no significant correlation with psychological distress. The finding of this study supports the findings of Taiwo (2011). The implication of the result however suggests that whether the adolescent is from a monogamous or a polygamous family setting, this may not sufficiently have an impressing association with the adolescents' present psychological state.

This study only revealed that adolescents from large family size had the highest level of psychological distress though the relationship was not significant. Previous reports have shown that adolescents in larger families have significant higher risks of psychological distress (Fagg et al., 2006; Fatoye, 1998; Taiwo, 2011). Difference in findings may mean that deeper factors than just the size of the family are implicated. Greater social deprivation, sibling conflicts, and parental stress are more likely, but not invariably, to be experienced in a larger family than smaller ones. These were not investigated in this study and they are worth consideration in future research.

Parental figure which was defined by whom the adolescents stay with, such as both parents, single parent, and guidance also did not correlate significantly with psychological distress. This lack of relationship is perhaps due to undisturbed social milieu of the family which is promoted by strong cultural value placed on childrearing such that an adolescent is equally and well nurtured regardless of whom he or she stays with. Findings from past research show otherwise: for example, Fagg et al. (2006) studied 6,767 adolescents in East London adolescents by measuring psychological distress using Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and family circumstances. One of the family circumstances studied was parental status which was categorised into parents, lone parent and reconstituted family.

They found adolescents from the reconstituted family to have more psychological distress while adolescents living with both parents were the least distressed. This finding conflict with the result of Fag et al study, it is not surprising because the category of 'reconstituted family' was not investigated in this study, and also, a different instrument for measuring psychological distress was used.

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned findings, the following conclusions were drawn. All the parenting styles as perceived by adolescents had varying significant relationship with psychological distress except the permissive type which calls for further investigation. The relationship is inverse with authoritative, signifying higher levels of this parenting style leading to lower levels of psychological distress, the relationship with authoritarian was direct. A high level of control from parents is thought to be vital in determining the psychological state of adolescents and in combination with high level of warmth produces less psychological distress.

Implications for counselling

The findings have implications for counselling; programs can be designed for parents with the aim of educating and enlightening them on the injurious use of authoritative parenting styles, beneficial use of authoritarian practises and uncertain role of permissive parenting on the psychological state of their children. In addition to communicating this knowledge, counsellors can also help and guide parents on appropriate parenting style to enable their adolescents develop an emotional state free of distress.

RECOMMENDATION

More studies of this kind are recommended which should be equally extended to street adolescents not captured in this study, and also look into the role of ethnic variation. Methods not applied in this study such as separating the parenting styles between parents into father and mother in order to determine who exerts a greater influence, interviewing of parents to obtain their view in addition to their adolescents should be considered in future studies. This is expected to shed more light on the issue.

Limitations

There are some limitations observed in the study which is not deemed sufficient to invalidate the results but viewed as important when interpreting the results. First, it is important to note that the participants were restricted to school going adolescents and this limits the generalization of these findings.


Secondly, the study results were based on a survey questionnaire and self report; participants' perception of self and parenting style may not have been accurately measured. Finally, parenting styles differs between parents and often used in mixture of which this research did not account for.

Conflict of interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interest.

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