

FAMILY ADJUSTMENT IN HOMES WITH BIOLOGICAL AND ADOPTED CHILDREN IN ONITSHA EDUCATION ZONE OF ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

This study investigated family adjustments in homes with biological and those with adopted children. The study was carried out in Onitsha education zone of Anambra State. It is descriptive study guided by one research question and one hypothesis. The population of the study comprised 1,800 families in the area. The sample comprised 158 parents selected through purposive sampling technique. A researcher-developed instrument duly validated by experts and whose Chronbach Alpha was 0.81 was used in data collection. Mean ratings and t-test were used in data analysis. It was found that parents of biological and adoptive families differed in their mean ratings on their family adjustments. It was recommended among others that biological and adoptive parents should attend regular counselling and family retreats for improved family adjustments.

Introduction

The family systems theory, specifically, conceptualises the family as a hierarchical structure in which subsystems exist, including the couple, parent-child and sibling relationships, which are themselves embedded in larger systems, such as the community (Cox & Paley, 2017). In order to maintain balance in the system, each member within the family responds to one another in ways determined by relationship agreements. However, these interactions cannot be fully understood in isolation from the interconnected and interdependent relationships between all members in the system. The systems conceptualisation of families provides an important metaphor for understanding child development as occurring within a context that includes a number of different relationship-based influences and interactions. The interplay between parent-child and sibling relationships may hold clues for understanding key aspects of biological and adoptive family functioning.

The presence of an existing child or children in the adoptive home can create added complexity to adoptive family life. For example, evidence suggests that adoption disruption rates are higher in families with existing birth children (McRoy, 2019). Difficulties may arise in families where parents feel closer to their birth child (Loehlin, 2016) or when the adopted child perceives this to be the case (Selwn, 2015). Birth children themselves may experience difficulties in adjusting to their new family form. In a study of siblings in late permanent placement (Rushton, 2018), two-thirds of birth children were experiencing some level of adjustment difficulty twelve months post placement. Philip (2018) found that the reactions of birth children to their revised family form depended upon the child's developmental stage. For young birth children, a pattern of anxiety and a fear of abandonment prevailed, threatening the children's sense of self and security within the family. The age differential between an existing (birth) child and their adopted sibling is an important factor in determining placement stability, with outcomes poorer when the siblings are close in age or when the adopted child is not the youngest in the family (Wedge & Mantel, 2017). This re-alignment calls for adjustment in the families.

Adjustment is concerned with a family's dispositions, accommodation, satisfaction, attachment to one another and ability to resolve problems on a level that maintains effective family functioning. Adams (2014) described family adjustment as being concerned with family appreciation and acceptance of its members, psycho-social attitudes, identities, special needs, and problem-solving in families. It is used to describe by a set of personality traits, behaviour, and patterns that build a person's individuality. It has to do with those images, concepts, values, behaviour, attitudes, dispositions and perceptions, which a person manifests in facing the challenges of life (Roberts & Robbins, 2014).

The prevalence of adoptive families is on the increase in Nigeria and Anambra State in particular, thus changing the family situations in which children in the country are cared for and raised (Oladokun, Arulogun, Oladokun, Morhason-Bello, Bamgboye, Adewole & Ojengbede, 2009). In Anambra State and Onitsha Education zone in particular, the Society for Family Health (2016) reported that the number of adoptive families will continue to increase because more families are seeking to adopt children for a variety of reasons including: infertility, late marriages, and sex preferences. Given the projected increase in adoption in Onitsha Education Zone, an important question that arises is how families with adopted children function when compared with those with biological children. The reason is obvious. For instance, some adoptive parents receive negative feedback from family

and friends who question the authenticity of their roles as parents. Consequently, such parents may lack a sense of entitlement to their children and have lower levels of self-acceptance as parents, thus affecting the levels of their family functioning.

In Anambra state and Onitsha education zone in particular, problems of poor family adjustments in some families have increased the number of children who run away from their homes because they have been neglected and abused, physically and/or sexually. Many families in the area have experienced family violence, disunity, conflicts, extreme deprivation, and malnutrition as a result of poor family adjustments. How these problems of family adjustment apply to both biological and adoptive families needs to be further investigated because there is lack of empirical data in the area due to the fact that no studies appear to have been done in the zone. In the light of the above, it is important to conduct a research on how the adoptive families of these children adjust compared to biological families.

One research question and one hypothesis guided the study.

What is the extent of family adjustments in homes with biological and adopted children in Onitsha Education of Anambra State?

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of parents of biological and adoptive families on their family adjustment.

Method

The researcher adopted descriptive survey in this study. The population for this study comprised parents in 1,800 families with children aged 11 to 18 in Onitsha education zone of Anambra State. The sample consisted of 158 participants (79 biological parents and 79 adoptive parents) selected through purposive sampling technique. Condition for eligibility is that a family has two parents that are alive and the target child (referred to as the adolescent; age = 11-18 years and in secondary school). However, only one of the parents (either the father or mother) was expected to respond to the questionnaire. Study eligibility was limited to families living with a father, mother, and an adopted child aged between 11 and 18. Seventy -nine such families were located in the area of the study. These families have adopted children spread across 61 secondary schools in the area of the study. Hence, these 61 schools were chosen for the study. One hundred and fifty-eight eligible biological families were therefore selected from the same 61 secondary schools where adopted children had been identified and selected. This was done to avoid raising suspicions from the adopted children.

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire is for parents and it is titled "Family Functioning

Assessment Scale- Parents (FFAS -P). The instrument comprised structured on a 5-point response scale of Very High Extent, High Extent, Moderate extent, Low Extent, and Very Low Extent. Three lecturers in the Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, validated the instrument. The Cronbach alpha method was used to test for reliability of the instruments in terms of internal consistency. The Cronbach alpha for FFAS-P was 0.81. This index is high indicating internal consistency of the instruments. The researcher was assisted by three school counsellors to collect data during Parents-Teachers' Association meeting in the selected schools on different dates.

To answer the research question, mean ratings were used in analyzing responses to the questionnaire items. The responses of biological and adoptive parents item were analyzed separately. To test the hypothesis, the t-test was applied to compare the mean responses of families with adopted children to those with biological children. The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 significant level.

Results

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Biological and Adoptive Parents on the Extent of their Family Adjustments

S/N	Items	Biological Parents N = 79		Adoptive Parents N = 79	
		X	RMKS	X	RMKS
1	We are hopeful that our child will achieve great things in the future	4.40	HE	3.54	HE
2	Family members look sad and with-drawn from one another for no good reason	3.33	ME	2.78	ME
3	We easily forgive any family member for wrongs done	3.41	ME	2.84	ME
4	We are proud of talking about our family with other families	3.53	HE	2.01	LE
5	Family members are physically cruel or abusive to one another	3.23	ME	2.68	ME
6	We feel that friends and relatives are friendly or like our family	3.31	ME	1.86	LE
7	We have more behaviour problems from our child than we expected	3.30	ME	1.55	LE

8	Every member of our family is acceptable to us	3.55	HE	3.56	HE
9	We are quite capable of restraining, disciplining and controlling our child's behaviour	3.58	HE	1.57	LE
Cluster Average Mean		3.52	HE	2.49	LE

Note *=Reverse scored items; RMKS=Remarks

Table 1 shows that items 1, 4, 8 and 9 scored between 3.50 and 4.49 the biological parents thereby indicating a high extent of their family adjustment as depicted in the items. The biological parents also rated items 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 between 3.23 and 3.41 which shows their moderate extent of their family functioning as stated in the items.

With mean scores of 3.54 and 3.56, only items 1 and 8 were rated high extent by adoptive parents. Items 2, 3, and 5 had mean scores within the range of 2.68-2.84, thus indicating that adoptive parents rated moderate extents of family adjustment in those areas. By obtaining mean scores below 2.50, there was a low extent of family adjustment with respect to items 4, 6, 7 and 9 as rated by adoptive parents.

Family adjustment attained an average cluster mean score of 3.52 for biological parents, while it had a cluster mean of 2.49 for adoptive parents. Therefore, there was a high extent of family adjustment in biological families but a low extent of adjustment in adoptive families as rated by their respective parents.

Table 2: t-test on the Mean Ratings of Parents of Biological and Adoptive Families on their Family Adjustment

Parents	N	X	Sd	df	Cal-t	Crit-t	P<0.05
Biological	79	3.52	0.91	156	9.82	1.96	Significant
Adoptive	79	2.49	1.00				

Table 2 reveals that at 0.05 level of significance and 156 degree of freedom (df) the calculated t of 9.82 is greater than the critical t of 1.96 on parents' ratings on family adjustment. The decision is to reject the null hypothesis. Therefore, parents of biological and adoptive families differed significantly in their mean ratings on their family adjustment.

Discussion

The results of this study show that parents of biological families rated a high extent of family adjustment while adoptive parents rated a low extent of adjustment in their families. Biological parents' ratings of family adjustments differed significantly from those of adoptive parents. This indicates that parents of biological families rated their families as being better adjusted than adoptive parents did. This finding agrees with Lash and Esau's (2010) who found that the levels of family adjustment reported by biological parents were often higher than those of adoptive parents.

Findings also disagree with Oladokun et al., (2009) who found that adopted children in Anambra State were likely to experience high levels of non-acceptance by parents. An explanation for this difference is that Oladokun et al. studied community perceptions of acceptance of adoption and included samples of both adoptive and biological parents to comment on their perceptions of adoption. Since biological parents have not experienced adoption in their families, their views on acceptability of adoption could have been borne out of emotions rather than experience. Perhaps the observed lack of acceptance in that study was a product of extended families and not perceived within the immediate adoptive family. Such perceptions of extended family members might have little impact on how adoptive families accept their members and express hope for their future.

With the reversed interpretation of responses, the findings of the study also indicated that whereas both biological and adoptive parents indicated that their family members did not always look sad and withdrawn for no good reason nor were they physically cruel or abusive to one another, both biological and adopted children indicated that sad looks, withdrawal, physical cruelty and abuses happen in their families to a high extent. This suggests that adoptive families did not perceive more of sad looks, withdrawal, physical cruelty and abuses among family members than biological families did. These findings contrast with Farr and Patterson (2018) who after analyzing 12 studies carried out in different countries on emotional adjustments in adoptive families concluded that most parents were often sad and withdrawn. In that study, the adoptive parents nursed the feeling that the child belongs to somebody else and feared that the biological parents could come up one day and desire to have their child back or establish relationships with the child. Such fears led many adoptive parents to

become sad, unforgiving, withdrawn, lose hope on the future of their families and even engage in frequent physical cruelty and fights.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a number of insights into family adjustments in Onitsha education zone. The study showed that parents of biological and adoptive families differed significantly in their mean ratings on their family adjustment. The study clearly shows that biological and adoptive parents experience similar though not equal aspects of family adjustments. With proper guidance and counselling, both biological and adoptive parents may ease these challenges for effective family functioning.

Recommendations

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

1. The functioning of biological and adoptive families in Onitsha education zone should be significantly improved through regular counselling and family retreats by non-governmental organizations and religious bodies.
2. Media discussions should be organized by social workers, family life educators, family planning specialists, religious bodies, community-based organizations and counselors to make parents aware of growing evidence regarding the successes of adoption.
3. Adoptive parents should make personal efforts to improve their family adjustments by attending family conferences, reading professional journals (for literate ones), attending support groups, talking with other parents and even mentor one-another.

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