
CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF INTERACTIONS EXISTING IN FAMILIES WITH BIOLOGICAL AND ADOPTED CHILDREN IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

This study investigated the perception of children on family interactions in families with biological and those with adopted children. The purpose of the study was to ascertain children's perception of family interactions 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 1,883,952 children in the area. 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 0.80 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 indicated that both children in biological and adoptive families perceived a low extent of interactions in the families. It was therefore recommended that adoptive parents should make personal efforts to improve their family interactions in order to help the children adjust well in their families.

A family consists of father, mother, sisters and brothers. As a social unit, it 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. Lash and Esau (2010) noted that it is the responsibility of both biological and adoptive families to care for their children by providing social care and emotional support. In her Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the United Nations (1991) described a child as any person aged 0-18 years. In this sense, adolescents are children. That document made it clear that every child deserves a family and every family must function to ensure the welfare of its members, without discrimination. Hence, some of the most important summits, conventions and declarations that have taken place in the 21st century are directed towards the welfare of children and families (United Nations,

2001; United Nations International Children's Fund, 2008). In Anambra State, the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare (MWASW, 2007) affirmed that families must provide conducive environment for effective family functioning and enter into supportive relationships with their children irrespective of birth circumstances. Uzozie (2008) also noted that the MWASW is committed to ensuring that adequate family functioning and care is provided in all families. This, however, depends on the level of interactions among the family members.

Researchers such as Juffer and van Ijzendoorn (2005) and Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) have family interaction as an important variable for family functioning. Family interaction is used to describe trust, initiatives, family relationships, emotional support, assistance, and sharing of feeling among family members. Interaction is a socialization process that is formulated over time in the midst of a system of changing relationships. It is used to describe the relationships among members of a family. Salmon (2005) defined family interaction as the mutual actions of members of a family. It involves how members participate in routines, chores, rituals, activities and other processes that make up the daily lives of the family.

Interactions aim at transmitting the societal values to its adolescents as well as drawing families together. High levels of interaction provide a satisfying home environment and experience that enhance family functioning. As Spring (1995) noted, such a pleasant and satisfying home environment would increase the relationship among the members of the family and acceptance of the values and attitudes of the family. Interactions enable children's social and intellectual development to be stimulated by their parents. Therefore the way in which parents interact with their children is likely to be associated with high levels of functioning in their families. Parental-marital relationship is often associated with stability in the home. When the parent-child relationship is cordial, parents may be more able to positively influence their adolescents' behaviour. Erich, Kanenberg, Case, Allen, and Bogdanos (2009) observed that when there is a high level of interaction between spouses and their children, they receive much love and help from one another. Hence, family interactions as depicted in parent-child interactions are included as a variable in comparing the functioning of biological and adoptive families.

Level of family interaction has a powerful influence over family members' psychological well being. Poor family interaction can contribute to negative well-being of family members, while an ideally functioning family can protect any family member from many of the psychological risks that he or she might face. Farr (2010) described an ideal family as one that has supportive interactions; flexible relationships within the family unit; a strong sense of togetherness; and a strong identification with their friends and families.

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An important issue that arises in considering family interaction is the extent to which it operates in biological and adoptive families. Biological families are those in which members are directly linked by birth (United Nations, 1991). In biological families, the children are the direct offsprings of the parents; hence the children are biologically related to the parents through procreation. Adoptive families on the other hand are those where there are placements (often legal) of children within families that are not related to them, which discontinues the relationship between the children and their biological parents (Patterson, 2009). In adoptive families, the parents possess the child or children through transferred parental rights and responsibilities. The view taken in this study is that biological families are those with their own biological children while adoptive families are those with their non-biological children (excluding caregivers/ house-helps).

Given the projected increase in adoption in Anambra state, an important question that arises is how families with adopted children function when compared with those with biological children. Authors have stated that couples that adopt have fears about the functioning of their families when the adopted children grow from childhood to adolescence (LaRanzie, 2010; Lash & Esau, 2010). The concerns of many adoptive parents include non-acceptance of the child by either of the spouses, extended families or friends, fear of disloyalty by the child, and poor family adjustment. These fears have devastating psychosocial consequences on the affected families and deter several others from seeing adoption as a viable option, as well as providing a compelling rationale for the superiority of biological families.

Some governmental reports also reflect the idea that adoptive families do not function well because they are regarded as inauthentic or nonstandard. The National Population Commission (2003), for example, explicitly excludes adoptive families from the broad category "traditional nuclear family" (a family in which a child lives with two married biological parents and with only full siblings if siblings are present)" (p.71).

Again, studies such as Brodzinsky, Smith and Brodzinsky (2008), and Farr and Patterson (2009) found that internationally adopted youth perceived their families as functioning poorly in several dimensions including internalizing and externalizing problems, attachment and academic achievement). These studies also found that adopted children perceived their families as less adaptive and cohesive than their parents. These studies indicate that many adopted children tend to view their families as being emotionally unsupportive and rigid than biological children.

Studies have also indicated a low level of family functioning in Anambra State (Nwokolo, 2005; Nwabunwanne, 2010). There are increasing cases of spousal

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abandonment of their families and many children carry with them the trauma of maltreatment, sadness, anger, and problems of un-acceptance from their family members (Ezeugwu, Obi, & Onah, 2002).

In the light of the projected increase in adoption in Anambra state as reported by Ezeugwu et al.,(2002) and Uzoezie, (2008), the increasing cases of disruptive behaviours among adolescents, and the fears of non acceptability of adopted children, it is important to conduct a research on interactions existing in both biological and adoptive families in Anambra State.

Research Question

One research question guided the study.

What is the extent of interactions existing in families with biological and adopted children in Anambra State as viewed by the children?

Null Hypothesis

One null hypothesis guided the study.

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings on family interactions by biological and adopted children.

Method

The research design adopted in this study was a descriptive survey. The population for this study comprised children in Anambra State. This consisted of children in about 1,883,952 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 is 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 information of the child. Part 2 of the instrument is 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 Faculty of Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, validated the instrument. The Cronbach alpha method was used to test for reliability of

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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 Onitsha North Local Government Area. These children were not included in the final study. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the instrument was found to be 0.80 and this was considered adequate for the study. The researcher was assisted by twelve social welfare officers and twelve school counsellors to collect data.

To answer the research question, 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. The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 significant level.

Results

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Biological and Adopted Children on their Family Interactions

S/N	Items	Biological Children N = 168		Adopted Children N = 168	
		X	RMKS	X	RMKS
1. 8	Family relationships are more important to us than material possessions.	4.46	HE	4.48	HE
2. 9	Our family members assist me with school work	4.34	HE	2.40	LE
3. 0	Family members relate well with one another.	4.42	HE	4.46	HE
4. 1	We try new ways of helping our family	4.20	HE	4.30	HE
5. 2	Family members keep their feelings about failures to themselves.	2.38	LE	2.41	LE
6. 3	We understand the "rules" about acceptable ways to act in our family	3.96	HE	4.39	HE
7. 4	Every child in the family participate in doing chores	4.41	HE	4.38	HE
8. 5	We really do trust and confide in each other in our family	2.31	LE	2.47	LE
9. 6	Our parents shout at family members over little mistakes	2.37	LE	2.44	LE
	Cluster Mean	3.65	HE	3.53	HE

Note*=Reverse scored items; RMKS=Remarks

In Table 1, biological children perceived a high extent of family interactions as stated in items 1-4, 6 and 7 with mean ratings ranging from 4.20 to 4.46. However, the biological children perceived a low extent of items 5, 8 and 9 which had mean ratings

within 2.31 and 2.38. This means that biological children perceived a high extent of interaction in their families with respect to 6 out of the 9 items.

With mean scores ranging from 2.40 to 2.47, adopted children perceived a low extent of four items (2, 5, 8 and 9) while they perceived a high extent of the remaining 5 items by rating them within 4.30 and 4.48.

The cluster means for both biological and adopted children were 3.65 and 3.53 respectively which fell within 3.50 to 4.49 criterion range of high extent. Therefore, there was a high extent of interaction 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 Interaction

Children	N	X	Sd	df	Cal-t	Crit-t	P<0.05
Biological	176	3.65	0.68	350	1.51	1.96	Not Significant
Adoptive	176	3.53	0.78				

Table 2 shows that at 0.05 significant level, and 350 df, the calculated t of 1.51 is less than the critical t of 1.96. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. Hence, there was no significant difference in the mean ratings on family interactions 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 high extent of interaction 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 interactions by biological and adopted children.

Discussion

The adopted children reported positive indicators of interaction at similar rates as their biological counterparts. For instance, parents and children from both biological and adoptive families perceived that the highest area of their family interaction is in valuing family relationships more than material possessions. It was also found that children from adoptive and biological families perceived that their family members related well with one another, tried new ways of helping their families, explained to family members the "rules" about acceptable ways to act and supported one another when they were ill. The perceived interactions in families with biological and adopted children appear to be characterised by a high degree of what Williams (2011:5)

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described as "responsiveness (warmth, supportiveness and family relationships) together with a high understanding of rules on appropriate behaviours".

Findings did not support some studies such as Davis and Friel (2001); Carlson and Corcoran (2001) and Ceballo, R., Lansford, J., Abbey, A. & Stewart, A. (2004), who found family interactions to be more significantly dependent on biological and prenatal hormones over and above the influence of parenting, family values, practices, attitudes and family environment. This present study would suggest that parenting behaviours, values, resiliency and warmth would be relevant to family interactions, and that both differences and similarities in family interactions might be expected among families with biological and adopted children.

Conclusions

The findings of this study provided that there was high extent of interaction in biological and adoptive families as perceived by children in the families. In addition, biological and adopted children did not differ significantly in their mean ratings on their family interactions. In other words, adoptive families function similarly in terms of family interaction. This study clearly shows that biological and adopted children experience similar though not equal aspects of family functioning with reference to family interaction.

Recommendations

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

1. The family interaction of biological and adoptive families in Anambra State needs to be encouraged through regular counselling and family retreats by non-governmental organizations and religious bodies.
2. Media discussions should be organized by social workers, and family life educators and the focus should be on how to challenge negative myths and attitudes expressed by many people on adoption outcomes.
3. Adoptive parents should make efforts to enhance the existing high level of family interactions in their family.
4. School counselling services should be enriched and intensified to provide a detailed, systematic and on-going profile of desirable family interactions to in-school adolescents.

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