



# Effect of parental conflict and divorce/separation on children's attitude towards marriage in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The study examined the effect of parental conflict and divorce/separation on children's attitude towards marriage in Nigeria. Three hundred and six undergraduate students of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko in Ondo State, Nigeria were randomly selected and used for the study. Participants' age ranges between 19 and 27 years with a mean age of 22.03 years. Three hypotheses were tested and results of analysis of data showed that parental conflict and divorce significantly affects children's attitude towards marriage [ $t(304) = 13.96, p < .05$ ]. It was also revealed that there was a significant effect of sex on attitude of undergraduate students from divorced families towards marriage [ $t(124) = 7.95, p < .05$ ]. Results also indicated that children who attributed parental conflict and divorce to inability of parents to give up personal freedom were significantly different on their attitude towards marriage from those who attributed parental conflict and divorce to a lack of mutual trust, poor communication, and discontentment [ $F(4,270) = 13.25, p < .05$ ]. Results were discussed in light of available literature and recommendations were made.

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## Introduction

Much importance is attached to the institution of marriage across the world. This is because it forms a platform for raising families. And a family performs such important function as being a therapeutic setting for social support, in addition to its economic and reproductive functions (Lamanna and Riedmann, 2003).

As adolescents become young adults, they tend to begin to explore various aspects of life that include dating, forming intimate relationships, and thinking of future marriage. Yet, many marriages end in conflict, divorce and separation. For example, Daniels, Evans and Scolt (2001) reported that in 1989, 22.6 percent of young adults report having experienced parental divorce and the figure rose to 25.4 percent in 1999. It was estimated that this figure will double by the year 2010. And although the figure may not have doubled now, it seem to have increased drastically, however. Tasker and Richard (1994) argued that experiencing parental conflict and divorce may lead a child to trivialize the importance of commitment and view the institution of marriage with negativity. Also Cherlin (1992) and Wallestein and Kelly (1980) posited that experiencing parental divorce or conflict could impact children's attitude towards marriage and therefore live many children uncommitted to their partners in the early dating years due to anxiety.

These findings underscore the vulnerability of adolescents whose parents have divorced within the last few years. According to Price and Kunz (2003), parental divorce is associated with lower self esteem, promiscuity, greater delinquent – like behaviors, and more difficulty in establishing gratifying adult heterosexual relationships. Sinclair and Nelson (1998) found out that parental divorce can give children a feeling of insecurity within their own relationships, leading them to move fast into an intimate relationship; as well as have a greater variety of dating partners and interest in relationships.

These may equally be detrimental to the sustenance of a satisfactory relationship as either party is committed to his/her partner.

In Nigeria, cases of marital divorce, conflict, and separation are daily read or heard about in the electronic and print media. Also, it seems to be that most young adults of marriage age do not go into marriage early or never even marry at all. The phenomenon of 'contractual marriage' or single parenthood seems to be in the increase. This phenomenon relates with the situation in which partners agree to have a child or children for the mere reasons of parenting but without any legal or solemnized marriage to each other. The situation in which most children grew with foster parents or single parents could cause such children to have unrealistic ideals about marriage and can lead to a strong sense of marital dissatisfaction and a consequent high divorce rate in societies.

The focus of this study therefore is to assess the effects of parental conflict and divorce on children's attitude towards marriage. It is hoped that findings from the study would be useful for marriage counseling and in building a 'sane' society in addition to filling the lacuna in the dearth of literature on marriage and families in Nigeria.

The study therefore set out to test the following hypotheses:

- That parental conflict and divorce will significantly affect children's marriage.
- That those male and female children from divorced families will differ significantly in their attitude towards marriage.
- That those children who attributed parental conflict and divorce to inability of parent to give up personal freedom will be significantly different in their attitude towards marriage from those who attributed parental conflict and divorce to a lack of mutual trust.

## Methods

To find out whether parental conflict and divorce/separation could affect children's attitude towards marriage, this research method was adopted.

**Research Design:** The study is an ex-post facto study in which the independent variable has had its influence prior to the commencement of the study. However, the independent groups' design was used to compare two groups on their attitude towards marriage. Therefore, the t-test for independent groups and one-way analysis of variance statistics were used for data analysis.

**Research Participants:** A sample of 306 research participants comprising of 120 males and 186 female participants were randomly selected from the undergraduate students of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko in Ondo State of Nigeria. The participants' age ranges from 19 to 27 years and their mean age is 22.03 years.

**Measure:** A questionnaire comprising of three sections was used for this study. Single item variables of sex and age were contained in section A of the questionnaire. Section B consisted of some self generated items to know the respondents' parents and family living pattern. Items in this section include: 'Are your parents currently living together or divorced / separated?' 'Has your parents ever disagree or quarrel?' etc.

Items in the section were generated based on literature and two of the items are in multi-choice format. The items were subjected to cronbach alpha reliability to ascertain its reliability and a coefficient of 0.62 was found. Thus, the scale is reliable.

The dependent variable in the research is measured in section C of the questionnaire with the marital attitude scale (MAS). MAS was developed by Braaten and Rosen (1998) to measure an individual's attitude towards heterosexual marriage. It is a 23 items likert format measure to investigate the marital attitude of students from divorced, intact and single parent families.

For each item, participants are expected to rate their opinions or feelings on as scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The total MAS score range from a minimum of 23 to a maximum of 92. Higher score indicate a more positive attribute towards marriage.

Item numbers 1,3,5,11,12,16,18,19,20 and 23 are reverse score such that strongly agree =4, agree=3, disagree=2 and strongly disagree = 1. The internal consistency of the scale is 0.79 (cronbach alpha).

**Procedure for data collection:** The researcher through a trained research assistant administered the questionnaire to the respondents in their lecture rooms at Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba- Akoko in Ondo State of Nigeria after due consultation and having gotten the consent of the research participants. In all, three hundred and fifty questionnaires were administered but only three hundred and nineteen were retrieved. And out of the 319, three hundred and six were correctly filled and are analyzed. Thus, a response rate of 91.14 was found.

## Results

**Table One:** summary of independent t- test showing the effect of parental conflict and divorce on Attitude of undergraduates Towards Marriage

Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Will not affect	105	27.59	4.79	304	13.90	<.05 (sig.)
Will affect	201	36.13	5.65			

**Table Two:** Summary of independent t-test showing sex differences on Attitude Towards Marriage among undergraduates from divorced families.

Variables	N	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Males	60	32.32	5.95	124	7.95	<.05 (sig.)
Females	66	24.09	2.16			

**Tables Three (a):** Summary table showing the mean (x) and standard deviation scores of the causes of parental conflict and Divorce / Separation

Causes of Parental Conflict	N	X	SD
Discontentment	21	33.05	6.37
Inability to give up personal freedom	92	28.99	6.49
Poor Communication	93	34.61	6.88
Lack of Mutual Trust	36	34.56	5.10
Others	29	36.00	0.00

**Table Three (b):** One way Analysis of variance (ANOVA) table showing the effect of the causes of parental conflict and Divorce / Separation on Attitude of undergraduates Towards Marriage.

Variables	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	df	F	p
Between Groups	2049.35	512.34	4	13.75	<.05 (sig.)
Within Groups	9914.90	37.37			
Total	119.64.24				

Result of data analysis in table 1 revealed that parental conflict and divorce/separation significantly affected children's attitude towards marriage [t (304) =13.90, P (0.05)].

Also result from table 2 above revealed that males and female from divorced/separated families differed significantly in their attitude towards marriage [t (124) =7.95, P (0.05)].

And lastly, results from table 3 a and b revealed that children who attributed parental conflict and divorce/separation to inability to give up personal freedom were significantly different in their attitude towards marriage from those who attributed parental conflict and divorce to either a lack mutual trust, poor communication or discontentment.

## Discussion, conclusion and recommendations

Findings from this study revealed that parental conflict and divorce /separation significantly affect children's attitude towards marriage. This finding is in consonance with previous research findings. For example, Segrin Taylor & Alman found out that children whose parents were divorced face greater risk of divorce and a number of attitudinal effects. Also, Amato and Cheadle (2005) submitted that divorce is often a traumatic life – changing event for children, especially for boys who often lose not only a parent but also a crucial role model. Pappi, Cummings and Schermerhorn (2005) also found a relationship between marital distress and the adjustment of children. Despite the plethora of consistent findings that parental conflict and divorce affects children's attitude towards marriage however, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) found no significant difference in the attitudinal disposition towards marriage between children from intact and divorced families. This thus suggests that parental conflict and divorce/separation may not be a sole factor in the attitudinal disposition of children towards marriage. The roles of peers, socio-economic status, age at time of divorce, social value system across geographical boundaries in shaping one's life than just the family background may be significant in this instance. Bowling (2005) considers that there is no one truth about how divorce affects children. The author concluded with a call to allow children of divorce families to have a voice and an opportunity to tell their stories.

Findings from the present study also revealed that male and female children from divorce families differ significantly in their attitudes towards marriage. Blakeslee and Wallerstein (1989) observed that most young women whose parents divorced while they were young children often delay their reaction to the event. This phenomenon is what they called the ' sleeper effect '. In contrast however, Amato and Keith (1991) reported that boys are more likely to ' act out ' during the time of divorce, showing their aggression and anger at the situation while girls keep their frustration inside. The pent up emotion is theorized to show its effects later in the lives of the girls. Blakeslee and Wallerstein (1989) described the effect of pent up emotions as particularly dangerous because it occurs at the crucial time when many young women make decisions that have long-term implications for their lives. It seems plausible therefore that the upheaval of a child's family roots could be detrimental to that child's emotional and psychological well-being, and in turn, play a big role in future love relationships. For example, Tasker (1992) found out that adolescents with a history of parental divorce have an increased likelihood of cohabitation, are apprehensive about marriage (Carson, Maddison and Santrock, 1987), and harbor negative attitudes about marriage (Kinnaid and Gerrard, 1986; Tasker and Richards, 1994). They also show a lack of trust in heterosexual relationships and are likely to divorce in the future (Mazur, Wolchik, Virdin et al, 1999) if they eventually marry.

It was hypothesized that children who attributed parental conflict and divorce to inability of parents to give up personal freedom in their attitude towards marriage will differ significantly from their counterparts who attributed parental conflict and divorce /separation to a lack of mutual trust. Findings from the present study also confirmed the stated hypothesis. Variables such as communication and mutual trust have been found to significantly influence sexual satisfaction among heterosexual adolescents (Ogunleye and Oke, 2012), and Adebayo and Ogunleye (2010) found out that family cohesion is a significant factor in intimate relationships. It may be reasonable to argue that cohesion in families will be dependent on the perception and attribution that parties involved in the relationship are amenable to corrections.

From this study, it was revealed that discontentment, inability to give up personal freedom, lack of mutual trust, and poor communication are significant factors that can cause conflict among parents in families. A comparison of the mean(x) scores revealed that inability to give up personal freedom may not be a severe factor of parental conflict as poor communication, lack of mutual trust and discontentment respectively. Thus, children who attributed parental conflict and divorce to inability to give up personal freedom may not be as apprehensive about marriage as those who attributed parental conflict and divorce to either a lack of mutual trust or poor communication, or discontentment.

**Conclusions:** It is concluded therefore that parental conflict and divorce affects children's attitude towards marriage. Also, it is concluded that males and females from divorced families differ significantly in their attitude towards marriage with males being better disposed favourably ( $x= 32.32$ ) than females ( $x= 24.09$ ) and lastly, it is concluded that inability to give up personal freedom is a factor of parental conflict and divorce which affects children's attitude towards marriage. However, it is concluded that discontentment, poor communication, and lack of mutual

trust are more severe factors of parental conflict and divorce which impacts children's attitude towards marriage.

**Recommendation:** Based on the findings from the study, it is recommended that aspects that contribute to the formation of attitudes such as peers, institutions other than the family, and socio-economic background should be considered rather than focusing primarily on parental conflict and divorce.

It is suggested that functional marital laws should be enacted to forestall indiscriminate divorce/separation among intimate partners. Also, concerted efforts should be made to educate the public about living a fulfilled marital life to reduce the menace of divorce, conflicts in marriage, and single parenthood which impinges societal development.

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