

# Married Couples' Perceptions of Family Stress

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## Abstract

This study investigated the perceptions of married couples in Ilorin Municipality, Kwara State of Nigeria towards family stress. A total of 200 purposively selected married couples from five institutions namely, churches, public and private secondary schools and the Ministry of Education responded to surveys related to their perceptions of family stress according to their sex and occupation. The main instrument used for data collection was the researchers' 'Family Stress Questionnaire' (FSQ). Results of the findings analyzed using t-test and ANOVA statistics indicated that male and female married couples differed significantly in their perceptions of family stress. It further showed that unemployed couples and those in public and private employment were significantly different. The implications of the findings were discussed as well as strategies for dealing with family stress.

**Keywords:** Family stress, Couples, Occupation, Counselling, Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Rationale for the study

Family stressors are regarded as problems requiring solution or situations in which the family must adapt in order to maintain the functioning of the family system. Stress in itself can be both positive and negative. Positive stress can be a powerful motivator for change, and when the energy inherent in the stress response is not channeled outward, stress takes on a negative valence (L.A. Green, University of Ilorin Nigeria, personal communication). A growing body of studies in the area of family stress has revealed that most families are disintegrating mainly due to job/social interactions and customary practices (Dobson, 1991; Jegede, 1991; Schwartzbeg & ScherDytell, 2008; Dreyfus, 2009). For example, industrialization, urbanization, the breakdown of traditional, religious and moral codes, the spread of secularities, etc have all combined to put the old family under strain on a global scale. Each partner in marriage relationship brings into marriage different endowments and life experience, different personalities and adaptive patterns, conscious and unconscious expectations culminating into conflict. Thus, when these conflicts are unresolved, the marriage itself may not be tolerated and will end in divorce or conflicts openly expressed in irritability and hostility (L.A. Green, University of Ilorin Nigeria, personal communication).

Stresses in the family can come from within, in which case it could be as a result of illnesses, or individual members wanting to satisfy personal needs than those of other members. This further puts family cohesiveness apart. In the case of stress outside the family, mothers' and fathers' stress is caused more by the separate pressures of their job and home responsibilities and interferences (Schwartzbeg & ScherDytell, 2008). It was stated further that both parents derive self-esteem from their accomplishments at work rather than accomplishments at home, while their emotional state of happiness or depression is obtained from the relationship they have within the family. Thus as women compete with men in their workplace, they find that their sense of wellbeing is related to the workplace rather than the home. While working fathers were more attuned to their emotional relationship with their spouses, working mothers seem more attuned to the amount of actual assistance they receive around the house (Schwartzbeg & ScherDytell, 2008).

In his own view, Hammed (2008) noted that the incidence of stress is due to overwork. Some causes of stress among others include effect of serious illness or disease, daily life hassles, the work place and family

responsibilities (National Women's Health Information Centre, 2003). Moreover, Hammed (2008) posited that strain often arises in Nigerian women, trying to balance the multiple competing demands of their spouses, children, elderly parents, etc. To this end, Akinboye (2002) was of the view that stress takes its toll on women's physical and mental health. Although women are often socialized to develop their sense of self from their relationships or the quality of their relationship, support from family and spouse appears to be more important to women than men. Thus, a woman who likes her job and home life ultimately develops good mental health (Hammed, 2008).

Marriages contracted in recent times have been observed to be faced with various strains and pressures which inevitably lead to its breakdown. Available records in Ilorin, Kwara State of Nigeria showed that out of 700 cases of divorce suit in 1986, 501 were granted (Ahmed, 1990). This shows that more couples are likely to end their marriages in divorce in Nigeria presently, especially because more women are entering the labour force. A study which investigated relationship between job satisfaction and occupational stress using 356 teachers found moderate to strong correlations between most of the job satisfaction and occupational stress variables (DeNobile & McCormick, 2005).

Some other sources of stress include family relationship, occupation and how we think (Dreyfus, 2009). The birth of a baby, relocation, change of job, not feeling appreciated, dealing with little issues and making a mountain out of a mole hill are all ways by which stress builds up among couples (Dreyfus, 2009). The work life of couples, childcare problems, length of marriage etc is major stressors in couples' perception of family stress. Others include kinship problems, education, socio-economic status and communication ((M.M. Adeyemi; L.A. Green, University of Ilorin Nigeria, personal communication). Marriage, which is the oldest and most important institution of the society, ought to be treated with much attention and interest. Even though statistical records of marital instability and family stress are not compiled in Nigeria, it is very common to see and hear about divorce and marital problems around the nation, which are all evidence of family stress. The researchers perceive that the behaviour of couples towards their marriage may be affected by the various changes they experience in the family cycle. Therefore, this study has an additional task of finding out whether sex and occupation have any perceptible influence on couples' perception of family stress.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

This study was guided by the following questions:-

1. Is there any difference between male and female couples' perceptions of family stress?
2. Is there any difference in the perceptions of couples in different occupations to family stress?

### *1.3 Research Hypotheses*

The following hypotheses were postulated to guide the study:-

1. There is no significant difference between male and female couples' perceptions of family stress.
2. There is no significant difference among couples from public and private employment or unemployed in their perceptions of family stress.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Research Design*

The study adopted the descriptive survey method. This is because the method presents facts or current conditions concerning the nature of a group of persons, class of events, etc. Moreover, survey research is a scientific tool to employ when one is interested in the opinions and attitudes of overt behaviour.

### *2.2 Subjects*

The target population comprised all married couples in Ilorin Municipal, Kwara State of Nigeria. Ilorin being the capital of Kwara State is assumed to have all the Local Government Areas represented in the Ministries, Government and Private parastatals. As a result of unavailable data on number of married couples in the municipality, five institutions with a large concentration of married couples were randomly selected, from two churches, one public and private secondary school and the Ministry of Education. In each of the institutions, 40 married couples were purposively selected, giving a total of 200 married couples (100male and 100 female). The respondents were also stratified based on the variables of sex and occupation.

### *2.3 Procedure for Data collection*

The researchers designed and used an instrument named 'Family Stress Questionnaire' (FSQ). Items on the instrument was derived from review of related literature on causes of divorce, separation and major sources of

family stress, in addition to studying some marital adjustment scales developed by some foreign authors. The instrument consists of two sections. Section A elicited information on the demographic data of the respondents and section B was based on 26 statements assessing an individual's perception of family stress.

#### 2.3.1 Pilot Testing

The instrument was tested to ascertain its usability by administering 20 copies to literate married couples having the characteristics required for the study.

### 2.4 Psychometric Properties

#### 2.4.1 Validity

A total of four experts from the Department of Guidance and Counselling and Sociology assessed the instrument and confirmed that it possessed content validity. The comments given were noted and used in modifying the final/validated version of the (FSQ).

#### 2.4.2 Reliability

The test re-test method of estimating reliability was adopted for the study. The questionnaire forms were administered twice within four weeks to 20 married couples who were not part of the final study. The scores obtained were compared and correlated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient ( $r$ ). The result showed a coefficient value of .76, which was considered high enough for the instrument.

#### 2.4.3 Procedure for Administration of (FSQ)

The researchers sought the assistance of four persons trained in completion and administering of the instrument to the respondents. The trained assistants also retrieved the instruments from the respondents.

### 2.5 Scoring and Data Analysis

The instrument was scored on a four- point Likert Type scale of Strongly Agree (SA) = 4, Agree (A) = 3, Disagree (D) = 2 and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1. The highest score for an item is 4, multiplied by 26 items, giving a total of 104. The lowest score is 1, multiplied by 26 items, giving a total of 26. The average score is 52. Thus, respondents who scored 52 and above were considered to have a high perception of family stress or affected by it and those with a score below 52 were considered to have a low perception of family stress. In other words, stress has no direct bearing on them. Also, in testing the sincerity of respondents, some items were written in positive form and the scoring for such items were reversed.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Results of Hypothesis One

In order to compare male and female couples' perceptions of family stress, the t-test statistics for test of difference was employed. The mean scores, standard deviations and calculated t-value showing a general description of the results were tabulated in Table 3.1.

#### Insert Table 3.1 Here

Table 3.1 shows mean scores, sample numbers and standard deviations for the two groups. From the table, it is observed that the calculated t-value of -2.34 is higher than the critical t-value of 1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance. This shows that significant difference exists between male and female couples' perceptions of family stress (sig. =  $p < 0.05$ ). Based on this result, the hypothesis was rejected.

### 3.2 Results of Hypothesis Two

In testing the significance among couples on the basis of their occupational status, the one way ANOVA statistic was employed. The mean scores and standard deviations show the general description of the results as tabulated in Table 3.2.

#### Insert Table 3.2 Here

Table 3.2 shows that the calculated F-value of 5.20 was higher than the critical F-value of 3.00 at the 0.05 level of significance. This means that there is a significant difference among unemployed couples, and couples working in private and public employment in their perceptions of family stress (sig. =  $p < 0.05$ ). As a result of the significant difference among couples, the result was further analyzed using Duncan's Multiple Range test as shown in Table 3.3

#### Insert Table 3.3 Here

From the Duncan's Multiple Range test, it shows that the unemployed couples differed significantly from those in public and private employment (sig. =  $p < 0.05$ ). Based on this result, the hypothesis was rejected. The groupings in Table 3.3 indicate the following:

Occupation - 1= Unemployed couples

2= Couples in Public employment

3= Couples in Private employment

### 3.3 Discussion on Results

#### 3.3.1 Discussion on results of Hypothesis 1

The result of the first hypothesis comparing male and female couples' perceptions of family stress revealed that they were significantly different. The mean score of the female (69.12) is higher than that of the male (65.53) as shown by the data in Table 3.1. This observation is not surprising because by the nature of the female and her responsibilities in the home, she is very much prone to being stressed due to the fact that there seem to be more sources of stress around her. Moreover, Nwachukwu (1989) observed that traditionally, a typical Nigerian woman is taught and trained from childhood to emphasize her 'femininity' and to suppress anything in her behaviour that might be considered 'masculine' or upset the traditional distinction between the sexes. Thus, the girl-child grows up concentrating on those things that would help her as a housewife and a mother. Conversely, the male by tradition was not to display weakness or dependence, since he is supposed to be the head, provider and 'boss' of his family. This obviously explains to some extent why the male experiences less stress in the family system. The finding is in contrast with those of Schwartzbeg and ScherDytell (2008) who reported that family stress appeared to be more important in determining depression for fathers than mothers, which contradicts widely held belief.

#### 3.3.2 Discussion on results of Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis comparing couples' perceptions of family stress on the basis of occupation revealed that they were significantly different. The couples who were unemployed differed significantly from the employed that belonged to public and private sectors as shown by the data in Table 3.2. This could be as a result of the differences in the stress experienced by couples of various occupations. The Duncan's multiple range test indicated that the unemployed respondents have the highest mean score (74.500) as against those in public and private employment with mean scores of (65.910) and (68.050) respectively. This implies that the unemployed perceptions of family stress were very high. This further explains that occupation was not affecting their perceptions of family stress. The Duncan's multiple range test indicated no significant difference between public and private workers, judging from their low means. This indicated that occupation was an influencing factor to the respondents' perceptions of family stress. A possible reason for this could be because these two groups of married couples have a common identical motivation which in this case, is their involvement in the labour market, a situation that does not exist for the unemployed.

#### 3.3.3 Implications of the Findings

This study revealed that married couples in Ilorin Municipality of Kwara State, Nigeria have a fairly high perception of family stress. The study further indicated that they differed significantly when compared against the factors of sex and occupation. One of the implications of this finding for counsellors, social workers and behavioural scientists is that equipped with the knowledge of this finding, they can help better in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Knowledge from this research can be used to assist couples gain better understanding of themselves and the prevailing circumstances around them. Couples can learn that success or failure of a marriage depends mainly upon the strength and flexibility of the relationship between the principal family figures- the husband and wife and not in the presence or absence of their sources of pressure.

This finding could also be helpful in pre-marital counselling. This would enable intending couples to realize that marriage is something more than erotic partnership that is a matter of home making, parenthood and economic cooperation. It would enable them know that when the erotic element has through ageing, senility, disease and other causes entirely disappeared, the family life must still go on. Lastly, it would enable couples to be more aware of different sources of stress to which families are susceptible and thus, learn coping and preventive strategies.

## 4. Recommendations and Conclusion

1. Married couples should be helped by counsellors through seminars and workshops in identifying various sources of stress to which families are susceptible. The effects of such stressors as well as coping and preventive strategies should be taught so as to make couples better equipped to face the stressors more effectively, especially the female who is mostly affected as shown by this study.

2. NGOs especially those who work with couples should mount awareness campaigns for couples experiencing family stress to form pressure groups in order to share their personal experiences on the issue and find solutions to overcome family stress through planned picnics, holidays, etc.

3. Government should sensitize the populace on the dangers of family stress and include courses on family life and stress on the school curriculum so as to prepare young people for family life.

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Table 3.1. t-test Analysis of male and female couples’ perceptions of family stress

Variable	N	Df	Mean	S.D	t-cal. value	t-crit.-value
Male	100		65.53	10.956		
		198			-2.34*	1.96
Female	100		69.12	10.766		

\*Significant P< 0.05

Table 3.2. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on couples’ perceptions of family stress by basis of occupation

Source of variation	Df	ANOVA Sum of Square	Mean	F-cal.	F-crit.
Occupation	2	1202.52	601.26		
Error	197	22799.88	115.73	5.21*	3.00

\*Significant P< 0.05

Table 3.3. Duncan’s Multiple Range Test on Couples’ perceptions of family stress by basis of occupation

Duncan Group	Mean	N	Occupation
A	74.500	18	1*
B	68.050	60	3
B	65.910	122	2

\*Significant, P< 0.05