

Parental Marital Status as Predictor of Undergraduates' Mental Health Status

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Abstract: Parenting plays a major role in the development and transformation of young adults. However, in recent years, the aptness of parents has been greatly reduced. Considering the increase of broken marriages and single parenting in Nigeria, young adults may be at risk of depreciating mental health due to unexpected emotional challenges with respect to the immediate family. This cross-sectional survey examined the mental health status of undergraduates as a function of parent's marital status. One hundred and fifty-six undergraduates selected from three higher institutions responded to the Awaritefe Psychological Index (API), measuring mental health status. Two hypotheses were tested at $p=0.05$ level of significance and the results revealed that parent's marital status did not significantly predict undergraduates' mental health status ($\beta=-0.076$, $t=0.951$, $p>0.05$); however, the type of higher institution significantly predicted undergraduates' mental health status ($\beta=0.159$, $t=-1.985$, $p<0.05$). Since this study revealed that the institution of learning is an effective predictor of undergraduates' mental health status, it is recommended that institutions of learning should be made more academically conducive for undergraduates to foster better mental health.

Keywords: Mental Health Status, Parent Marital Status, Undergraduates, Institution of Learning

Introduction

Mental health is an important aspect of health. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), health is a state of well-being and wholeness in the

physical, mental, and social sense, and not just the absence of infirmity or disease (WHO, 2012). This infers that mental health does not focus on mental disabilities or mental disorders only.

Mental health is described as a state of well-being where individuals become aware of their own ability, and can function productively and make useful contributions at work and in the community (WHO, 2007). Boyle (2011) described mental health as a state of emotional, behavioural, and social normalcy or maturity; the absence of a mental or behavioural disorder; a state of psychological well-being where one has been able to sufficiently integrate one's instinctive desires and interests in ways that are personally and socially acceptable; a proper balance of work, leisure, and love pursuits. Mental health can also refer to cognitive, and/or emotional well-being. It has to do with how people think, feel and behave. The state of a person's mental health can affect his/her everyday life, physical health, and relationships. Mental health can also be described in terms of a person's ability to enjoy life by attaining a balance between daily life activities and endeavours to obtain psychological resilience (Nordqvist, 2009).

As young adults, undergraduates face a time of change where they experience transformations such as physiological (like hormonal) and social (like family) factors, which occur within and around their lives. Though they gradually withdraw from their families to form stronger bonds with friends and peers, the state of their parents' marriage could affect them because they are still an integral part of the family. Problems on the home front could affect their perception of life and could hinder the development of necessary skills and relationships.

Parental marital status influences the mental health of undergraduates in several ways. There is a significant role of parents' marital status in relation to adolescents' psychological well-being (Pappa, 2013). There are widespread cases of undergraduates taking mentally ill during their school years though there is yet to be a statistical collection of the occurrence of mental illness among Nigerian youths. Due to new environmental and situational exposures, undergraduates, teenagers especially, face several stressors such as physical, financial and emotional which could intensify mental health instability if not well managed. The occurrence of mental illness especially depression and anxiety in undergraduate students has risen consistently over the years and this has caused a great disadvantage in the exploitation of intelligent minds.

The family system is a very influential part of this problem as undergraduates are affected by family challenges and this study seeks to know how parents' marital status affect the mental health of undergraduates. Over the years, psychologists, statisticians, researchers and others have made bold statements about how marital status affects the mental health of children. Olson and Defrain (2003) noted that marital instability may affect adolescents by exposing them to potentially intense stress and this stress experienced by children increases linearly with their exposure to conflicts. In their study, Bramlett and Blumberg (2007) revealed that children living in single mother and grandparent-only families had poorer health than children in two biological parent homes. Cross-sectional and longitudinal results have shown that children of divorced

parents are at increased risk for maladaptive outcomes (Lansford, 2009; Nuner-Costa, Lamela, and Figueiredo, 2009).

Swedish researchers conducted a study on single parenting and found that children from single parent families are twice as much vulnerable to mental health issues, substance abuse problem and attempted suicide (Secure Teen, 2013). Mahajan and Sharma (2006) found that adolescents from nuclear families were significantly better adjusted in school than their counterparts from single parent families. Studies have also shown that parental divorce has significant impact on depression in adulthood (Wauterickx, Gouwy, and Bracke, 2008). Uphold-Carrier and Utz (2012) observed that those who experienced parental divorce as a child or as an adult are at higher risk of depression compared to those whose parents are still married. The results of Strohschein's (2012) study confirmed significantly worse mental health problems among children of divorced parents. Researchers have observed that experiencing parents' relationship instability in early childhood is associated with sexual behaviour and major depression in adolescence (Donahue, D'Onofrio, Bates, Lansford, Dodge, and Pettit, 2010).

As is popularly said, "Youths are the leaders/future of tomorrow." The outcome of this study will create awareness on possible roles parents' marital status play on the mental health of their undergraduate children and this could help ameliorate the negative effects of broken families on the society at large.

Objective

The main objective of this study is to determine if parents' marital status predict undergraduates' mental health status.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

1. Parental marital status will significantly predict undergraduates' mental health status.
2. Type of institution will significantly predict undergraduates' mental health status.

Method

This study utilized the cross-sectional survey design, which is a descriptive study targeted at getting information on the whole population at a specific time. Undergraduates from three higher institutions participated in the study - University of Lagos, Lagos State (Government); Lagos State University, Lagos State (Government); and Covenant University, Ogun State (Private) respectively. A total of two hundred and fifty (250) undergraduates were selected via convenient sampling based on easy accessibility and volunteering of participants. Participants responded to the Awaritefe Psychological Index (API). The API is a twelve (12) sectioned home-grown inventory with one hundred and twenty-four (124) items that measure mental health status. Awaritefe (1982) reported an Alpha coefficient of 0.81 using Kuder Richardson Formular (K-R 20) and a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.85 for the API. The researcher conducted a pilot study and reported a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.97 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.93.

A total of one hundred and seventy-one (171) questionnaires were

retrieved out of the two hundred and fifty (250) that were administered and only one hundred and fifty-six (156) were found useful for analysis as fourteen (14) of them were incompletely filled. Regression analysis was used to statistically test the hypotheses raised in this study.

Results

Demographic Data

Seventy-five (75) participants were males and eighty-one (81) females (47.8% and 52.2% respectively). One hundred and five (105) participants are

attending a government university and fifty-one (51) were attending a private university (67.3% and 32.7% respectively), seventy-six (76) participants had married parents, fifty (50) had single parents, twenty-four (24) had separated parents, five (5) had widowed parents, and one (1) had divorced parents

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1: Parental marital status will significantly predict undergraduates' mental health status.

Table 1: Summary Table

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error
1	0.178 ^a	0.32	0.13	13.597

a. Predictors: (Constant), Parental Marital Status, Institution, Sex

b. Dependent Variable: Mental Health Status

Table 2: showing the role of independent variables in the prediction of undergraduates' mental health status

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t
1	(Constant)	25.421	2.473		10.277
	Sex	1.193	2.189	.044	.545
	Institution	-4.592	2.314	-.159	-1.985
	PMS	-1.175	1.235	-.076	-.951

a Dependent Variable: MHS

Table 2 shows that parental marital status did not predict undergraduates' mental health status ($\beta = -0.076$; $t = 0.951$; $p > 0.05$). This hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 2: Type of institution will significantly predict undergraduates' mental health status.

Table 2 shows that type of institution predicted undergraduates' mental health status ($\beta = -0.159$; $t = 1.985$; $p < 0.05$). This hypothesis is accepted.

Summary of Findings

In summary, this study has revealed that the mental health status of

undergraduates is not determined by the marital status of their parents but the type of institution they attend is implicated in their mental health status.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation

This study revealed that undergraduate mental health status is not a function of parental marital status, which means that the state of the marriage of parents alone cannot deter or enhance the mental health of their young adults. Although previous studies like that of Olson and Defrain (2003) showed that parental marital status may expose

their children to more stress and health problems, when Bramlett and Blumberg (2007) adjusted for certain demographic variables in their study, the adjusted estimates revealed that children in single-father families did as well as children living with two biological parents. Generally, the finding in this study can be attributed to the phase of life undergraduates find themselves, a time when they withdraw from their families, from stronger bonds with friends and develop other significant relationships too. In most cases, this is the period when they are in a different environment from home and as such, the events at home may have less impact on them.

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