

**BRIEF REPORT**

# Changing perspectives in the extended family system in Nigeria: implications for family dynamics and counselling

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**ABSTRACT** *The extended family system in Nigeria had in time past provided support structures for the Nigerian people. Today, Nigeria as a society has witnessed severe changes in the extended family system. This paper addresses issues connected with the extended family system in the Nigerian cultural setting before the influx of the extraneous forces as well as changes within the broader Nigerian society.*

## **Introduction**

The 'extended family' system as a concept in the Nigerian cultural context is a foreign and borrowed terminology which takes on a different connotation from the Western contextual terminology where the family takes its description from its relationship to the individual. The Nigerian family takes its description from ancestral ties. Once a common ancestry is established the degrees of separation becomes irrelevant. What then obtains in practical terms is a multiplicity of primary familial relationships usually determined by kinship ties. This presumes that unlike in the Western context where cousins, aunts, uncles etc. exist, in Nigeria, everybody is either a father, mother, brother, sister or child. Thus the Nigerian does not in reality have an extended family but has instead an "extensive" primary family. This trend cuts across practically all Nigerian ethnic groups of which there are over 250 (Obayan, 1994).

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### **Features of the Nigerian family system**

In a paper of this nature, it is necessary to make some clarification on the cultural and psychological dimensions of the family system and its influence on the individual who would eventually become the client in the counselling relationship. Some of these features are:

#### *The personhood of the Nigerian*

Okon (1983) described the Nigerian as having the group as reality rather than the individual. This is reflected in choices, actions and decision making processes of the individual. Consequently when relating to a Nigerian, one is relating not just to the individual but to the values, beliefs, attributions, attitude and behavioural patterns of the group as well, especially in relation to how it impinges on him or her.

#### *Concept of human freedom*

For the Nigerian, human freedom is determined along boundaries set by the family unit. Ipaye (in press) describing this says that the individual is absolutely free though accountable to the collective goal and "unwritten constitution" of the family. The family is thus like a cob-web which no matter at which angle or spot it is touched, vibrates to the centre. He further stated that the family has hundreds of eyes and ears watching and listening over the general behaviour of its members.

#### *Group support*

The extended family unit serves a shock absorbing role in helping to meet the emotional, financial, physical, social needs of family members. Burdens as well as successes are shared by family members alike. In other words, providing group support which has been appropriately described by Esen (1973) as the 'Care Syndrome' which is a feature of the Nigerian. Thus Imouokhome (1987) found Nigerian children having a remarkable sense of psychological well-being due largely to the caring disposition of every member of the family.

#### *Exclusiveness of the family*

The family in the Nigerian context is closely knit and thus tends towards the exclusion of 'outsiders' from certain forms of interaction, especially, those involving trust, and a tendency towards keeping secrets. Imouokhome (1989) refers to this as the undisclosed nature of the Nigerian client.

#### *Dependency*

Socialization practices in Nigeria encourages dependency or group support even though this is restricted by the exclusive nature of the family as described previously.

### *Psychological imperatives*

For the Nigerian, the family is the reference point in the determination of psychological status. Thus, such parameters as self-esteem, hostility, world-view, etc. are largely derived from the nature and characteristic of the particular family rather than from individual successes and accomplishment alone.

### **Current trends**

A number of factors such as education, urbanization, industrialization, the formal economy which these days involves both couples to go to work outside the family, have begun to affect the status and mode of operation of the family in Nigeria. These factors can be seen in the light of the following trends.

#### *Rural-urban migration*

Economic and political development in Nigeria especially pre and post independent times, have led to a high level of migration from the rural to urban centres. This in itself has led to a reduction in the level of interaction within the family settings mainly as a result of distance, different work environment and spheres. The absence of effective telecommunication network has further compounded this. The individual in this context is thus removed from his/her extensive primary family. The influence of the family in the light of its ability to provide support, inculcate and transmit values, encourage mutual and reciprocal sharing, is thus reduced however slightly. This further implies that a gap is created between the individual in this situation and his/her primary extensive family thus bringing about a weakening of the linkage with this point of references which basically is where reality is perceived.

#### *Adoption of Western values and beliefs*

A second trend can be seen in the adoption of Western values, beliefs and the influx of Western mass media (literature, television, etc.) This has resulted in some level of adoption of these values by the Nigerian (sometimes these influences are subtle but they exist). Hence such concepts as human freedom and the right of the individual have shifted from the traditional based values towards Western ideals.

#### *Evolution of "new" family units*

A third trend is the evolution of new family units especially in the urban centres. As urban-rural migrations have brought about a gap in the family interaction, there has been a tendency for Nigerians to recreate surrogate family units linked more by social interaction than by kinship ties. This interaction may be as a result of a common ethnic origin, area of residence, professional ties etc. This has through time resulted in new relationships which tend to modify traditional relationships and develop the sense of community within urban settings.

### *Interaction of diverse cultural groupings*

A fourth trend has resulted from the interaction of diverse cultural grouping living in close communities. Hence the individual's set of values is sometimes a result of a 'cultural osmosis'. It is to this extent that it is possible to talk about a Nigerian mode of behavioural response, disposition and values.

### **Counselling implications**

It is pertinent to mention at this stage of the paper that as result of the exclusive and extensive characteristic features of the family, counselling was mainly done within the family. The current trends previously mentioned have resulted in a gap in the availability of such helpers. This then carved out the need for professional counsellors who became relevant and needed. At the same time, the creation of new relationships in the urban centres has enabled the counsellor to fit into one of these relationships and is thus able to qualify as an adopted member of the family. Hence a counselling relationship with the Nigerian client today has a major objective of relating with his client as family.

Furthermore to be effective, the counsellor in the Nigerian setting must be able to identify the extent of the various influences on his client caused by the trend identified in this paper. There must be the awareness that there is the likelihood of an ill-defined state of flux ranging from traditional to non-traditional values, original family settings to new, and continuing "cultural osmosis". A counsellor should however note that his/her client is still likely to have some group support base as his reference point even though different from his original base and may be able to use this information in helping the client. Where for some reasons this is not the case, there is by and large a willingness on the part of the Nigerian to develop this and accept such a relationship. Finally, in looking at the general discussion so far, a developmental focus emerges as far as the counselling implications of the paper are concerned, There is the need however for the counsellor to identify their clients group assumption or contacts, new or old that the client is involved in as their support will be necessary for any effective counselling relationship.

### **Conclusion**

The trends presented here, as far as changes within the family set up in Nigeria is concerned, point to the direction counselling should follow. It is important to note that these situations presented here are highly fluid and dynamic but so important and influential that the counsellor will need to understand the changes in the family unit for the counselling relationship to be effective and successful.

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