

Combating the 21st Century Family Challenges in Nigeria for Social Stability through Family Counselling Services

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Abstract

The family is an important constituent of the society, its stability therefore determines to a large extent the advancement of the society. Unfortunately most families are witnessing more and more trauma and challenges; and this has affected the stability of the society. This paper addresses family challenges through family counselling, services in the 21st century. It also proffers solution for family stability and societal advancement. The Nigerian society is a male dominated social environment where family chores are seen as the exclusive responsibility of the woman. However, within the turn of the 21st century, the need to protect the women to be able to make meaningful contribution to the advancement of the society has become imperative. Family stability minimizes stress and undue pressure brought upon the society by family disorganisation and social disintegration.

Keywords: Family Counselling, Family Challenges, Social stability, Family Stability

Introduction

The family is the basic unit in most social organizations. It may vary in form or nature across cultures but it performs basically the same fundamental functions. According to Maisamari (2006), the institution of marriage which the family is built upon has its origin from God. At creation, the family (union of man and woman) was made to be a stable institution which parents (father and mother) and children would live in peace and harmony and fulfil the purpose and injunctions of God.

The changing realities of time and place have greatly affected the family framework all over the world (Nwoke, 2004). In the developed countries, most especially in this 21st century, families are characterized by incessant crises, witnessing gradual disintegration of family norms, values and cohesion. The causes according to George (2009) can be ascribed to both internal and external factors which have significantly increased over time. Whatever the situation, it is felt that the family should not degenerate to a level of imminent collapse. Family values must be upheld and counselling must be able to do save families from imminent collapse.

Family counselling aims at addressing different kinds of change in the family circle. It is vital for the counsellor to ask what the extent of change should be. The techniques to be used are a matter of choice. The goal of family counselling is not just to remove symptoms but to create a new way of harmonious living. This may involve helping individuals to express emotions in a more acceptable way. In a family set-up, people may be too rigid or too fluid. The desired change may be facilitated by the counsellor by shifting the balance within the family and by advising the members on how to relate to one another in new ways and to examine its value system and provide for appropriate changes in it.

Some families need minor adjustments to get back on course and some need a major overhaul to save the family or relationships within the family. Some families go for family counselling to prevent problems from occurring in the future and some go to solve current problems or heal past family wounds. Family counselling is a therapeutic process that is concerned with changing current living situations of couples, families, relatives even singles within the context of relating with others or the network of people who must be treated together.

Today, we live in a very conservative, complex and perverse society. We can no longer deny the fact that many Nigerian families are troubled. A lot of families (husbands, wives and children) can best be described as neighbours as they merely live under the same roof, without familiar interpersonal interaction. It has become very necessary to talk about possible ways of helping families to live aright, and enjoy their relationships for a healthy society to emerge.

The Genesis and Meaning of Family Counselling

The development and emergence of the concept of family counselling started at the turn of the 19th century. About the 18th and 19th centuries, people who were troubled sought help in the expertise of religious institutions and later the medical professions. In the wake of the 20th century there arose the development of professional counselling which replaced the authoritative, sacred and secular views of both the religious and medical profession in helping people who were socially and psychologically troubled. The goals of this new health professionals (professional counsellors) were to give advice about life problems that were supposed to rest on new theories about human conduct which was scientific in disposition. This new dimension derived largely from the work of Freud for the

treatment of the mentally ill institutionalized and neurotic effort which resulted in family counselling. The transition came possibly on the problems of many people in the family circle. George (2006) noted that problems did not just happen on their own families but were occasioned by the problems of the individual family members. Sequel to the psychoanalytic views and practices came the evolving several professional units in the mental health work; such as the psychiatrists, social workers, psychotherapists, clinical psychologists, and marriage counsellors. Learning from Freud's work, this group of health workers basically help their clients to talk about their problems; help them understand the source of their problems as well as develop ways of resolving them.

Accordingly, family counselling; in the words of Glick Kessler Shertzer and Stone (1980), is a professionally organised attempt to produce beneficial changes in a disturbed marital or family unit essentially through interactional, nonphysical but dialogue oriented methods. Its aim is the establishment of more satisfying relationship for family social stability.

From the psychotherapy standpoint, family counselling is a form of psychotherapy that deals with interpersonal issues involving personal contact with members of a family. Through family counselling services, symptomatic behaviour of individuals are viewed as the result of unhealthy interaction within the family, with each person playing a part to promote, rather than prevent intrapsychic conflicts.

Hence in trying to resolve family issues, for social stability, counsellors and social studies professionals may engage the family as a system (husband, wife and children) working as a group to resolve problems of each family member. This is so, because counsellors and social scientists believe that problems are rarely limited to a single family member but consider them a problem for all.

Types of Family in Nigeria

According to Achalu and Achalu (2002), there are three main types in Nigerian. These are:

(i) The Nuclear Family

The nuclear family comprises the husband, wife and their children living together in the same household. It is a kind of family system which is common among people in industrial countries of Europe and America but it was adopted in Nigeria as a result of our experience with the British during the colonial era. Nuclear family is the basic unit of the family and forms the basis or building block for larger family system. Nwoke (2003) observed that in the last 30 years, there has been a steady decline in the moral code of the nuclear family system and a rise in the number of single parents in Nigeria.

(ii) The Extended Family

This is the type of family system common among Asia and Africans. Here relationships are based on blood and marriage and extended family may consist of several generations of blood relatives, all living either with or near each other. These include cousins, brothers, grandparents, and grandchildren (Eke, 1992).

(iii) The Single Parent Family

The single parent family consists of only the children and only one parent. This may result from illegitimate relationship, death, divorce or separation. Single parenthood could also arise when either the male or the female decides to produce and raise a child by choice outside wedlock. It comes mostly as a result of teenage pregnancy of which the father disowns the pregnancy or the teenage mother may not be able to identify the real father (Achalal and Achalu, 2002).

Obot (2000) classified the single parent families as: the widowed mother, the divorced mother, the separated mother, the deserted mother from the father.

Family Counselling Approaches

Rao (1981) in George (2009) identified different types of family counselling approaches. These are:

- (a) **The conjoint family counselling:** In this case the counsellor or the social scientist meets the family and understands the patterns of interaction within the family. The focus is on the family problem, holistically as member of the family is dealt with individually.
- (b) **The multiple impact counselling:** This is a situation where several counsellors work with individual members of the family intensively over a period of time to resolve the lingering problem threatening the stability of the family. Focus is on the family system.
- (c) **The network counselling approach:** In this care the counsellor or the social scientist starts working with the family unit and proceeds towards the neighbouring friends, relatives and others. The objective is to create a social network for the individual member or the family in distress. The network counselling approach is very common among Nigerian families and works very well.
- (d) **The multiple family counselling:** This one involves a number of concerned families who are brought together and are counselled simultaneously. It provides different families, with opportunities for

observation, imitation and identification with other families. It results in social facilitation and reduction of social inhibition.

Family counselling services may be provided through different therapies. For example,

(i) Pre-marriage counselling therapy

This counselling therapy is organized for couples who are thinking of starting a family. Some couples seek counselling before they get married. The counsellor will discuss their plans about careers, children and management. The goal of pre-marriage counselling is to determine if there are any significant differences in lifestyle that should be addressed before the wedding ceremony. Some churches require pre-marital counselling before permitting a couple to be joint in the church.

(ii) Preventative therapy: This type of counselling is done to help prevent problems from occurring in the future. A family counsellor is trained in the types of negative family dynamics that can occur and how it can affect each individual family member. The counsellor can teach family members how to work, love, live and work together in a more positive way to prevent future problems.

(iii) Family therapy: This is organized to fix problems, resolve issues, repair relationships, increase family health, or take the family's functioning level to a higher level. Minnel (2000) states that family counselling includes the immediate family where the counsellor will gauge the reactions of not just the couple, but the children and other family members as well. All members of the family are encouraged to speak out during these sessions. The counsellor will gain a better understanding of the family dynamic and the couple will see how their feelings affects the household. Family counselling can also be used in combination with couples, individuals, or group members. In which case, the counsellor will determine the best form of counselling approach after meeting them individually or in groups.

Family Challenges in the 21st Century

The family system being the oldest institution had its fare share of challenges even as far back as the time of Adam and Eve. Akanni (2008) described one of the first challenges of marriage that God Himself had ordained to be blissful, having joined Adam and Eve Himself as the challenge of "open eyes". This challenge, He says is the principle of self knowledge. Before this self awareness both were stark naked before each other and were not ashamed as stated in the Holy Bible. The moment their "eyes opened", it was to see each others' nakedness. Adam saw the nakedness of his wife outside the covering grace of God and outside God's own lenses. He saw every mistake, every omission; every incongruence, every problem, enlarged and exaggerated under the convex lens of Mr. Flesh, Eve herself too had her eyes opened to equally see the unwavering loopholes of Adam's character. All these are imminent in our marriages today, the "open eyes" syndrome manifest itself in lack of submissiveness to each other in trying to cover up, through self defense, self hiding (Akanni, 2008).

This hypocrisy and self defense has led to lack of openness in marriage. The above when not properly handled would lead to communication breakdown in our families. Dollar and Dollar (2002) in their counselling approaches observe that effective communication between spouses produces a successful marriage, whereas lack of it brings about anger, bitterness and resentment that thrive in many relationships today. If they are allowed to escalate out of control, the family's social stability will be threatened. Without spouses discussing and communicating their hurts, anger, bitterness and both resolving to address these issues as they come; they can threaten the well-being of the family. Challenges such as how to manage household finances has rocked many marriages. Money problems can place more stress on a marriage than any other factor. Most marital arguments and frustrations stem from money. A person's economic status doesn't make money less of an issue. Both the rich and the poor fight over how to spend, save and invest money; they do so out of differing motives and perspectives (Dollar and Dollar, 2002). Couples must learn to work together to properly manage their household funds.

The ever increasing challenges of stress in the system have caused a lot of families to exist without enjoying fun times and leisure. The quest and ambition to make more money is making it impossible for families to come together and plan family outings and vacations together.

This stress is even affecting marital relationships between husbands and wives. Sex is something to be enjoyed in marriage. It is an outward physical expression of the love, affection, appreciation, care and concern that the husband and wife have for each other; because many spouses are not having this sexual fulfilment, many see it as a "legal" ground to cheat on their spouses. However, one sees this, adultery an unfortunate incident, to say the least, can be very devastating to the family. It can be a spouse's worst nightmare. The challenge of childlessness in marriage has been given as an excuse by some men for extra marital relationship (Yusuf, 1995).

Many times spouses choose to 'solve' the problem of infidelity in marriage by going in for divorce. Divorce another big challenge in marriage doesn't resolve problems either; it only serves to add more pains to an already difficult situation. It has brought a lot of untold crisis in the family with the children having the greatest impact.

Many rebellion and violence we see in the society today have been traced to children that are from broken homes, where their parents out of selfishness chose divorce as an option in managing their family crises.

Another challenge that is subtly affecting marriages today is the issue of who does what e.g. cooking, washing, cleaning or reviewing the children's homework. Therefore, the division of labour and management of the home are definitely topics work revisiting in our families. To overcome this challenge, calling a family meeting to discuss and assign chores that are age-appropriate, for example, a 5 year old child can help to set the table, a 12 year old can help to empty the trash can or garbage. The teenager or even spouse (husband) can wash the car. By giving everyone a job to do that is suitable to their age and ability; you bolster their confidence, sense of responsibility and accomplishment while ensuring peace of mind for the mother who is retaining strength to complete other tasks. The above division of labour and management of the home has met some challenges because of the type of Society we live in today.

The Nigerian Society is a male dominated social environment where family chores are seen as the sole responsibility of the woman or the girl child. However, with the advent of civilization and the need to protect womanhood, so that she can attain her full potential and make meaningful contributions to her family and the society at large, there is the need to minimize the stress she carries in the family. This can be done by the family agreeing to share the responsibility of handling family chores (Yusuf, 1995).

Social Stability

According to Luster and Okagaki (1995), a socially stable family is a group of people living together happily and enjoying harmony, peace and sufficiency. This implies that a stable family is a social unit run by parents who play their various roles effectively and this influences their children's intellectual, physical and social development.

Uzondu (1999) went a step further by pointing out that social stability is a term used to qualify a home that is responsibly run to provide for peace, cordiality, healthy communication, growth and development for parents and children.

Characteristics of Social Stability

A socially stable family usually possesses the following characteristics:

1. **Mutual Dependence:** From the time of birth the child is completely dependent on his parents (Papalia & Olds, 1992:81). They are responsible for his coming into the world and they must accept the responsibility of his becoming. The child is human and understands the feelings around him. In order to actualize his immense potentials a child is dependent on the adults around him as his first educators in a socially stable family, the father depends on his wife's ability to play her role for both himself and the child. While the mother depends on the husband's ability to provide security, financial needs, emotional and physical comfort of the members.
2. **Open Communication:** Farweg (1990) defines open communication as the sharing of verbal and non-verbal experiences, happenings, knowledge, opinions and ideas among group members. In an open communication, the adult and the child are in a specific relation to each other. The adult (leader) and the child (being led) are connected existentially with each other and communication is affected. Yeats (1991:10) describes open communication as:
 - a process of making known, imparting, transmitting, transacting ideas.
 - an inter-charge of thoughts and ideas
 - a system of sending and receiving messages
 - the making of a connection; and
 - a channel of sending and receiving information.

In a socially stable home the father and mother leave communication gaps open between themselves and are receptive of environmental stimuli as issues continue to become part of this communication process. The vehicle through which the pedagogic relationship is talking-to-each-other is the inter-human-communication between and amongst the parents (educators) and child (educand). Through authentic communication the "I" and "you" meet each other, so that a true "we" relationship emerges (Van Kiekerk, 1991).
3. **Peaceful Co-Existence:** The term co-existence refers to a person's relationship with others in the world on a mutual basis. Co-existential involvement forms the basis of the intimate relationship that exists between members of a socially stable family. This is because people have important parts to play in the lives of other members especially as regards the mutual relationships. As the home-maker, the mother plays an important role in determining the climate of co-existence in a stable home. The father also plays a decisive role in the type of co-existence between parents and children.
4. **Acceptance:** Acceptance is a process by which the relationship or trust between parent and child is co-instituted (Ran-Leasburg, Landman & Bodenstein, 1994:304). Acceptance is not primarily a consciously

or rationally planned act but the favourable, willing acceptance of a person as he is. The husband accepts his wife as a part of him and the wife likewise. The parents encounter the child lovingly on the basis of a natural, spontaneous affection. Parents accept with humility that it is their task to take the child as non – yet adult by the land and to guide him so that he can accept his own becoming towards adulthood as a task (Vos, 1994:108-109).

Responsible Parenthood and Family Stability in Akwa Ibom State

According to Ekong (2001) the marriage institution in Akwa Ibom is entrenched in cultural heritage, handed down from the days of our ancestors. He understands that any family becomes legally instituted when the various customs and rites that are prerequisites for marriage union to be established between two adults.

Counselling for Social Stability

Families of the 21st century come in all shapes and sizes; Divorce and remarriage, parenting out-of-wedlock and a host of other variables have turned nuclear family into the exception rather than the norm. As little as half-century ago, children were typically raised in homes with two biological parents, and chances are, those two parents had the support of extended family members nearby. When one questioned their own parenting, they had only to turn to one of these supporters for reassurance and a confidence boost (Vaillant and Vaillant, 1990).

The first decade of the 21st century found the traditional, nuclear family in the endangered specie list. Even in nuclear families, homemaker and bread winner roles have evolved into something that makes it impossible to define and designate an “average family. In fact, the stereotypic bread winner and home maker roles rarely exist, most household require the income of two fulltime wage earners just to get by (Gottman, 1999).

Another significant change is the support network parents once enjoyed. It was not uncommon for extended family members to reside in close proximity to each other, if not under the same roof. This trend of stretching families around the globe means that there are fewer and fewer built in-support networks in our communities. Extended family members not only served as mentors and role models, but often as a sounding board of emergency caregiver.

Levinson (1992), parents and grandparents were respected and looked to for guidance during tough times. As a society, we admire and respected their stories of endurance, surviving economic challenges, marital troubles and a myriad of other circumstances associated with their times. As our role models they inspired us to work hard and persevere (Ganong and Colman, 1999).

In addition to the extended family; we have lost our sense of community, our neighbours today are essentially strangers. Today, step families are the most common form of “non-traditional” families, but think of the many variables within step families; everything from two partners with custody of their respective children to households where one partner has children and the other doesn’t. There are still even more types of families single mothers, single fathers, grand parents raising grand children multi, generational households, the list is endless. Custody arrangements following separation and divorce are almost as unique as snow flakes; no two are the same. Legal and physical custody are no longer automatically awarded to the mother, more and more, kids are bouncing back and forth between two households on a weekly basis (Cherlin, 1993; Ahron, 1995).

Family educators and coaches are well suited to help parents meet the changing demands of family life. While counselling and therapy may be necessary in some cases, generally speaking, people are in need of resources that will assist them in major transitions to move them forward to balance work and family. A family coach can support parents in aligning their personal goals with their values and priorities.

Family educators/coaches can also address a wide range of issues, from parenting toddlers to teenagers, childcare, elder care, resources and referrals to connect to existing community services with a sea of services available. It can be difficult and time consuming to identify exactly which one is best suited to meet ones needs. A family therapist that is familiar with both the community and the family’s unique needs can take the time and guess work out of the search. It is time to rebuild the support network that once helped the family together, step families in particular need encouragement and insight to help them recognize the inevitable hurdles before them and proof that it can be done.

Implications for Counsellors and Social Workers

According to Nwoke (2004), counselling today no more plays only a tangential role but increases in perspective to include developmental, preventive and remedial role at every stage of an individual’s life.

The family is the heart of the society and its constellation is one that needs proper understanding and management for it to remain stable. This crisis in the family and their capacity to disrupt the very foundation of the society and its values makes it imperative for counselling intervention from the on set.

Counselling for family stability should be developmental since the family is made up of individuals who pass through dynamic processes in life. There is transition at different times in the life of an individual as well as interactions, decisions and conflicts, which affect individuals and consequently family stability in the short or long

run (Ejimofor, 1998). Counselling should therefore play preventive, remedial as well as rehabilitative roles toward the maintenance of family stability.

There are several social factors at play in couple's lives to make the marriage blissful. Preventive counselling should create awareness of these factors through socio-counselling education. As such counselling should be included in schools curriculum which will form a foundational preparation of children for family life in the future (Minnel, 2000). Issues to be emphasized in the curriculum should include building marital security and enduring affection, satisfying sexual desires, issues bordering on societal values, sexuality, general marriage guidance education, building emotional, economic stability, need to avoid unplanned marriages, financial, emotional and maturity before marriage, realistic approaches to problem solving and interpersonal social conflict. (Maisamari, 2006).

Issues bordering on individuals personality and image making, individual self control, restraints, tolerance, other related issues to family stability should be emphasized in the curricular which include financial management and budgeting, respect for each other, compatibility of partners, and stress management.

Family counselling as an integral part of general counselling is significant in maintaining family stability. Parents and married couples with their families should be programmed for periodic counselling sessions to talk to the members on the need to avoid unplanned marriages that plague most families. The need to reach the age of maturity and freedom of choice of life partners, should form themes for such meetings.

Counselling should also play a rehabilitative role by helping to rebuild families which are already disintegrated. This is because of failure in marriage, many spouses turn into alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitution, murderers, and armed robbers, other have neurotic tracts with mental disorder characterized by a combination of anxieties, compulsions or find it difficult to make satisfaction, adjustment in any human relation. Such cases must be addressed through psychological counselling to return such individuals to reality. This is because character disposition or pattern of behaviour constitute important factors to determine whether family will remain stable or disintegrated (AbdulJimoh, 2006).

Counselling should therefore develop relative to the culture of Nigeria, counselling talk shown on the electronic and print media will avail family members the opportunity of re-evaluating their family values and incorporating them to proper love, peace and unity.

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