The Difference Between Males and Females Regarding the Effect of Children on Relationships

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Children can either make or break a relationship between parents with varying degrees of impact on males or females. Five aspects of children have been identified as contributing to the life of a relationship: availability or unavailability, nature of children, number of children, child rearing practices, and the decisions the children make in life. All can impact adult relationships and this can differ between males and females. The principal aim of this exploratory qualitative study has been to evaluate the difference between males and females with regard to the effect of children on relationships in Nyanga, North, Zimbabwe, through answering these exploratory questions: What are the effects of children on a relationship; what aspects of children affect relationships; how does society view children in a relationship; and how can relationships survive these effects? Participants (n = 10.5 males and five females) whose ages ranged from 35 to 75 years were involved. Data were gathered using unstructured interviews and were analyzed through interpretive analysis. The findings suggest that there are indeed differences between males and females regarding the effects of children on relationships. Participants needed support and intervention especially tailored for their unique needs. The findings of the study recommended counselling, educational and social support.

Keywords: differences, males, females, effects, children, relationships

Introduction

Children can change a relationship completely and permanently. They may change who people are; as individuals and as a couple. They may change the way they think and act and relate to each other. They may be both an incredible joy and a total distraction as they may cause people to redefine themselves and their relationship.

Think of a relationship and family as a whimsical mobile. The mobile is first made up of a husband and wife who are tied to each other by their heartstrings at their wedding. For a time they bounce around together as they adjust to each other’s personalities and habits, values and expectations. Soon they settle down as they gain a sense of balance in their relationship. In time, a child is added to the mobile. New strings are added, the original ones are stretched, and the whole mobile wobbles crazily out of whack. This bouncing around increases as a second and maybe a third child is added. Husband and wife have become mom and dad, and they face a critical transition in their relationship. Their challenge is to regain a sense of balance in their relationship within the new configuration of the family mobile. (D. Stoop & J. Stoop, 2002, p. 231)

However, if they throw the car out of whack, then that only indicates that the driver was having issues
Children can be a blessing and a joy. Bringing with them a sense of joy and love because of their beauty, innocence, and helplessness. They may be a drastic change to one’s lifestyle and make you re-evaluate yourself and life. A home with children and that without children has a different feel. Children can possibly add pressure, as new roles as mother and father are added. When children are painted into the marital picture, pressure may be added to the parents’ relationship. This added pressure may simply reveal the presence of cracks in the relationship between the husband and wife. Cracks, such as poor communication skills, difficulty negotiating, hurtful behaviour, and justifying neglect, are magnified as pressure in a relationship increases. (Ali, 2009; D. Stoop & J. Stoop, 2002)

Children can either make or break a relationship between partners with varying degrees of impact on males or females. They can deepen, complicate, and test the “I do” of marriage. When a couple stands at the altar and make their vows, saying “for better or for worse” and “in sickness and in health”, they may not be prepared for the true implications of their words. When they begin to raise a child together they either have to learn the meaning of those vows at a deeper level or risk undue stress upon their relationship (D. Stoop & J. Stoop, 2002).

The principal aim of the small-scale study was to investigate gender difference regarding the effect of children on relationships in Nyanga, North of Zimbabwe.

**Background**

Extensive literature seems to reveal that children may have an effect on a relationship and a number of aspects of children can affect the relationship positively or negatively. These aspects include availability or in availability (presence or absence) of children, decision to have subsequent children or the number of children, gender of children, discipline, and child-rearing practices among other things.

The coming of children into a relationship may affect the relationship negatively as either of the two parties may fail to come to terms and cope with the pressure and challenges that accompany having to divide attention between the child(ren) and partner. This may result in marital dissatisfaction setting in and the affected partner subsequently suffering from depression. This is supported by Barlow and Durand (2005) who posited that marital dissatisfaction and depression are strongly related and that these disruptions in relationships often lead to depression. They go on to assert that findings from a number of studies indicate that marital disruption often precedes depression.

Otte, Manning, Pereira, and Colson (2008) concurred as they stated that about 70% of new mothers go through a phase when they feel depressed. The pressure from the demands of a baby and having to lead a life that is more less the same as what it was like before the arrival of the baby may make the mother especially feel guilty and that they have failed. This might not only affect the female partners but the male as well, depending on the nature of the child that would have been born. In the case of a child being born with a disability or being delivered in the father’s absence, he/she may feel that he/she has failed and this may lead to depression. This is in line with Frey, Greenberg and Fewell (1989) who stated that parents of handicapped children have to adjust to a variety of emotional problems when confronted with the failure of their productive expectation.

Marriages are most fragile when couples have small children, precisely the time when they need to be the most strong. A little over half of married couples report that their marital satisfaction diminished when their children arrived. Only 20% report that their marriage satisfaction improved after having children, while about 30% indicated their marriage remained the same (Matteson & Harris, 2009). There are many reasons for the
temporary dip in satisfaction—including conflicts over role expectations, money, work, and social life—but the point is that each stage of life has different stresses and satisfactions (Matteson & Harris, 2009).

In the past, in some cultures, the birth of twins or children with disabilities, albinism included, was taboo. If any of the above happened in a family, the child(ren) would be killed at birth. Failure to do so would result in the family being banished. However, if a parent (the mother in most cases) managed to escape to another land, their children would be spared (Hanson, 2005). The mother would therefore have to face most of life’s challenges looking after the children on her own the whole time.

Under such circumstances, some partners may even move out leaving one party to take care of the child; all by themselves and in other cases in-laws may attribute the problem to the wife and her family. They may even encourage their son to send the wife and the affected child(ren) away.

In some instances, one party in a relationship may get so attached to a child that she/he may have very little or no time at all for the partner. All attention will be on the child and when spoken to, they may even respond through the child. This is supported by Lesley (2009) who stated that parents may suffer stress when one party gets too attached to children in a relationship and loneliness may set in. According to Mynhardt (2006), loneliness is an unpleasant emotional and cognitive state that results from desiring close relationships but being unable to attain them. This lack of reciprocity in an existing relationship may result in negative emotions, for example depression.

Despite the negative effect the presence of children can have on a relationship, there may be a positive side to the situation. Some partners are actually drawn closer by the arrival of their children, regardless of their natures (Burdett, 2009).

Le Roux and De Beer (1994) as cited in Barone, Byrne, and Branscombe (2006) concurred as they argue that although parenthood is often identified with a decline in marital satisfaction and all the problems associated with parenthood, parents are usually glad to have children.

There is this real and instant love that moves you. It is easy to see why some people make children their centre. Sometimes husbands disappoint and are ungrateful and there are some that lose so called love or affection when you gain weight. It is for that reason people focus on kids because if you are a good mom and you love them, they love you unconditionally. Children are not as superficial as adults and men. (Ali, 2009)

Some relationships may also tend to be hinged on the availability of children. Despite the problems a couple may be experiencing in their relationship, they may try as much as possible to ensure that they stick together just for the sack of the children. Quite often if a marriage is on the rocks you hear of the woman saying they will stay put for the sack of her children.

One study confirmed that a relationship that was on the rocks got worse when the couple’s son left home to go to college, only to be restored when the son learns of the situation and returns home (Barlow & Durand, 2005).

Some relationships may suffer because one party (Harris, 2009) especially the female partner is trying to share her time between children and work thereby laterally shutting out the other party in the relationship. In line with the above assertion, Jansen (2009) concurred as he argued that husbands are devastated because of being denied access to children because the wife is in control.

Apart from the problems brought about by the presence of children in a relationship in general, the decision to have subsequent children and the number of children a couple may want to have can be a bone of
contention. After deciding to have only one child, the prospect of having another can be stressful for the wife, who feels that she is going have less time for her husband and so many other demands (Twigs, 2009). Thus a relationship may subsequently be affected negatively.

A couple may fail to agree on the number of children they want to have and none of the two is willing to compromise. This may lead to the dissolution of a union. On the other hand, if a couple agrees on a certain number of children and another one comes after that number, the woman is usually at the receiving end for something that she probably had little or no control over what so ever. She may be sent away or the husband may move out (C. Kabade, personal communication, August, 1999).

Disciplining children and child rearing practices may be a source of problems for couples. People are brought up in different environments through different parenting styles. Some research findings tend to attribute the way one brings up his/her children to the way they were brought up (Barlow & Durand, 2005). Given the vast differences between parties in relationships, chances are people in a relationship are bound to disagree on issues pertaining to how they want to raise their children and they may from time to time fail to complement or reciprocate each other’s efforts when it comes to disciplining their children. This may even lead to the two separating or polarizing and confusing the children. The children in turn may become rebellious or they may take sides, moves that will have a negative impact on a relationship. In line with the above, Jansen (2009) asserted that a couple may be divided over child rearing. The husband may be given input by his mother, contrary to what the wife is doing in terms of raising children thereby putting a strain on the relationship.

In as much as a couple may experience problems because of the failure to agree on the number of children or the children have widened the gap between couples; a childless relationship on the other hand can also affect a relationship. Certain decisions taken by the couple may also have an even more negative impact than what the couple is trying to deal with. There may be interference from parents because society strongly believes in continuity and a childless relationship means there will be time when a tribe or clan will come to an end.

Some community members may even address the childless woman by a non-existent name of a non-existent child, only to apologize and claim to have forgotten that she has no children (Kuimba, 1986). This may be quite stressful and can even lead to depression or serious psychological problems. Parents may interfere in a childless relationship as they tend to try to “solve” the problem. A mother-in-law may openly show her preference of someone else and make moves to connect that person to her son so they can be married or just try to have children (Kuimba, 1986). If the childless couple has a car, a big house or some other asserts, they may be referred to as their children, something which may be provocative.

No matter how much a partner claims to love and not mind their being childless, it seems that there is always a gap in the relationship if there is no child. Elkana (1 Samuel 1 in the NIV 2007) continuously told Hannah, his wife, that he was worth ten sons to her, gave her double portions when it came to provisions, but that did not close the gap for the need for a child.

The gender of children in a relationship may affect it negatively. According to Cuff (2009), many women have preference for a particular gender, for a variety of reasons. Some may arise due to societal pressures or from family, such as the spouse’s desire to have a son to carry on the family name. A situation where there are boys only may be tolerated but, girls only will not be taken lightly. The couple may end up having more children than initially agreed upon, the husband may try to have children elsewhere to ensure continuity of family or the other family members may encourage him to get rid of the wife and find another one who can bear him sons (P. Fero, personal communication, September, 1990).
Relationships go through a lot of challenges due to the various experiences the parties go through. These experiences may be a result of having or not having children, how the partners decide to raise their children and many other variables making up a relationship. In the face of all these variables and their effects, relationships can be sustained if they receive support from society in general and significant others (Lesley, 2009).

Literature points to some evidence of effects of children on males and females. Females are said to be overwhelmed by the arrival of a child feeling inadequate and stressed which may deteriorate into depression. Males on the other hand feel neglected and lonely as women concentrate on the children. Society’s view of children can also have adverse effects on a relationship.

Overall, there seems to be evident differences between males and females regarding the effect of children on relationships. However, there are few studies that investigate effects of children on relationships as most studies focus on children and relationships. The documented research findings regarding the effects of children on relationships are from America, Australia, Canada, or some other western countries, thereby leaving a gap in literature regarding this phenomenon in Zimbabwe and Africa at large.

**Family Systems Theory**

Family systems theory can be used to support the understanding of the difference between males and females regarding the effect of children on heterosexual romantic relationships. A family is viewed as a bounded set of interrelated elements, exhibiting coherent behaviour as a trait (Constantine, 1986): interrelated elements being members; patterned interactions—predictable interactions; boundaries—open and closed; function as a whole—sum of all of the parts, and shape member behaviour—using messages and rules.

Family members’ actions influence all members of the system. Even if families are in a constant state of change, the family system seeks stability in the midst of these changes. When individual members change, the system seeks to restore itself. A family is more than the sum of its parts, it is a system. Thus male and female-interrelated elements interact and function as a whole. They may change in response to members’ actions and to aspects of children.

**Method**

The phenomenological tradition was followed with ten participants (five males and five females) whose ages ranged from 35 to 75. Phenomenology aims to understand how people attribute meaning to events and interactions with others during the course of daily living as well as to understanding experiences of people from their own subjective view point (Maxwell & Satake, 2006). Of the ten, 60% were in relationships, 30% widowed, and 10% were separated.

Semi-structured interviews with the ten were undertaken as interviews offer the opportunity of following up on interesting responses. Semi-structured interviews assume people’s subjective experiences are real and should be taken seriously; we can understand others’ feelings by interacting with them and listening to what they tell us; and that qualitative research techniques are best suited for this task (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999).

**Results**

The following themes emerged: the effects of children on a relationship, how society views children in a relationship, support systems available to assist people in relationships and indeed differences between males and females regarding the effects of children on relationships.

The majority of participants pointed out that the effects children have on relationship is dependent upon:
Whether the couple can have children, the nature and gender of the children, childrearing practices, the decision to have more than one child, and the birth of a child with a disability (albinism included) can make or break a relationship. For some, it brings them closer and they strive to do the best for the child, yet others separate and blame is assigned sometimes along cultural lines. In-laws may interfere with couples, sowing discord in the relationship for the identified aspects of children. Children are viewed as custodians of family integrity and continuity, as “fire” or “light”. Factors such as childlessness, disabilities, and gender (especially with girls) are equated to a house that is dark or a nest that has no egg.

For some the arrival of a child turned their world upside down, as their partners tended to spend most of their time attending to the child(ren). They said that there are times when they really thought they could have extramarital affairs where they could possibly relieve themselves of the stress at home.

In-laws tend to perceive their married “children” as not being old or mature enough to raise children by themselves. In the case of a relationship being childless for a while or a number of girl children being born in a relationship, problems arise as in-laws perceive the wife to be the root of the problem. They may arrange for their son to have children outside marriage, causing discord in the relationship. Other participants also pointed out that the decision of how many or when to have subsequent children may also affect a relationship. One participant said that she had at one point been sent back to her parents after she had fallen pregnant with a third child after having initially agreed on two.

Children out of wedlock have been another phenomenon pointed out by the participants as an aspect that can affect a relationship. One participant said that they would not mind getting into a serious relationship with someone who already has a child as long as it is made known from the onset. Contrary, the majority of female participants said that they would not want to be involved with someone who has a child. Their reasons for such a stance ranged from the fear of the mother of the child bouncing back into the relationship, to putting themselves at great risk of contracting the deadly HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). Others also have said that although their children are grown up and leading independent lives, their relationships had been marred by disagreements over the children’s careers, how they should dress and their choice of marriage partners.

Most female participants cited problems that arise when people in a relationship do not agree on certain issues pertaining to children and how they felt they seem to be always at the receiving end. They are either blamed for failing to have children or are sent back home for having another child after they had agreed on a certain number.

The birth of a child with disability (albinism included) can make or break a relationship. For some, it brings them closer and they strive to do the best for the child, but others separate and blame it on the wife and her family. One participant seemed to vividly remember how his marriage almost fell apart and thanked his wife for her resilience.

The elderly participants said that society views children as custodians of its integrity and continuity and as fire or light. The absence of, disability or gender (in this case girls) of children in a relationship is equated to a house that is dark or a nest that has no eggs. They, however, pointed out that while some acknowledge that the situation is God’s will, others cannot sit back and watch. The later may interfere in a relationship in the pretext of helping rekindle the fire by encouraging the male to find another wife or they find one and create conditions they think are conducive for the man to fall for their trap. They also pointed out how before the coming of missionaries children born with disabilities and twins were killed.
Although most participants seemed to dwell on negatives about children, one had this to say, “Having or not having children is not always doom and gloom. Before the arrival of our first child, for five years we visited places of interest and had lots of fun despite all the attempts by family and society to frustrate our childless marriage and referring to our car as a baby”.

Support systems such as counselling facilities and the formation of and participation in support groups for example Men’s Fellowship have been devised to assist people to survive the storms in relationships arising from the effects of children. Counseling includes premarital as well as marital counselling and genetic counselling.

However, measures like genetic counselling seemed unfamiliar and some participants said they would rather not know than know and live in fear of potential risk of disability and other disorders.

**Discussion**

The findings of the investigation provided insights into the effects children may have on relationships and how males and females differ in this regard. Female participants felt the effects children have on relationships more as they expressed concern over the fact that their male counterparts almost always have the choice even to opt out of a relationship and look for alternatives, while blaming every negative aspect about children on the women, even without proof to support the claims. For example they may walk out when a child with disability or girls only have been born to the family as a way of adjustment. It will be consistent with Frey, Greenberg, and Fewell (1989), who stated that parents of handicapped children, have to adjust to a variety of emotional problems when confronted by the failure of their reproductive expectations.

Another finding of the study is that women tend to be overwhelmed by the arrival of a child and feelings of inadequacy set in. Men, on the other hand, are affected by the fact that a wife concentrates more on the child to the extent that when they are asked something they will baby-talk to the child in response and they feel shut out.

Females have found themselves at the mercy of males as the birth of a child against what has been initially agreed upon will result in the woman being sent away. Society does not spare them either. They have to put up with the decision to find another wife or to flee with a child at risk of being murdered (Hanson, 2005).

While males do not seem to really worry about getting involved with someone who has a child, females will have none of that. Some women have developed hypertension because their children have married against their wishes.

Although the bulk of the findings tend to indicate females as being affected by societal views, attitudes and actions, there is also evidence of some strong males who stood up for their female partners and resisted the pressure society exerts on them (consistent with Kuimba, 1986).

There are a number of implications for males and females in relationships and even those not in relationships regards the effect children have on a relationship. When the male and female in a relationship know how to work together as a team and maintain the conditions conducive to staying in love with each other, raising children or any other aspect of children may not cause unhappiness in a relationship. The discovery of weak spots revealed by pressure in a relationship should be seen as an opportunity to improve and strengthen it. However, improvement can only be inevitable if steps are taken to prevent problems brought about by some aspects of children. These may include but not limited to participating in marriage education courses that focus on meeting emotional needs, negotiating, and communication skills will help to eliminate problems that can be
the true cause of discord in a relationship (Harley, 2008).

There is need to seek professional help timeously before taking decisions they will live to regret. If counselling services are made readily available, they will go a long way alleviating the high levels of stress both males and females are experiencing. They need to be encouraged to go for genetic counselling so that they can make informed decisions. Society needs to be more supportive to both male and female in a relationship and support groups have to be more active.

Indeed there are differences between males and females regarding the effects of children on relationships, skewed more dramatically towards women.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations of the study has been the small sample size. The findings may not hold true for all people in relationships in the whole country. A much larger sample size randomly selected from more than one area would have allowed for more generalizable results. It is, therefore, suggested a relatively larger sample size covering a wider geographical area, be drawn in future.

Despite the limitations, the study has assisted in identifying some issues pertinent amongst people in relationships regarding children. These include social support and recognition especially for women to help them cope with the effects of the various aspects of children and withstand societal pressure. Some light has been shed on the aspects of children that affect people in relationships and how these effects have manifested in chronic conditions like hypertension developing in some.

Most researches done have focused on child relationships and abuse in Canada, Australia, and some other western countries and little has been done closer home. Seeing as females seem to be affected by children, further inquiry into this issue and some coping mechanisms would help prolong the lives of those that have succumbed to some diseases and conditions triggered by some aspects of children.

**Conclusion**

Marital relationships are built time and again and their survival depends on a number of issues, amongst them having children or not having them, how the partners decide to raise their children and the nature of children.

Females are said to be overwhelmed by the arrival of a child feeling inadequate and stressed which may deteriorate into depression. Males on the other hand feel neglected and lonely as women concentrate on the children. Society’s view of children can also have adverse effects on a relationship (Lesley, 2009; Barlow & Durand, 2005; Barone, Byrne, & Branscombe, 2006; Kuimba, 1986).

Overall, it seems evident there are differences between males and females regarding the effect of children on relationships. When parties in a relationship know how to work together as a team and maintain the conditions that allow them to stay in love with each other, family related concerns and raising children is less likely to cause unhappiness in a relationship. Both males and females in relationships also need to be supported to build a healthy society.

This exploration was purely qualitative in nature and could benefit from bolstering by quantitative inquiry.

**References**


