It's Only a Hoodwink who Doesn't Change the Mind: A Sociological Lens on Family Stress, Domestic Violence and Health

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Abstract

Learning about how families cope with stress, no doubt, is critical first step towards the institutionalization of long term feasible strategies and social policies aimed at addressing the social repercussion posed by stress on family members. This study, therefore, aims at utilizing the classical ABCX family crisis model first used by Hill (1949) in identifying how families perceive, interpret and react to various sources of stress confronting them. Ghana was chosen as the study site as a result of the recent upsurge in domestic violence cases, which normally result from family stressors degenerating into crisis. A qualitative research design was adopted for the study involving thirty women as respondents. The study confirmed the fact that all families do experience some forms of stressors at one point or the other. But not all stressors relapse into crisis. It all depends upon the coping mechanisms available and utilized in dealing with the stressors and the interpretations made of it. Further, it is no news that women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence emanating from family stressors than men. This unfortunate fact has to be addressed given the adverse health implications of stress and domestic violence on women and children. Some of the recommendations made are as follows: There is the need for effective counselling prior to marriage. This should be stressed more seriously and people must be encouraged to patronize them. The government needs to be more proactive in dealing with domestic violence. A more severe punishment needs to be meted out to perpetrators of domestic violence to serve as deterrent to others. Women should also be empowered and encouraged to seek help when exposed to any form of domestic abuse with the hope that the agencies within the criminal justice system will not trivialize complaints made to them by women. This underscores the need for vigorous public education on the rights of women and why these rights must be fully respected.

Key Words: Family, Family stressors, Family Crisis, Domestic Violence, and Women

1. Introduction

Family stress is "a state that arises from an actual or perceived imbalance between a stressor (that is, challenge, threat) and capability (that is, resources, coping) in the family's functioning" (Huang, 1991: 289). No family can be said to be immuned to stress. Stress, therefore, features prominently in all family dynamics. But since the forms of stress differs from one family to the other, there is no one size fit all approach in dealing with it. Even where the stress confronting families are same or similar, individual families depending on their strength or quality of its crisis-meeting resources react differently to it (McDaniel and Tepperman, 2010). Family stress, not well handled, can easily relapse into crisis, which can affect adversely the roles and relationships that define the family and the health of its members.

Learning about how families cope with stress, no doubt, is critical first step towards the institutionalization of long term feasible strategies and social policies aimed at addressing the social repercussion posed by stress on family members. This study, therefore, aims at utilizing the ABCX family crisis model first used by Hill (1949) in identifying how varied forms of family units in Ghana perceive, interpret and react to various sources of stress confronting them. Ghana has been chosen as the study site as a result of the recent upsurge in domestic violence cases, which normally result from family stressors degenerating into crisis. An in-depth study on domestic violence against women determined that one in three Ghanaian women suffered from physical violence at the hands of a past or current partner. In addition, three in ten Ghanaian women admitted to having been forced to have sex by their male partner, and twenty-seven percent of women have experienced psychological and emotional abuse, including threats, insults and destruction of property (Coker-Appiah and Cusack, 1999).

The statistics given prior are highly under stated because many women unknowingly accept violence against them in the hands of men as normal. For instance, more women (over 50 per cent) than men (43 per cent) in Ghana believed that a man was justified in beating his wife if she used a family planning method without his consent (Kimani, M., 2007). The recent upsurge in domestic violence cases in Ghana is in spite of governmental and non-governmental interventions to have the problem addressed. Prominent among these interventions is the creation of the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU), formerly Women and Juvenile Unit (WAJU) of the Ghana Police Service to deal with violence against women. Notwithstanding this intervention and the increasing openness about domestic violence in Ghana, many Ghanaians continue to believe that cases of domestic violence must be resolved within the family, and Ghana's criminal justice system continues to treat crimes of domestic abuse less seriously than other violent crimes (Cantalupo et al., 2006).

Various explanations, however, have been assigned for the high incidence of domestic violence in Africa. Cantalupo et al. (2006) for instance categorized five general theoretical explanations to the problem, namely - the rights theory, feminist theory, cultural explanations, society-in-transition explanation, and culture of violence explanation. Interestingly, explanations explicitly based upon economics are relatively rare, as are theories that ground the phenonmenon in individual psychology or family dysfunction.   The high incidence of domestic violence in Ghana is largely attributable to family dysfunction due mainly to stressor events experienced by families. Though stress can be deemed as normal and can be coped with, with the right steps, violence is an abnormality that should not be coped with, but rather condemned and shunned. The status of stress as normal connotes that it is part of the romantic ideal of family life embraced by many, but not violence. Unfortunately, however, violence is slowly but surely becoming a norm in many family units in Ghana. This surely has to be condemned and addressed. A route to that path is to identify the sources of domestic violence, which mainly emanates from stressor events, hence the need for the study.

2. Theoretical Framework

The ABCX family crisis model first elaborated by Hill (1949) will be used as the theoretical benchmark for the study. This is one model that many sociologists have used to examine differences in the ways families cope with a wide variety of difficult problems (McDaniel and Tepperman, 2010). In this model, "A", which represents the stressor event, interacts with "B", the family's crisis-meeting resources (coping mechanism(s)), and with "C", the interpretation a family makes of the stressor event, to produce "X", the crisis. The ABCX family crisis model dwells mainly on pre-crisis variables that make some families more or less able to cope with the impact of a stressor event. Note that "A" can/not result in "X" depending on how families combine the "B" and the "C" variables and also the type of stressor event involved.

2.1 Types of Stressor Events

McDaniel and Tepperman (2010) have identified four categories of the common causes of family stress as follows - First are major upheavals, such as war and natural disasters that affect many people. simultaneously. Second are major life transitions such as birth, death, becoming a parent, divorce, and retirement. Third are chronic stressors like disability, severe physical or mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, occupational problems, unemployment, or imprisonment of a family member. Fourth are occasional stressors like car accidents, burglary, sudden illness or even death of a family member.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted for the study, giving the sensitive nature of the topic. The convenience sampling technique was adopted for this study. This technique based on non- probability sampling approach was best suited for the study because of the non-existent of a sampling frame for the study's population. A call was made for women in the Eastern region of Ghana who have ever experienced some form of domestic violence in the hands of their present or former spouses to volunteer to participate in the study. Men and women are almost equally likely to commit small acts of verbal, psychological, and physical violence in intimate relationships. Studies, however, have shown that whereas women kick, slap, or throw things; men are more likely to punch, choke their partners, use a weapon, or commit the most emotionally, mentally and physically harmful acts like killing (Serran and Firestone, 2004; Gartner, Dawson, and Crawford, 1998, 2001). This confirms the long held notion that women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence and abuse than men. Based on this evidence therefore, women were chosen as the unit of analysis for the study.

Thirty women came forward to participate in the study. Learning about their experiences regarding domestic violence & what they felt accounted for their situation was central in the study. This provided an opportunity to create a social space for the respondents and their experiences. The qualitative interview was adopted as the data collection technique. On the average, an interview session lasted an hour. Themes covered in the interview included - the frequency & the types of domestic violence experience by the respondents; their culpability in the situation; precursors, if any, of the situation; perceived or actual stressors leading to the situation; available coping mechanisms in dealing with family stress; consequences of domestic violence; and ways of addressing what seems like a social pathology consuming many Ghanaian women in silence. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, all respondents were duly assured of the confidentiality of their responses. This assurance has been fully adhered to.

It must be stressed that in spite of the respondents' voluntary participation in the study, few did find it difficult recapturing some of the experiences incurred in the hands of those who once professed love to them. Overwhelming majority of the respondents, however, felt that the study had provided them with a long waited opportunity to air out their stories and experiences. Three respondents disclosed that they had all along thought that all women experienced some form of domestic violence in their relationships. Based on this obsession, they did not see themselves as victims of abuse prior to the study. Domestic violence was thus seen as a norm rather than a deviant and criminal behaviour. For data analysis, the Nvivo software was adopted in patterning the data elicited from the field. This made it feasible to capture both individual perspectives that respondents had on the issues posed to them. Further, convergences and divergences that emanated from the various perspectives were also established using the axial coding approach. This entailed the combined use of deductive and inductive reasoning in stringing together the responses.

4. *Data Analysis and Discussion*

The thirty respondents of the study did come from varied backgrounds. Whereas ten were separated, twenty were divorced. The average age of the respondents was thirty-five years. The levels of education of the respondents ranged between high school completion & university. This implies that the issue of family stress culminating into domestic violence confronts all irrespective of educational attainment. Further to this is the fact that majority of the respondents did work formally and contributed to the economic strength of their families. This portray the fact that one's position in the stratification system does not necessarily insulate them from family stressors & domestic violence. This, however, is in spite of the evidence that people in the lower social stratum are more susceptible to severe family stressors & domestic violence than those in the higher social stratum (Tausig et al., 2004). Further, people in the higher social stratum, all other things being the same, have a better sense of coherency and mechanisms to cope with family stressors better than people in the lower social stratum (Clarke, 2008). Family stress, which is ubiquitous, can therefore be avoided in degenerating into family crisis with a good sense of coherency, and access and application of appropriate coping mechanisms.

In line with the theoretical benchmark for the study - The ABCX Family Crisis Model - the respondents experienced various types of family stressors (*the "A" in the model*), ranging from major upheavals to occasional stressors. Normal everyday hassles came on top as the major source of stress experienced by the respondents with economic and trust issues being the prominent of them all. All the respondents did accuse their ex-partners of infidelity and saw that as the major straw defining the demise of their relationships. This is however not very surprising because of the unfortunate acceptance of polygyny in the Ghanaian society. Whiles married men indulgence is extra-marital affairs is not frown upon, married women cannot even think of it. Two of the respondents shared their experiences below:

> *"I was married for twelve years with two children and simply cannot recollect a time in the marriage that my ex husband never cheated on me". Communication between us more or less broke down because I dare asked questions about his promiscuous lifestyle. Even though he did not abuse me physically, the relationship was emotionally draining and I can confidently state that my twelve years marriage period has been far the worse experience in my entire life" (Rose).*

> *"Mine was both physically and emotionally draining. Myself and children were often   abused   in the hands of my ex husband. But families and friends kept us together for over   a decade. I can't imagine I did that and regret it till this day. The marriage, however,   was done with after he impregnated two other women. The sad part was that one of these women was a good friend of mine. This was indeed devastating to   me and my children"   (Ama).*

Engagement in extra-marital affairs is a common behavioural trait seen in most African countries. The patriarchal nature of these societies reinforces the behaviour, thus exposing women to all sorts of health dangers especially sexually transmitted diseases. A recent study on HIV/AIDS and Women in Africa has raised the red flag that women are more susceptible to contract HIV/AIDS because of the promiscuous lifestyles of men (Odhiambo, 2012). It is therefore no accident to find the promiscuous lifestyles of men as topping the list of major stressors experienced by the respondents when they were in marriages. Another major stressor identified and also linked to the promiscuous lifestyles of men is economic. Majority of the respondents claimed that their ex-partners did not disclose to them any information about their finances and easily relinquished their financial obligations on numerous occasions. Yet, they always insisted to know how much money the women earned and took control over it. A woman recounted the physical violence she incurred in tears following her refusal to entrust her own earned money in the hands of the husband, who she claimed lavished their finances on other women (girlfriends, so they are called). This situation took a toll not only on the women, but more so on the children. Most of the women indicated that they virtually shouldered most of the financial responsibilities of their families alone, because the husbands were not forthcoming with their obligations.

Issues bothering on sex-making also featured prominently in the conversation on family stressors. The respondents were divided on this. Whereas some accused their ex-partners of forcing to have sex with them on a number of occasions, others complained about lack of sex from their ex-partners. Technically, marital rape though illegal in Ghana, many men do get away with it because it is hardly brought to the attention of the police, who are also many often accused of trivializing such complaints even when made. The women who felt conjugally raped indicated why they most often did not want to have sex with their ex-partners. Fear of contracting diseases from the partners who were engaged in extra-marital relationships and would also not engage in protective sex was the main reason for the rejection of sexual advances from the ex partners. Most of these women said they were many at times beaten to succumb to it, thus making it a rape by all standards. This unfortunate abuse needs to be checked because it is getting out of hand all in the name of patriarchy.

Recently, there has been an upsurge of married women being murdered or severely beaten in the hands of their husbands for denying them sex (Kimani, M., 2007). The social structures need to work well to arrest this crime. The other reason assigned for the sex denial was tiredness on the part of the women after rendering their multiple shifts of working formally and informally outside the home and domestically respectively. Evidently women in this social context easily become burnt out as a result of over-burdened responsibilities. It is therefore no coincidence that they play the sick role more than men (Clarke, 2008). Some of the respondents vehemently stated that they were denied sex from the husbands for a very long time. One of such women have this to say:

> *"My husband never had sex with me for about 10 years even though we shared the same   bed throughout the entire period. But I knew and was always told that he was in very intimate sexual relationships with others". I did find this demeaning and an affront on my womanhood. This was the major stress in our marriage of about two decades and I am not surprised this same reason spelt the doom of the relationship" (Maame).*

Another woman found this emotionally abusive and shared the following:

> *"I many occasions had to plead for sex from my own husband. How mean is that? There were even some instances that my plea were rudely turned down. The irony of the situation, however, is that he got it when he needed it without any plea because he would   not take a no for an answer, but would not reciprocate it. Men are ....(foul word, sorry)" (Nana).*

Literature on family is explicit about sex as a major source of problems in relationships. It has been amply recommended that communication about it is very important because of its central role in relationships (McDaniel and Tepperman, 2010).

Unfortunately, however, many couples shy away from its discussion or simply do not know how to engage in conversation on the topic without conveying some negative impressions to the other partner. Problems pertaining to parenting also emanated as a stressor for the respondents. Incompatible parental styles triggered off conflicts among parents. Parenting as always has never been an easy task. But it has assumed a more difficult proportion in recent times with the advent of many socialization agents like the media welding extreme influence on children. The fact that most women are now working in the mainstream of society does not make parenting easy at all. Hitherto, women stayed at home and nurtured children, but those days are gone for good. Though this is extremely essential for women's empowerment and the overall good of society, it poses some challenges on parenting. Women in spite of their recent participation in the mainstream are still expected to play the lead role in parenting. They are therefore easily blamed when parenting goes wrong. This exposes women more to the stressors associated with parenting than men because of the gender socialization, which is changing at a snail-pace in contemporary society.

Further, the respondents were made to discuss the key coping mechanisms *(representing the "B" component of the model)* they adopted as families when exposed to the various stressors outlined above. It was unanimous among the respondents that extended family members, friends, and associations like religious groupings were mainly relied upon as a stopcock to settle differences posed by stressors within the family. Professional marriage counselling was missing because of lack of easy accessibility of the service and the cost entailed in doing so. The counselling secured from some of the religious associations may be placed on the same pedestal as professional counselling services, since some of the leaders acquire the professional counselling skills as part of their theological training. In relation to the definitions or interpretations made of stressors *(representing the "C" component of the model),* the respondents were asked how they saw the root causes of the stressors they experienced. Overwhelming majority saw stressors as normal part of life, but were quick to add that they indeed constituted substantial pain for them. Two of the respondents, however, attributed stress to the work of the devil. Clearly, such interpretation can easily blind them from seeking a scientific and a more rational way in dealing with the problems posed by various stressors.

The "X" component of the model touches on crisis emanating from stress ("A") as a result of the wrong use of the "B" and the "C" in the model. Stress may or may not result in crisis depending on the combined use of the "B" (coping mechanism) and the "C" (interpretation of the stress). A major form of crisis associated with stress has been found in the literature to be domestic violence and abuse - physical, psychological, and emotional (McDaniel and Tepperman, 2010). All the respondents indicated that they experienced these forms of crisis in course of their marriage, but never sought any official help in resolving them. A respondent said that for a very long time she taught it was normal and universal for women to be abused in relationships, but has long learnt she was wrong.
The effects of family crisis in the form of domestic violence and abuse of all forms can be damaging for the entire family. But it is undoubtedly more devastating for the women who are mostly at the receiving end of domestic violence. The ones most devastated by family crisis are children who most often are unable to rationalize the situation and are brought up in dysfunctional homes with its attendant social difficulties, which can leave a life-long health and social scars for these children (Tausig, 2004). Such children perpetuate the cycle of abuse either as victims (in the case of women) or perpetrators (in the case of men) of domestic violence and abuse when they are grown (McDaniel and Tepperman, 2010). This cycle needs to be broken to ensure that children are raised in more functional homes for their own good at the micro level and the overall good of the society at the macro level.

5. *Conclusion and Recommendations*

So far it has been established that all families do experience some forms of stressors at one point or the other. But not all stressors relapse into crisis. It all depends upon the coping mechanisms available and utilized in dealing with the stressors and the interpretations made of it. Further, it is no news that women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence emanating from family stressors than men. This unfortunate fact has to be addressed given the adverse health implications of stress and domestic violence on women and children. Effective counselling prior to marriage should be stressed more seriously and people must be encouraged to patronize them. This is critical to equip people with some form of knowledge about likely stressors entailed in marriages and how to deal with them when they come up, or what can be done to evade some of these stressors, or preventing them from relapsing into crisis.

Further, the government needs to be more proactive in dealing with domestic violence. A more severe punishment needs to be meted out to perpetrators of domestic violence to serve as deterrent to others. Women should also be empowered and encouraged to seek help when exposed to any form of domestic abuse with the hope that the agencies within the criminal justice system will not trivialize complaints made to them by women. Public education on the rights of women and the need to respect them across board should be vigorously pursued.

Lastly, the government needs to ensure that the right apparatus are always in place to sanction men who relinquish their obligations to their children after divorce. Children, more often than not, are catered for by women in the woke of divorce with not much support from the men. A child support must be a must. In the nutshell, patriarchy has to be uprooted in contemporary society. The times of male chauvinism has changed and it is only a hoodwink who would not go with the wave.

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