

Effectiveness of Cognitive-Attribution Therapy on Shame and Guilt Feelings of Women Exposed to Spousal Rejection in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nowadays, one of the ways to reject a woman in Africa especially Nigeria is when the spouse elopes with a lady in the Western state in the guise of seeking greener pastures. Economic depression, lack of job and general insecurity, political instability and lack of social amenities have been attributed to reasons many men leave their home country for the Western world for better living for self and the family; but the current trend has been abandon, neglect and eventual divorce of the women with their children. This has brought shame and guilt to many women because of the perception of many Africans towards divorce. This empirical study involved twenty-five women whose husbands have been overseas in the last five to ten years and waiting to be invited over; but were later divorced. It was established that these women were suffering from guilt and shame. The twenty-five volunteer women were subjected to twelve weeks counseling using self-developed scales that were patterned after Cognitive-Attribution Therapy of Lewis (1993), and Shame and Guilt of Barrett (1995). The prognosis revealed that the level of shame and guilt of the women were reduced; some of them concluded to move forward by remarrying, while others concluded to take the incidence as fate and continue to take care of self and children. It was concluded that many people inflict self pain on self for not being responsible for a particular occurrence, but psychological therapies such as Cognitive-Attribution can be applied to help such individuals.

Key Words: *Cognitive-Attribution Therapy, Shame, Guilt, Women, Spousal Rejection, Nigeria*

1. Introduction

Marriage in Africa especially Nigeria is one of the most respected social institutions. In the time past, marriage was prescribed, initiated and instituted by the family members; giving the reasons for family's involvement whenever things go wrong between the couple. Marriage is defined by Olson and DeFrain (2003) as the emotional and legal commitment of two people to share emotional and physical intimacy, various tasks, and economic resources. Arising from this, people marry for different reasons which may include; forming a family unit, to strengthen social and economic stability, and to nurture and educate offspring (Maggie 2002, Alexander, Schill and Dukeminier 2006). Some claim that marriage improves the health and longevity of men and women; gives them access to a more active and satisfying sex life; increases wealth and assets; boosts children's chances for success; and enhances men's performance at work and their earnings (Cherlin 2005). It suffices to say therefore that marriage typically provides important and substantial benefits to individuals as well as society.

In Africa, Nigeria inclusive, man is regarded as the breadwinner of the family, who is required to support the family especially financially: footing all the bills ranging from shelter to children's school fees, feeding, electricity and phone bills etc (Shobola 2010). While the woman is obligated to keep the house, nurture the children and provide sex (Phanjaruniti 1994). Though it is becoming a common practice for man and woman not to live together as a result of job location; and in most cases some spouses are on job transfers especially men, while the women are left behind to take care of the children and the entire family as the husbands visit weekly or monthly or as otherwise arranged by both parties.

During the 1980s in Nigeria, a large number of agile and virile professional and middle-class individuals especially men exited the country for the Western world (Europe, America, etc) in search of better living (Shobola 2010). This sometimes eventually makes the men abandon their families back home in Nigeria; as some of them send home divorce particulars without any prior discussion or compensation for doing so (Personal Communication).

2. Effects of Spousal Rejection

Among several effects of spousal rejection is shame and guilt which forms part of the psychological feelings the victims go through. Shame and guilt feeling is part of the emotional trauma a Nigerian woman goes through when her spouse who has denied her physical presence and finally divorce goes through. Shame and guilt is expressed when the woman feels that the entire society is aware of her divorce situation and there is nothing she can do to salvage the situation.

This is evident because of the way marriage is held in Africa. One, marriage is a relationship between two families but with a representation of two individuals, and in most cases the marriage ceremony is usually elaborate and in the process, when things go wrong, the family members are involved which makes it more devastating for the woman to bear. Two, it is believed that woman is always at fault when marriage breaks up. Three, as a result of economic hardship in Nigeria, some families rely and live on the money that is remitted to them by their son or husband that is overseas which gives them some psychological fulfillment and it makes them feel above their contemporaries here at home. Four, marriage in Africa is perceived as an indicator of success, responsibility and height of acceptance in the society. In the same manner, one is rejected when her marriage breaks up.

Therefore, when this marital relationship ends in an abrupt manner it does not only bring a feeling of rejection and immense shame to a person, but it can also lead to mental illness (Moison, 2009, Hall, 2011). Earlier, Brown and Harris (1989), gave the report of U.S. Surgeon General that about 30 to 40% of those undergoing divorce reported a significant increase in symptoms of depression and anxiety. Being subjected to continual indignities may lead to low self-esteem and can cause psychological imbalances. Whisman (2001) summarized these marital stressors as the leading cause for depression among women generally.

3. Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by the principles of reality theory otherwise known as choice theory. Reality theory of Glasser posits that man's behavior is driven by five genetically needs which are patterned after Abraham Maslow's. The needs are:

- Physiological/Survival
- Belongingness/Love/Connecting
- Power/Competence/Significance
- Freedom/Responsibility
- Fun/Learning

One of the core principles of Reality Theory is that, whether one is aware of it or not, one is at all times acting to meet these needs, but our inability to successfully achieve this may degenerate into psychological challenges. Socializing with people or being in a relationship is one of the effective ways to meet our need for belonging. When we get disappointed from such relationship we may decide to mourn that experience and if possible decide not to enter into another relationship. Or we might allow it to affect our entire whole being. This is generally an ineffective way of meeting that need – though it may work for a while, but it is painful and it is detrimental to self and others. So if life is unsatisfactory or we are distressed or in trouble, one basic thing to check is whether we are succeeding in meeting our basic psychological needs for survival, power, belonging, freedom and fun. The choice for this theory in this study is for the fact that these participants are already dysfunctional in the five construct areas of Reality Theory. It is typical of Nigerian women to depend on their husbands for the provision of their needs to survive and by extension of this, it makes them fulfill other psychological needs, but when these are thwarted by divorce, it will expose them to some emotional trauma of which is shame and guilt. Reality theory therefore is applied to assist the participants shift from the zone of thinking (mourning) of the past by way of feeling shame and guilt to what needs to be done at present to make the individual happy and functional once again. In effect, the clients with expression of unhappiness and gloominess are able to learn how to choose alternate behaviors that will result in positive and greater satisfaction.

4. Shame and Guilt Feelings

Shame is a type of negative evaluation of oneself as a whole person, while guilt is a feeling that one has acted in a way that is different from a social or moral expectation. Shame and unresolved guilt are associated with greater distress and could also impact both physiological and psychological feelings in ways that might weaken a body's ability to respond well to stress and relationship activity. Women that are going through spousal rejection may experience shame due to the abandonment from husbands, gossips about them, inability to satisfy their daily needs because of husbands' refusal to financially support them, they may also view themselves unlucky, or inability to run a successful marital home.

Women may also feel guilt having conceded to their husbands going overseas for better living for the entire family, mistakenly believing that they have caused the divorce because they have not been pestering their men to invite them over. Some even feel that they have trusted their men so much that when they say things are not easy with them overseas, or they are working on their 'stay papers' and will invite them over when they are comfortable, think that they wouldn't have been that devastated if they were already in a new relationship as soon as their husbands left Nigeria, and all kinds of expression of guilt make them not to forgive themselves.

5. Cognitive-Attribution Therapy (CAT)

Cognitive theory is concerned with the development of a person's thought processes. It also looks at how these thought processes influence how we understand and interact with the world. While attribution theory is concerned with the ways in which people explain (or attribute) the behavior of self and others. It explores how individuals attribute causes to events and how this cognitive perception affects their motivation. In effect, cognitive is about encoding and decoding information that is gathered through the cognition channels and attribution affiliates it to the accessible objects.

Attribution theory seeks to explain the cognitive process whereby individuals make explanatory inferences regarding the causes of events. Heider (1958) distinguished between two general categories of explanation, internal and external. Internal attributions implicate characteristics of the individual (such as ability, attitudes, personality, mood, and effort) for having caused a particular behavior, whereas external attributions implicate external factors (such as the task, other people, or luck) for causing an event or outcome to occur.

6. The Problem

This study seeks to assist women whose husbands left for overseas for better living and eventually got their wives divorced back home in Nigeria. The aftermath of this divorce brings the feelings of shame and guilt to the women; and in effect it affects their emotional and psychological feelings.

7. Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are raised for this study:

There will be a significant relationship between spousal rejection of the women and shame feeling

There will be a significant relationship between spousal rejection of the women and guilt feeling

There will be a significant difference in shame and guilt feelings of the spousal rejected women before and after cognitive-attribution therapy.

8. Methodology

8.1 Research Objectives

There are two basic objectives for this study. One, it examines the relationship between spousal rejection and shame feeling on one hand; and guilt feeling on the other. Two, the study investigates the effectiveness of cognitive-attribution treatment on shame and guilt feelings of the women as a result of spousal rejection.

8.2 Participants

The participants for this study were drawn from two churches in Southwestern Nigeria. There was a Christian program targeted at divorced women in the two churches; the program was titled: "Divorce and the Christian Women in Nigeria". Out of six hundred and fifty women in the two churches; forty-seven of them are divorcees, out of which twenty-five women who volunteered to come for counseling reported shame and guilt feelings. To qualify for the experimental study, the participants were confirmed legally married and husbands have been overseas for not less than ten years ago; the women have been divorced by their husbands in the last one year before this study, and the divorce took place with husband being overseas and wife in Nigeria. The participants are between the ages of 30 and 50 years.

8.3 Instruments

A self-developed scale tagged 'Shame and Guilt Feelings of Divorced Women' patterned after Barrett (1995) was used. It has three sections; section A consisted the bio-data and information on the participants' divorce experience, sections B and C are on Shame and Guilt feelings respectively. The treatment properties were carefully selected from the participants' reported style of thought and attributable objects which were derived from the work of Lewis (1993).

8.4 Design

This study made use of pre and post test of dependent group.

8.5 Procedure

Through a self-constructed questionnaire, the participants were confirmed to express shame and guilt feelings as a result of spousal rejection through divorce. It was also confirmed that this feeling has made the participants to live a solitary life, refusal to begin a new relationship and inability to discuss the divorce experience with people, including close relations and friends. Willingness to participate in the study was sought from the participants and confidentiality was assured. The participants were put together as experimental group. A sample of Cognitive-Attribution statements that were applied during the training is presented as thus:

- Divorce has taken place; what do you want to do next?
- Since divorce, and you have been feeling this way; has anything changed?
- Whether you blamed yourself for this divorce or not, your partner is not around to pity your situation
- If you develop any medical complications how would you cope?
- Don't think of how people would make jest of you only, but the social support you stand to enjoy from them by discussing your experience with them etc.

The participants and the researcher arrived at some other logical statements that they can use each time the thought of divorce and the negative behaviour was to be expressed. For instance:

- I am not the first person to experience divorce
- My life is not solely tied to marriage
- There are more agonizing marital situations than divorce etc.

The group members were given a copy of the questionnaire each to establish shame and guilt feelings as a result of spousal rejection. The group was made to go through the training once in a week for twelve weeks. They were given assignment weekly; to record their thought patterns, instances that remind them of their husbands and their feelings, and the counter thoughts. They were also asked to record some steps they have taken such as discussing the divorce case with people, readiness to start a new relationship etc. At the end of the twelfth week, the questionnaire was re-administered measuring the present level of shame and guilt of the participants.

9. Results

The data generated at both pre and post tests are analyzed along the hypotheses tested and the following results are presented:

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant relationship between spousal rejection of the women and shame feeling.

Table 1: *Correlation coefficient summary of relationship between spousal rejection and shame feeling of the women*

Variations	n	mean	sd	df	r	Sig
Spousal Rejection	25	38	1.46	24	0.72*	0.00
Shame feeling	25	22	0.68			

*significant

Table 1 shows the number of spousal rejection participants, which is 25 with the mean of 38 and standard deviation of 1.46. The same participants for shame feeling are 25 with mean of 22 and standard deviation of 0.68. The degree of

freedom is 24, and all yielded r value of 0.72 which is significant at 0.05 level. These results indicate that shame feeling of the participants is as a result of spousal rejection. The hypothesis is therefore upheld.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between spousal rejection of the women and guilt feeling.

Table 2: Correlation coefficient summary of relationship between spousal rejection and guilt feeling of the women

Variations	n	mean	sd	df	r	Sig
Spousal Rejection	25	38	1.46	24	0.82*	0.00
Guilt feeling	25	36	0.66			

*significant

Table 2 shows the number of spousal rejection participants, which is 25 with the mean of 38 and standard deviation of 1.46. The same participants for guilt feeling are 25 with mean of 36 and standard deviation of 0.66. The degree of freedom is 24, and all yielded r value of 0.82 which is significant at 0.05 level. These results indicate that guilt feeling of the participants is as a result of spousal rejection. The hypothesis is therefore upheld.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant difference in shame and guilt feelings of the spousal rejected women before and after cognitive-attribution therapy.

Table 3: Dependent-t-test summary of effect of cognitive-attribution therapy on shame and guilt feelings of the spousal rejected women

Variations	n	mean	sd	df	t-observed	t-cal	Sig
Pre-test	25	24	3.26	24	18.62*	1.70	0.05
Post-test	25	46	2.24				

*significant

Table 3 shows the number of spousal rejection participants with shame and guilt feelings at pre and post test is 25, with the mean of 24 and 46 respectively; standard deviation of 3.26 and 2.24 respectively. The degree of freedom is 24, and all yielded a t value of 18.62 which is significant at 0.05 level. These results indicate that cognitive - attribution therapy is effective on the shame and guilt feelings of the participants. The hypothesis is therefore upheld.

10. Discussion

Divorce has progressively become a common procedure worldwide, affecting not only parents and their offspring, but also the communities that surround the family unit, and consequently presenting a terrifying threat for the affected child. Nonetheless, regardless of the conventionality of divorce in some parts of the world, it persists to affect various aspects of children's' and parent's' daily lives and rituals. Reports on marital separation and divorce have that the effects can be debilitating to both the victims and the society. Shobola (2010) reported in a study conducted that women whose husbands migrated to America to work experienced increased hospital patronage with complaints such as high blood pressure, hearing deficiency and general anxiety. Crouch (1999) submitted that divorce may cause the risk of emotional problems of children, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol addiction, smoking, crime and poverty. To the women, they often feel intense anger and resentment, self-blame, fears about the future, loyalty conflicts, lower physical health ratings, lower social competence, anxiousness, depression, withdrawal, ambivalence, eating problems, less maternal warmth and empathy, low academic standing, and some other vices.

This study is a contribution to the existing literature on the various pernicious effects of divorce on women; part of which is shame and guilt. This finding corroborates the work of Giese-Davis (2003), that shame and guilt feeling was peculiar with women that were recovering from breast cancer. Authors like Tesler & Thompson, (2006) state that guilt and shame are a natural reaction to society's perceived or actual disapproval, as well as one step in the process of emotional adjustment to divorce. Shame and guilt are socially constructed and invariably connected with real or imagined social interaction endowed with significance by social communication and relevance to desired ends. Shame is associated with withdrawal from social contact while guilt is self blame for perceived wrong or inappropriate doing.

It is evident from this study that spousal rejected women experience shame and guilt. From the data, the participants reported that it was considered shameful to discuss the divorce experience with people for fear of being

mocked, or being gossiped about. The participants also felt the shame more when their spouses blocked every means of communication against them which made it so difficult to venture into any means of negotiation or resolution. They also reported a psychological feeling of 'being used and dumped' by their spouses. This is rationalized from the fact that since their spouses left Nigeria, there had been promises of being invited over to live together as a family which never came to be. However, seven out of the twenty-five women whose husbands left between eight and ten years ago; assist them financially, and communicate regularly express shame feeling more when compared with those whose husbands left between five and seven years; rarely assist them financially, and communicate occasionally.

The guilt feeling reports from the participants were as a result of the dimension of the divorce process. Twenty-two of the participants reported a 'no fault divorce' type of situation. In some of the divorce papers that were sent to them, their husbands' excuse was given as long years of living separately of which in the Western world, it is tantamount to separation which is a symptom of a broken marriage. In effect, the women still feel that they must have gone wrong somewhere and their husbands are neither ready to disclose this to them nor the legal sector. Some of the participants also reported that they financed the travelling of their husbands overseas, and they have been responsible for the upkeep of the family which they regret when the divorce matter came up.

Cognitive-attribution therapy explores how individuals attribute or affiliate causes to events and how this cognitive perception affects their motivation. This study demonstrates how the participants attribute their shame and guilt feelings to spousal rejection. Cognitive-attribution therapy has been applied to several psychological challenges. Roesch and Amirkham (1997) found that more experienced athletes made less self-serving external attributions, leading them to find and address real causes and hence were better able to improve their performance. Stage, Patricia, Jillian, and Ada (1998) in their study concluded that when students can connect outcomes to their causes using cognitive-attribution therapy, they can reduce the stress associated with uncertainty and can understand themselves better. During the treatment, participants in a group session were encouraged to narrate their divorce ordeal, and they were encouraged to feel free to share the experience with whom they wished outside the group. Some of the faulty thought patterns that were presented by the participants were analyzed with them both at group and one-on-one counseling sessions, and these were jointly reconstructed. Within the 12 weeks of the treatment, 15 participants were able to discuss their divorce experience with some relations and friends. All the participants reported forgiving self and their former spouses, and twelve of them after several attempts communicated with their former husbands. It was also observed that the participants were appearing cheerful and happy as the treatment period went by.

However, five of the participants though appeared forgiving and reconciliatory but they were not motivated to discuss their divorce case with any in-laws, relations and friends. From the data, these five women possessed the highest educational qualifications and they hold high positions in their various places of work. It suffices to say therefore that financial independence can help to ameliorate the level of financial denial from spouse.

The implication of this study is that cognitive-attribution therapy is effective in treating shame and guilt feeling of spousal rejected people. The effectiveness may be due to the fact that the therapy is user-friendly, interactive in nature and cost effective. Therefore, the therapy can be applied to other related psychological challenges. This study appears the first to apply cognitive-attribution therapy in the treatment of shame and guilt feeling among the spousal rejected women in this dimension; reasons for dearth literature.

It is recommended therefore that cognitive-attribution therapy can be applied to more marital challenges to generate more literature within the field. It is suggested also that this study can be replicated in another part of Africa, and larger population may be considered.

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