



Depressive symptoms in the adolescent child: Examining the moderating roles of maternal employment and paternal absence

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Abstract

The study investigated influence of maternal employment and paternal absence on adolescents' depression. The participants comprised two hundred and sixteen (216) students drawn from secondary schools in the Southeast of Nigeria. Participants' age ranged from 12 -18 years with a mean age of 14.6 years. The instrument used for data collection was Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, 1961). A 2- way analysis of variance (F- test) used for data analysis indicates statistically significant influence of maternal employment on adolescents' depression, $F(1, 212) = 4.13, p < 05$; non-significant influence of paternal absence on adolescents' depression, and non-significant interaction of maternal employment and paternal absence on adolescents' depression. It was concluded that the provider-status of the mother is psychologically healthy for the adolescent child.

Keywords: *Adolescents, depression, parenthood, employment, caregiving*

Introduction

In recent times, traditional gender role assignments have been questioned. Changes in economic conditions, social norms, and in values have contributed to an increase in married women enrollment in the workforce (Elkind, 1994). Also large social changes have forced women and men to change their roles. During the Second World War, most of the men went off fighting, and it became necessary for women to work in order for the economy to remain stable. This was a time when married women who have never worked outside their homes became involved in the labour force. After the Second World War married female employment and education, especially that of young mothers, grew rapidly with proportionate effect on emotional adjustment of children (Sptizer, 1990).

Earlier in Nigeria, women education was calculated to achieve two objectives namely: to make good wives and mothers and secondly to enable them run affairs at home. However one of the most significant development in recent times particularly after Independence of 1960 is the speedy manner in which women have successfully challenged men in the field of paid employment outside the home. The expansion of women in the workforce has increased the number women graduates and post graduates in almost all fields of human endeavor. Moreover, the growing urbanization coupled with increase in the cost of living and retrenchment of husbands has forced women to seek paid employment (Scott, 1999), reducing the level of psychological and physical support parents offer to their children.

Parental support is one of the key dimensions of parental behavior that correlate with adolescent psychosocial well-being (e.g., Barber, 1993; Baumrind, 1991). Parental support is often considered as a unidimensional construct, including parenting behaviors such as warmth, nurturance, acceptance, and responsiveness (Barber, 1993). Low parental care has been linked to several cases of psychopathology including behavioural maladjustment and depression. Depression is a common mental disorder that usually manifest indepressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, decreased energy, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, and poor concentration (WHO, 2012). Poquiz, and Frazer (2016) tabled the behavioural symptoms of depression among the adolescents to include, feelings of hopeless or pessimistic about theirfuture; no interest and enjoyment inactivities; low self-esteem andself-worth; thoughts of running away fromhome; substanceabuse, and thought or plans to hurt oneself. They further listed the precursors of depression in adolescents as onset ofpuberty and parent-child conflict dueto increasedindependence. However, Lakdawalla,Hankin & Mermelstein (2007) earlier posit that depression in adolescents go beyond onset of puberty and parent-child conflict to include the negative cognitive appraisals associated with poor parental support.

Cognitive theories of depression

Cognitive theories of depression have been hypothesized as one way to understand the development and functionality of depression. These the rideshare the general hypothesis that the way in which individuals attend to, interpret, and remember negative life events contribute to the likelihood that they will experience depression. A great deal of research has examined the origin of depressioncenteringaroundthreeseminalcognitive theories: Beck's theory of depression (BT; Beck, 1987), the Hopelessness theory of depression (HT;



Abramson, Metalsky & Alloy, 1989), and the Response Styles theory (RST; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). Each of these theories identifies unique cognitive vulnerability factors (dysfunctional attitudes, negative cognitive style, and a ruminative response style, respectively) that are hypothesized to contribute to the development and/ or maintenance of depression. Earlier, these theories have received much empirical and theoretical attention, providing support for the central role that cognition may play in depression in adult populations (see Abramson, Alloy, Hogan, Whitehouse, Donovan, Rose, Panzarella, & Ranieri, 2002; Ingram, Miranda & Segal 1998; Scher, Ingram & Segal, 2005).

Later, these theories were extended downward to youth (in order to understand the etiology and development of depression. This downward extension of adult theories has been an important preliminary step in understanding depression developmentally; however, several facts may jeopardize the utility of cognitive theories when applied to child and adolescent populations Lakdawalla, Hankin & Mermelstein, 2007). For example, Garber, Weiss and Shanley (1993); Rutter (1987) suggest that it is possible that children do not have the cognitive abilities that are posited to play a role in adult depression. Also, the structure and nature of depression may differ in children and adolescents (Weiss & Garber, 2003) and therefore the causes and/or consequences of depression may vary across the lifespan.

Hopelessness theory (HT; Abramson, Metalsky & Alloy, 1989), a revision of the reformulated helplessness theory of depression (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), posits that when individuals who manifest more depressogenic inferential style are confronted with a negative life event, they are likely to develop symptoms of depression. Although the theory allows for other possible pathways to the development of depression (e.g., genetics, neurotransmitters, etc.), it postulates three types of negative inferences that individuals can make given the occurrence of negative events: causal inferences (inferences about why the event occurred including stable and global attributions), inferred consequences (inferences about what will result from the occurrence of the event), and inferences about the self (inferences about the self with respect to the event that occurred). Further, making such inferences increases the likelihood of developing hopelessness, and in turn, depression because hopelessness is posited to be a proximal sufficient cause of hopelessness depression, a theory-based subtype of depression.

Aaron T. Beckin his cognitive theory of depression (BT; Beck, 1967, 1987) posits that maladaptive self-schemata which include dysfunctional attitudes, involving themes of loss, inadequacy, failure, and worthlessness, constitute the cognitive vulnerability. These schemata consist of stored bodies of knowledge that affect

encoding, comprehension, and retrieval of information. Consistent with vulnerability–stress models of depression, these dysfunctional attitudes are hypothesized to become activated following the occurrence of a negative life event, generating specific negative cognitions (e.g., negative thoughts about the self, world, and future), and lead to elevations of depressive symptoms. Depression arises as a result of inferences derived from distorted cognitions and schema-driven processes, whereas the inferences arrived at in non-depressives are based on relevant situational information (see Lakdawalla, Hankin & Mermelstein, 2007).

Whereas BT has been widely studied in adult populations, the research examining this theory in younger populations has lagged far behind. Only few studies (e.g. Lakdawalla, Hankin & Mermelstein, 2007) were identified. Based on the analysis given by Lakdawalla, Hankin & Mermelstein (2007), the negative cognitive style by stress interaction seems to be a relatively better predictor of depression in adolescent than child samples. Whereas this is consistent with the developmental hypothesis that cognitive vulnerability may not emerge until later stages of development when children develop the capacity for formal operational thought.

Parental support and childrens' emotional adjustment

Wang, Xia, Li, Wilson, Bush, and Peterson (2014) examined multiple familial and school variables on Chinese adolescent adjustment and found that parental support and monitoring were associated with positive adolescent adjustment, but permissiveness and punitiveness linked to negative adolescent adjustment. Furthermore, although all parenting behaviors (except love withdrawal) were correlated with adolescent adjustment, parent use of appropriate behavioral management strategies appears to be more important for adolescent externalizing problems, whereas parental support appears to be more relevant for adolescent internalizing symptoms. Furthermore, harsh and punitive discipline appears to be detrimental to both adolescent internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

Maccoby (2002) in his study of delinquent and non-delinquent children, found that the main difference between the delinquent and non-delinquent children is that delinquent children were results of improper supervisions of fathers. He however noted that if the mother is absent but arranges for adequate care for the child, the child is least likely to be delinquent. Heer (1996) study provides an opportunity to understand differential impact of maternal work at various ages of the child, and highlights some logged effects of early maternal employment. Briefly after controlling a range of factors, including child care arrangements,



they fail to find any relationship between maternal employment and a range of behavioural problems of the child (including hyperactivity, physical aggression, prosocial behavior, unhappy mood and anxiety) at the age 2. At the age of 4 however, current material employment's effects are dominantly positive with children of working mothers being more aggressive, more prosocial and anxious than their non-working mothers counter parts. These associations hold for children whose mothers are working either full time or part time. In the case of hyperactivity, however, she found that only children of part time working mothers score better than children of non-working mothers along with the negative effects. She also identifies a logged negative effect of mother's employment. Children whose mother worked either full or part time when they were 2 are significantly more aggressive two years later than their non-worked mother's counter parts.

Douvan (1995), in his study found that women who devoted much time to their work have less time to observe how their children grow and unable to monitor their movement and the company they keep. Since most women are not allowed to bring their children to places of work, it means that children could be left in the care of total strangers such as nannies or in day care centres. Sales (1999) found that mothers who work all day do not have time and energy to keep their home as clean as they should otherwise do, judging from look of their children. She observed that it is physically impossible for her to give the house the caring and comforting touch that means so much to the children. She went on to say that when the children and adolescents do not find their home as comforting and orderly, they will become unhappy and moody and as a result will not be fulfilled in their emotional life.

Robby (2003) found that most children in the day care centres were grossly neglected as they were left ten hours a day virtually on their own. When their mothers were out for work and their fathers are absent, they are left without proper supervision. Thus, they were easily subjected to accidents, mischiefs and serious delinquencies than those under close supervision of their parents. In another experiment by Rossman (1999), the term Latch-key child was coined. He found that the magistrates were deeply distressed by the number of young delinquents who came before them mostly because school holidays hours meant all the temptations of street life. With the home fatherless and motherless, cold and often locked up the children helplessly hang about the streets. Many returns to their homes which lack parental welcoming presence. The home has ceased to be the best place to go to.

Owonu (1994) studied the effect of bottle feed on childrens' emotional adjustment and found that most working class mothers do not have sufficient

time to settle down and breast feed their babies. During work hours, their babies are bottle fed. He posits that such children are not likely to have sympathy for their parents in their old age. He sees bottle feeding as the root of children's misbehaviours. He said that since mothers do not spend enough time with their children, this tends to affect the children mentally, emotionally and socially. This may lead to the children's antisocial behaviors such as lying, deviant act, just to mention but a few. It can also contribute to children having low self-esteem, low motivation for achievement, susceptibility to a group of influence and all traits of juvenile delinquency and so on. Amato (1993) in his study on the father's impact on children's emotional adjustment found that the absence of fathers in homes contributed to lack of emotional support for the children as well as inadequate practical help and guidance and significant supervision and role models. He also suggested that absence of fathers affect children's lives, because it places multiple stresses on them and it can interfere with children's ability to cope or utilize parental role.

Jegede (1995) in another study on the effect of absence of fathers on the emotional adjustment of children found that the absence of father had negative influences on children by making them to become less co-operative, less sympathetic and exhibit indifferent social behavior. Barber (1993) in his studies on the contribution of fathers in the shaping of self-concept, emotional maturity and achievement motivation of the adolescent children. The result revealed that the adolescents with high emotional maturity may have significantly high stress and self-confidence when compared to those with low emotional maturity.

The present study

It has been observed that maternal employment and parental absence play significant roles in childrens' emotional adjustment. Some researchers had it that maternal employment has an efficacious effect on childrens' emotional adjustment while others argue that parental absence has greater influence than maternal absence. It is the contention of the present study that whether parental physical support would moderate depression in the adolescent child or not may still depend on the cognitive appraisal such as attribution and labelling of the situation. To the extent that the cognitive appraisal associated with emotional adjustment may be a function of parental physical commitment, no study has examined the joint influence of maternal employment and paternal absence on depression of the adolescent child. Thus, the present study was set to investigate the following problems:

1. Will maternal employment significantly moderate depression in the adolescent child?



2. Will paternal absence significantly moderate depression in the adolescent child?
3. Will there be a significant joint moderation of maternal employment and paternal absence on depression of the adolescent child?

In this study, the adolescent child refers to young people within the age range of 12 and 18 years old and who were still under parental care. Depression refers to variations in mood as measured by the 21 - item Beck's Depression Inventory (BDI) developed by Beck (1961). Maternal employment refers to whether the mother of the adolescent is employment outside the home or not. Thus, employed mothers refers to mothers who spend up to 8 hours and above working outside the home, while unemployed mothers are those whose daily activities revolve round the home. And, paternal absence refers to whether father of the adolescent lives with them or not. Thus, present fathers refers to fathers who stay or go to work from home while absent fathers refers to those who are late or who live separate from their families. In view of these levels of the independent variable (maternal employment and paternal absence), the following hypotheses were tested:

1. Maternal employment would significantly moderate depressive symptoms in the adolescent children.
2. Paternal absence would significantly moderate depressive symptoms in adolescent children.
3. There would be no significant interaction of maternal employment and paternal absence on adolescents' depressive symptoms.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were two hundred and sixteen (216) secondary school students. They were Junior Secondary 3 and Senior Secondary 1 students from 8 secondary schools located in the Southeast of Nigeria. The participants were drawn through simple random sampling technique and consisted of one hundred (100) participants whose mothers were employed and one hundred and sixteen (116) participants whose mothers were unemployed. Among the participants also, one hundred and twelve (112) had fathers absent from home while one hundred and four (104) had father present in the home. Their age ranged from 12 – 18 years, with a mean age of 14.6 years.

Instrument

The instrument for the study was the 21 item Becks Depression Inventory (BDI) developed by Beck (1961) to assess the extent of cognitive, behavioural, affective and somatic components of depression. The statements on the items are numbered 0 to 3 for each item. 0 signifies no depression, 1 signifies mildly depressed, 2 for moderately depressed and 3 for severely depressed on that item. A participant's total of 0-9 in all the items as was categorized by Beck, indicate non-depressed state, 10 – 15 for mildly depressed, 16 – 23 for moderate (clinical) depressed and 24- 63 for severely depressed. Therefore, those scoring from 10 and above are categorized as depressed while those scoring 9 and below are categorized as non-depressed.

Procedure

The instrument (BDI) was administered to the participants in their various schools during school hours. The researchers applied for access to these participants through the Principals of the schools who then gave instruction to the form Masters/Mistresses. Questions on demography inserted in the instrument by the researchers helped identify those whose mothers were employed or unemployed and whose fathers were absent or present.

The researchers administered a total of 550 copies of the questionnaire in selected schools. There was an instruction at the top of the questionnaire instructing the participants to endorse the response alternative that is most representative of their general frame of mind now and during the past weeks. The participants were reassured of confidentiality in treating their responses, to enhance objectivity in responding. To facilitate reading and comprehension of the BDI items, the researchers with the help of their assistants read each statement aloud and translate it into vernacular for the participants to understand very well and tick their responses. Of the 550 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 216 were properly filled and appropriate to the aim of the study.

Design and Statistics

The design of the study is two-factor survey. The two-factor independent variables were: maternal employment (employed mothers and unemployed mothers) and paternal absence (present fathers and absent fathers) while the dependent variable is depression in the adolescent child. A 2-way ANOVA was employed for data analysis.

Results



Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of maternal employment and paternal absence on depression of the adolescent child.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Employed mother	7.9600	5.44749	100
Unemployed mother	9.6810	6.48289	116
Present father	9.2115	6.48624	104
Absent father	8.5804	5.67536	112

Table 1 above shows that adolescents living with employed mothers obtained a total mean of 7.96 (SD = 5.44) on depression while those living with unemployed mothers obtained a higher total mean of 9.68 (SD = 6.48) on depression. The Table also shows that adolescents who were living with their fathers obtained a total mean of 9.21 (SD = 6.48) on depression while those not living with their fathers obtained a relatively lower mean of 8.58 (SD = 5.67) on depression. A 2-way analysis of variance was used to test the significant of these differences as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: ANOVA summary of maternal employment and paternal absence on adolescents' depression.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Maternal Employment	150.124	1	150.124	4.127	.043
PaternalAbsence	23.343	1	23.343	.642	.424
MaternalEmploy * PaternalAbsence	39.701	1	39.701	1.091	.297
Error	7712.267	212	36.379		
Total	24979.000	216			

a. R Squared = .691 (Adjusted R Squared = .685)

Result in Table 2 above indicate significant moderating influence of maternal employment on adolescents' depression, $F(1,212) = 4.127$, $p < .05$. This means that there was a significant difference in depression between adolescents whose

mothers were employed and those whose mothers were unemployed. Thus, hypothesis 1 of this study was confirmed.

Result in Table 2 show indicate non-significant moderation influence of paternal absence on adolescents' depression, $F(1, 212) = .642, p > .05$. This means that there was no significant difference in depression between adolescents who were living with their fathers and those not living with their fathers. Thus, hypothesis 2 of this study was not accepted.

Result also indicate non-significant interaction of maternal employment and paternal absence on depression of the adolescent child, $F(1,212) = 1.09, p > .05$. Thus, hypothesis 3 was confirmed.

Discussion

The first hypothesis which stated that maternal employment would significantly moderate depression in the adolescent child was confirmed. Examination of the means indicates that adolescents of unemployed mothers rated higher on depression ($M = 9.68$) when compared with adolescents of employed mothers ($M = 7.96$). This finding is consistent with the study of Moccoby (2002) which reported that where necessary caring arrangement were made for the children, the irregular presence of the mother would not have negative impact on childrens' emotional adjustment. This finding is not in line with the study of Sales (1999) who found that children of maternal employment usually do not find their home as comforting and orderly as it used to be, they became unhappy and moody and as result would not be fulfilled in their emotional life. This findings also contradicts the study of Heer (1996) which reported that at the age of 4, current maternal employment's effect are dominantly positive with children of working mothers being more aggressive, more pro-social and anxious than their non- working mother counterparts.

The result of the present study could be explained from the point of the current quest for gender equality and women empowerment which places higher expectation on the mothers. Thus, when a mother (as a confidant) cannot also pose as a provider, the emotional adjustment of the adolescent child is adversely affected. This could also be as a result of the high cost of living which places heavy financial demand on the adolescent child.

The second hypothesis which stated that paternal absence would significantly moderate depression in the adolescent child was not confirmed. However, the direction of the means show higher means for adolescents whose fathers were present. This finding is contrary to the study of Jegede (1995) who found that the absence of father had negative influence on children by making them to become less co-operative, less sympathetic and exhibit indifferent social behavior. This



finding also is inconsistent with Amato(1993) who reported that the absence of fathers in homes contributed to lack of emotional support for the children as well as inadequate practical help, guidance and insufficient supervision and role modeling. However, the non-significant difference found in this study could be a result of the relatively loose attachment between fathers and children (compared with mother-child attachment) and which makes fathers' presence seem less important apart from fathers' role as providers.

The third hypothesis which states that there would be no significant interaction of maternal employment and paternal absence on adolescents' depression was confirmed. This finding may be related to the hard economic conditions which seem to have distracted attentions to status at home. Thus, being a father or mother, present or absent may mean nothing if one cannot put food on the table and protect the family from danger. This result may not be surprising considering the growing double significance of mothers as confidants and providers in recent times. So this makes the combination of mother and father seem less relevant in the emotional lives of the adolescents as they seem to have cognitively replaced male gender with the provider, be it mother or father.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have practical implications for family counseling centres and career choice counselors. Government should discourage unemployment among mothers. The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs should collaborate with the Federal Ministry of Labour and Productivity to handle matters concerning mothers such as providing meaningful employment for them, especially mothers with dependents. Parents should not take vocations that will make them to separate away from home for weeks or months. Equally, various locally-based non-governmental agencies such as the Parent-Child Intervention Centre (PCIC) should collaborate with social welfare institutions to sensitize the parents on the benefits of proper caring of their children.

Summary and conclusion

The present findings explored the influence of maternal employment and paternal absence on their adolescents' depression. The results of the study indicate significant moderating influence of maternal employment on adolescents' depression; non-significant influence of paternal absence on adolescents' depression, and non-significant interaction of maternal employment and paternal absence on depression. To this end, this study draws the following conclusions:

1. The provider-status of the mother is psychologically healthy for the adolescent child.

2. In as much as fathers' absence is not significant, their committed present could be an added advantage.

Future researcher research on this topic may add more variables such as income, family size, religion and likes to ascertain their influences on adolescents' depression. This will proffer a better interpersonal relation between children whose mothers are employed and those whose fathers are absent from home.

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