

Covid-19 Lockdown and Family Stability Amongst Married Couples In Gwagwalada

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Abstract

The covid-19 lockdown ensured that couples stay at home and spend time together. While this may have allowed harmonious couples to bond further, it may have also given room for disharmony couples to suffer various forms of abuse and thus, make up their minds about getting a divorce or separation. Therefore, this study investigated the impact of the covid-19 lockdown on family stability in Gwagwalada. The study answered three research questions and reviewed literature that are related to covid-19 and family stability. It adopted the functionalism theory of R. K. Merton because it explained the latent function of the covid-19 lockdown. It also, adopted a survey research design because the study focused on first-hand data. The study interviewed 10 married persons who had been married for at least five years. The research data was analysed using a thematic method of data analysis. The findings of this study revealed that, though the COVID-19 lockdown have led to the emotional and physical abuse, it has not cause separation or divorce. It was also found out that the major challenge the family system had during the lockdown was the accessibility of income. Based on these findings, the study recommended that, couples should strive to reduce their expenditure and increase their savings in case of eventualities like the COVID-19 pandemic. It also recommended that, couples should love, respect and tolerate each other even in the midst of social and economic disruptions like COVID-19 lockdown.

Key word: Couple, Covid-19 lockdown, family stability

Introduction

COVID-19 (Coronavirus) is a pandemic that came to the fore in the late 2019. It is contracted through respiratory droplets from an infected person to another. According to Obilor & Awogu (2021), COVID-19 is commonly transmitted between animals and people and is caused by a new strain of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) that has not been previously identified in humans.

In a bid to curb the spread of the virus, various governments including the Nigerian government enforced a “stay-at home” order; restricting social and economic activities within the country. This restriction prevented individuals from leaving their various homes except they are on special services to the public or the government.

This enforcement though carried out to prevent the spread of the coronavirus; may have availed individuals the opportunity to spend quality time with their family (husband, wife and children). This may have as well straightened the emotional bond between couples especially, as they tend to spend more time together than usual and also, aided the general development of children in the process. Ermisch & Francesconi (2013) opined that when parents spend quality time with children, it has positive consequences for child cognition and health. Kalil, Mayer, Delgado & Gennetian (2019) further added that the time parents spend with their children has an effect on their emotional well-being.

In the same vein, Purba, Kumalasari, Novianti, Kendhawati, Noer & Ninin (2021) stated that couples who harmoniously spend quality time together are less likely to undergo anxiety or depression and have better psychological and emotional well-being. However, this may not have been the trend during the COVID-19 lockdown. Kalil, Mayer and Shah (2020) asserted that, COVID-19 was a social shock due to the abrupt school closures and the widespread threat of illness and death. Baxter, Budinski, Carroll & Hand, (2020), Calarco, Meanwell, Anderson & Knopf (2020) Sevilla & Smith (2020), stated that while the school closures substantially increased the time that parents especially mothers, spend with their children the changes arising from the novel coronavirus can also have a direct effect on the level of distress parents and children experience arising from social isolation due to stay at home orders and changes to their usual daily routines (Kalil, Mayer, and Shah, 2020).

Kalil, Mayer and Shah (2020) surveyed 139 mothers from a range of income levels during the spring of 2020 and found out that on average; others who have greatly increased the time they spend caring for their children during the pandemic have disproportionately experienced substantial increases in stress, anxiety, and frustrations with their children. According to them, this was more rampant for mothers who held themselves to a high standard of intensive parenting. Other mothers in their sample did not experience increased time with their children as a substantial source of stress and indeed even characterized the increased parenting time as a source of joy in otherwise difficult times.

Thus, Conger, Wallace, Sun, Simons, McLoyd, & Brody (2002) parental mental health problems, such as loneliness, hopelessness, depressive symptoms and parenting stress are risk factors for a more stressful home environment. This is also, more likely in lower income homes and may have increased the rate of domestic violence among couples. Unlike when couples could avoid themselves by leaving the home for work or bar or to hang out with friends before the lockdown, the “sit-at-home” order or COVID-19 lockdown, made it impossible to leave the home.

Therefore, couples had to remain in the homes in spite of what they may have to experience in their homes. While the trend may have been different for harmonious couples, as they may have bonded further during the lockdown, the lockdown may have been a perfect opportunity for disharmony couples to engage in various forms of abuses against each other especially with the limited availability of income that may have accompanied the covid-19 lockdown. This may have also, helped them to make up their minds about getting a separation and divorce.

In view of this, this study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on family stability as it relates to couples relationship in Gwagwalada, Abuja.

The study was guided by the following questions. They are;

1. How did the COVID-19 lockdown affect the relationship between couples in Gwagwalada, Abuja?
2. How did the COVID-19 lockdown affect the economy of most families in Gwagwalada, Abuja?
3. How can couples’ relationship be straightened even in the midst of social challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and economic instability?

Literature review

Guidance for Lockdown

According to the presidential task force on COVID-19 (2020) the Federal Government of Nigeria stated that, schools, organizations and businesses in FCT, Lagos and Ogun States close effective from 30 March 2020 for an initial period of 2 weeks. For the period of lockdown, the following guidelines were expected to be implemented. They are:

1. For the period of the lockdown, every person is confined to his or her place of residence, unless strictly for the purpose of performing an essential service, obtaining essential goods or services or seeking medical care. In this case, essential services included the likes of health workers and food vendors.
2. All borders in the country are to be shut during the period of the lockdown, except for the transportation of persons on essential duty, food, fuel, manufactured goods or donated relief items.
3. Mass gathering is prohibited, except for funeral services which should be limited to not more than 20 persons as guided by infection prevention and control regulations.
4. Movement between and within States and FCT is restricted, except for workers involved in the delivery of authorized essential services, duties, food and goods.
3. Retail shops and malls must be closed, except where essential goods are sold. Shops and malls that are open must enforce social distancing and hygiene measures in line with issued guidelines.
4. Any business or organization providing essential goods and services must identify the staff who will perform those services.
5. Commuter services between cities and States including passenger rail services, bus services, maritime and air passenger transport are suspended for the period of the lockdown in States.
6. Limited transport services are allowed for the movement of workers, services and goods in response to COVID-19 and for the purpose of seeking medical attention or provision of essential services. Transport services available during the lockdown must implement social distancing and hygiene measures.

These guidelines were basically enforced by the police force as well as some other agencies and aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus at the peak of the pandemic. These regulations were put in place in addition to social distancing and regular hand wash.

Empirical literature

Kolo, Osezua, Osezua & Aigbona (2021) carried out a study titled “COVID-19 upon us: the work-family experiences of married couples during the first three months of the pandemic in Lagos, Nigeria”. This study explored couples’ experiences and coping strategies as they

negotiated the “emergency normal” that confronted them during the first three months of the lockdown. Using interpretive approach, In-depth Interviews were conducted with ten (10) couples, comprising five (5) males and 5 females, with marriage life ranging between four (4) to ten years and drawn from across various occupational sectors of the Nigerian society. We investigated couples’ experience of the lockdown using a tripod of approaches: pre-COVID-19 lockdown, COVID-19 lockdown and the futuristic approach of the post-COVID-19 period, all based on couples’ experiences. We found that work-life integration, desirable as it is, seemed difficult to practice in Lagos. Beyond the conventional work-life integration (WLI) approaches to and strategies for WLI, there is need to develop more practicable frameworks that can enhance WLI practice, based on the peculiar situation of married couples in Lagos, Nigeria.

This study is a departure from this study because it tried to assess the work-family experience and the coping strategy of couples in Lagos state before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on family stability by assessing the kind of relationship in families in Gwagwalada, Abuja during the lockdown.

Purba , Kumalasari, Novianti, Kendhawati, Noer & Ninin (2021) carried out a study titled “Marriage and quality of life during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia”. The study aimed at examining the quality of life of married people in Indonesia during a large-scale social restriction of the COVID-19 pandemic. An online cross-sectional survey using Qualtrics was conducted in June 2020. Respondents’ socio demographic data, spouse data (as reported by the respondents), and pandemic-related data were collected, followed by quality of life data, measured by WHQOOL-BREF. WHOQL-BREF consists of 26 questions grouped into four domains: physical, psychological, social relationships, and environmental. Mann-Whitney U, Kruskal-Wallis H and Spearman correlation analyses were employed to compare quality of life between groups of socio demographic characteristics. In total, 603 respondents were recruited. The respondents’ mean age is 35.3 years (SD = 7.61), most are females (82%), bachelor degree graduate (95%), Islam (78%), employed (69%), and assigned to work from home during the pandemic (76%). Married men reported better quality of life in almost all domains than women; employed respondents reported higher quality of life scores than unemployed; higher educated respondents reported higher quality of life than

those with lower education; respondents with higher income reported higher quality of life than those with lower income. We found significant positive correlations between the quality-of-life scores and age, spouse's age, and marriage length, although they were considered small. Compared to Indonesian population normative scores pre-pandemic, our sample reported no difference in physical and social domains, lower in the psychological domain, but higher in the environmental domain. Indonesian married people, especially women, those with low level of education, currently out of work, and below-average financial condition are the ones who reported worse quality of life during the lockdown. These results can help direct the Indonesian government efforts in dealing with psychosocial problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for married couples.

This study investigated marriage but, it failed to assess the relationship amongst married couples in Gwagwalada, Abuja during the COVID-19 lockdown. Rather, it investigated the quality of life of married couples during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia.

Kutsar & Kurvet-Käosaar (2021) investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families: young people's experiences in Estonia. This article reflects the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the everyday lives of children and their families in Estonia during lockdown in spring 2020 and 2021. The data corpus is based on diaries compiled by children during the first lockdown in 2020 for a collection at the Estonian Literary Museum, and on a series of semi-structured interviews with children documenting their experiences during lockdown in spring 2021. The study draws on literature from the "new sociology of childhood" and applies Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model to an analysis of young people's experiences when their mobility outside the home was restricted, and they were forced to reorganise their time use. The findings show how the pandemic extended the social contexts in which children and their families are embedded and highlighted the role played by socio-cultural factors in shaping children's coping capacities. In combination, analysis of the two datasets demonstrated the differential effects of lockdown on young children. The accounts from the first wave of the pandemic in 2020 suggested that positive family environments could smooth the negative effects of lockdown and help them cope with unexpected changes in their everyday lives. The interviews during the second outbreak of the pandemic revealed how the emerging weariness and boredom reported by some children strained family relationships. The amount of time that children spent online

both modified and expanded their experiences of technology-supported interactive spaces. Their reports showed that the interactive contexts in which they were operating through social media extended beyond national borders to an interest in transnational and global events. Online communication did not, however, compensate for the loss of real-life contacts with friends, which became a major concern for young people in Estonia. In the concluding discussion, the authors consider policy responses that address the main issues identified in the research.

This study which investigated *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families: Young People's Experiences in Estonia* did not assess the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on the relationship of couples in Gwagwalada, Abuja, Nigeria. In view of the above gaps, this study aimed at filling the gaps in knowledge of the studies above.

Theoretical framework

This study anchored on functionalism by R. K. Merton. This is because; it effectively explains the function of the COVID-19 lockdown. The theory looks at two types of functions. They are the latent and the manifest function.

According to him, manifest functions are intended functions while the latent functions are unintended functions. Based on this theory, the manifest function of the COVID-19 lockdown was ensuring physical/ social distancing and curbing the spread of coronavirus. While this may have been the intended function of the COVID-19 lockdown, this lockdown may have also strengthened the relationship and bond between couples as they spend more quality time together. However, in spending more time with each other, couples who are not at peace with each other, may experience lots of physical and emotional abuse that may likely cause separation or divorce.

Research methodology

The study assessed the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on family stability as it relates to couples relationship in Gwagwalada, Abuja. The study adopted a survey research design because the study relied on first-hand method of data collection.

The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data collection techniques in deriving data for this study. The research interviewed married couples who have been

married for at least five years and analysed the data derived from the field using a thematic method of data analysis. The study interviewed 10 married men and 10 married women. These couples were identified by a marriage counsellor to have had or be having problems in their marriage and a snowballing sampling technique so as to get the appropriate interviewee for this study.

Research findings

How did the COVID-19 lockdown affect the relationship between couples in Gwagwalada, Abuja?

All the interviewees stated that the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on couples' relationship differs. Four of the interviewees stated that the lockdown aided reproduction as can be seen in the 'lockdown babies'. One of the interviewees stated that the lockdown was frustrating especially because most families did not plan for such. He stated that having spent almost all their savings during the festive period and incurring other expenses like the payment of school fee, most families could hardly feed well during the lockdown and according to him; this was a major cause of disharmony in most families. Another interviewee who heard his conversation added that the husband will not be happy that he could not take care of the family and the wife on the other hand may also be unhappy and possibly beginning to disrespect the husband. According to her, both parties are likely to transfer aggression on themselves or their children.

Three of the interviewees stated that the lockdown is less likely to cause divorce and separation except in situation where the couples were in disharmony and wanted a separation or divorce before the lockdown.

How did the COVID-19 lockdown affect the economy of most families in Gwagwalada, Abuja?

All the interviewees stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact the family system. One of the interviewees stated that this impact is clearly seen from the effect of the pandemic on the country's economy. According to him, the country's economy suffered and so does the economy of the family.

In analysing the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the family system, one of the interviewees stated that those who are self-employed and those who rely on daily pay were affected greatly as they could not earn a living all through the period of the lockdown.

Another interviewee added that, lots of workers lost their jobs during the lockdown. According to him, most employers slashed the pay of their workers due to the reduction in productivity thus, most workers who were not comfortable with the pay had to quit their job.

All the interviewees agreed that the income level of most families reduced during the COVID-19 lockdown. One of the interviewee further stated that feeding level increased because all the family members were at home but, the income level reduced drastically.

How can couples' relationship be straightened even in the midst of social challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and economic instability?

One of the interviewees stated that the key to a happy home is the bible. According to her, the bible says it all that, husbands should love their wives and wives should respect their husband even when he has no money.

Two interviewees stated that husband and wife should tolerate each other and let love reign even in the midst of social and economic disruption.

Another interviewee further suggested that, couples minimise their expenditures and save more as it will help them on the rainy day.

Discussion of research findings

The findings of this study showed that the COVID-19 lockdown, to a large extent, had a multifaceted effect on families living in Gwagwalada, Abuja, Nigeria. While it led to stronger family bonds and deeper marital ties in some families, it contributed to the emotional and physical trauma experienced in other families. However, it rarely resorted to separations and divorce even in disharmonious couples.

The findings showed that families experienced major economic challenges during the phase of the COVID-19 Lockdown due to industry losses, pay-cuts, retrenchments and resignations experienced even on a global scale. It was revealed that to maintain family

stability even in the face of challenges couples must tolerant, love and understand each other.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 lockdown was an effective measure aimed at ensuring social/physical distancing and curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This measure ensured that individuals remained in their houses with their partners. However, the major challenge that faced most families is the ability to get adequate income to cater for their basic needs in the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown. This has heightened the frustration in most families; coupled with the restrictions and confinements to their homes, and further caused disharmony in most families.

Irrespective of this, the lockdown did not influence the rate of separation and divorce except in situations where the couples had already made up their minds to separate or get a divorce before the lockdown.

Recommendation

The following recommendations were made based on the research finding. They are:

1. Couples should strive to reduce their expenditure and increase their savings in case of eventualities like the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Couples should love, respect and tolerate each other even in the midst of social and economic disruptions like COVID-19 lockdown. This will help to ensure stability in the family.
3. Governments need to put in place measures, to cushion the socio-economic effects of wide scale lockdowns. This would enable families remain functional.

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