

Family Relationships and Coming to Terms with End-of-life Issues among Pensioners in Cross River State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT This study sought to determine the impact of family relationships on the ability to come to terms with end-of-life issues among pensioners in Cross River State, Nigeria. A three sub-scale instrument was used – Background Data Scale (BADs), Perceived Level of Success of Children Scale (PLSCS) and Attitude to Death Scale (ATDS). The ex post facto design was adopted and 430 pensioners were sampled. In line with the two hypotheses, the data was analyzed and attitude to death had a significant relationship with family ties and perceived level of children's success. It is recommended that parents form strong bonds with their families early in life and that older adults use this time to cement relationships, mend fences, and contribute as much energy and time as possible, thus firmly securing their footprints in the sand of time.

INTRODUCTION

Late adulthood represents the twilight years, as the lifespan steadily approaches its expiration. The major task of this stage according to Erikson et al. (1986) is that of introspection, reflection and adapting oneself to the triumphs and challenges of being in old age. At this stage of life, 60 years and above, changes and deterioration of the body becomes manifestly obvious and chronic illnesses, some of which are terminal and others extremely debilitating, begin to manifest (Dacey and Travers 1996). Also, numbers of friends begin to diminish as they begin to die one after the other, such that some older persons become socially isolated and lonely (De Vries 1996). The prospect of death and the possibility of terminal illnesses become stark realities.

Hence, some older persons may have mixed feelings about the prospects of dying and death. Others may be apathetic and have diminished desires and will to live as a result of physical problems, losses and other challenges of old age (McCue 1995). For others, the comforts and pleasures of life may inhibit their sensibilities to their finitude and mortality. There are yet others who feel they have lived their lives to the fullest and can therefore find meaning and purpose in their existence, hence they have little or no fear of impending death. Erikson (1987) contended that older adults, who resolve the final crisis of integrity versus despair, achieve acceptance of what they have done with their lives as well as

their impending death. Satisfying family relationship and other components of generativity are some measures of lives well lived, devoid of major regret (Kelly 1995).

Family, particularly children and grandchildren, form the core of the social life of the older adult and a primary source of emotional support, particularly for those who are widowed (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995). Also, children are seen as gift from God, source of hope and joy, sign of wealth, insurance for old age, a means of immortality because they propagate the family name and culture and they are the ones to take care of ageing parents and give them befitting burial (Ram 1999). Alexander et al. (1994) also indicated that older women who never had children express regret and the feeling becomes more intense, the older they get.

Grand parenthood and great-grand parenthood roles often give individuals personal sense of fulfillment, especially if their families make them feel important and valued. Such roles offer sense of personal and family renewal, symbols of continuity, source of diversion and marks of longevity (Suitor et al. 1995). In Doka and Mertz's (1998) interview with 40 great-grand parents, 93% commented, *life is starting again in my family, seeing them grow keeps me young and I never thought I'll live to see it*. As far as such older persons are concerned, they have lived life to the fullest, having seen their family grow to the third and fourth generations. Hence, to such people death is another step in a meaningful life.

Parents tend to have a profound sense of pride and satisfaction when they perceive their children as having turned out well. That is, being able to acquire good education; properly married and well anchored in family life, having good occupation and distinguishing themselves in the community. Such parents feel validated as successful parents (Propenoe and Whitehead 1999). Some parents tend to be distressed when their grown children have serious problems, for instance, with drugs, inability to hold down jobs and refusal to get married and procreate. For such parents, according to Troll and Fingerman (1996) such problems are signs of their own failure as parent. There is, therefore, a lot of unfinished business, the children need to be settled first and as such, death may indeed be a frightening thought.

Family relationships are sources of optimism for older persons but sometimes, according to Connidis and Davies (1992), some parent-child relationships can be distant, cold and fraught with difficulties. Hence, relationship with family may not make any difference in the attitude of some older persons to end-of-life issues. Some parents neglected their children when they were growing up and now that they are old and dependent, the children have in turn, neglected them. Such older persons, according to Bako (1998), live empty and melancholy lives. They regret their actions and are often encompassed by feelings of helplessness and worthlessness. Such people, according to Zisook and Downs (2000), are terrified by death because it represents their failure and woes.

Against this backdrop, one wonders the difference family relationships make in the attitude of pensioners towards end-of-life issues.

Statement of the Problem

Anxiety over matters of death and dying tend to run high even among older persons. For some people, these could be the years of stability and abundance. Death would, therefore, mean loss of relationships, loss of pleasures and the good things of life. Many people are therefore, terrified by the mere thought of death, even in old age. Despite the manifestation of the signs of ageing and the developmental challenges associated with this stage of life, many of such older persons hardly make adequate preparation towards this end-of-life journey. Death and severely impairing

illnesses, oftentimes, take many older persons unawares. The question therefore, is, do family ties and relationships impact on their coming to terms with the end-of-life issues among pensioners in Cross River State (CRS)?

Research Hypotheses

1. The family ties of pensioners are not significantly related to their attitude to end-of-life issues (death).
2. There is no significant relationship between pensioners' perceived level of their children's success and their attitude to end-of-life issues (death).

Research Design

The ex-post facto design was employed since the variables under consideration are already existent in the respondents and as such cannot be manipulated by the researcher.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The population consisted of pensioners of both the state and federal civil service. The list of pensioners was provided by each of the nine pay points from which retirees pick up their pay cheques each month. With each of the nine pay points forming a stratum, stratified random sampling technique was employed and 430 respondents were ultimately selected.

Instrumentation

The instruments consisted of three sub-scales namely, Background Data Scale (BADs) which is an eight-item scale that sought to obtain background information on respondents - age, sex, number of children, relationship with children, etc.; Perceived Level of Success of Children Scale (PLSCS) is a ten-item scale that would depict success made by respondents' grown children. Items such as academic attainment, ability to hold a steady job, maintaining happy home, heeding parental advice, etc. respondents were to assess their children as being high, average, low and very low on these dimensions; Attitude to Death Scale (ATDS), a ten-item scale to depict both positive and negative feelings about death. Items included, *looking back at my life to ascertain*

where errors and triumphs were made, possibility of being afflicted by cancer, stroke, Alzheimer and other age-related diseases, etc. Respondents were to react to the ten statements by ticking responses – acceptance, indifference, refusal and fear.

The content validity of the instrument was established through thorough scrutiny for its relevance, meaningfulness and appropriateness by experts in psychology and measurement. Furthermore, the instrument was administered to 60 older persons in the civil service who are close to retirement. The data accruing there from was analyzed and using the Cronbach Co-efficient Alpha reliability method, the internal consistency of the items was established. The reliability estimates were 0.89 for BADS, 0.93 for PLSCS and 0.83 for ATDS.

Data Collection

The researcher, in cooperation with some research assistants visited the nine pay points for ten consecutive days which coincided with the period pensioners report for their pay cheques, and the instrument was administered on the sampled pensioners. Follow-up visits were later made to respondents' residences for the retrieval of completed questionnaires.

RESULTS

The result of the data collected was duly coded and scored. Family ties consisted of the number of children respondents have and their relationship with them. Relationships were graded, *excellent* with score of 5, *very good* with

score of 4, *good* was scored 3, *fair* scored 2 and *poor* scored 1. Number of children and scores on relationships were aggregated to form one single score for each respondent. Maximum score for PLSCS was 40 for *high*, 30 for *average*, 20 for *low*, and 10 for *very low*. Maximum score for ATDS was 40 for a positive attitude of *acceptance*, 30 for negative attitude of *indifference*, 20 for negative attitude of *refusal* and 10 for attitude of *fear*. However, the mean was 27.04 which is indicative of negative attitude.

The accruing data is reported in tables with the corresponding interpretations, based on each of the two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1

The family ties of pensioners are not significantly related to their attitude to death.

Both the independent and dependent variables are continuous, therefore the hypothesis is tested with Pearson Product Moment Correlation Statistics. The results are shown in table 1. However, only 393 respondents gave information on their family size and relationship and so the analysis was done on that basis.

As shown in Table 1, the calculated r – value for family ties and attitude to death is significant at .05 level of significance and 391 degrees of freedom. This means that there is a significant positive relationship between family ties of pensioners and their attitude to death. In order words, as family ties increase, their attitude to death becomes more positive and vice versa and since the observed relationship is statistically significant, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Table1: Pearson Product Moment correlation of family ties of pensioners and their attitude to death (N=393)

Variables	$\Sigma x^2 (\Sigma y^2)$	Σxy	R	Significant level
Family ties	2122.555	719.634	.115	.023*
Attitude to death	23049.351			

* $P < .05$ df = 391

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlation of pensioners' perceived level of children's success and attitude to death (N=415)

Variables	$\Sigma x^2 (\Sigma y^2)$	Σxy	R	Significant level
Children's success level	13712.733	3485.863	.202	.000*
Attitude to death	23049.351			

* $P < .05$ df = 413

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between pensioners' perceived level of their children's success and their attitude to death.

For the same reason mentioned in Hypothesis 1, Pearson Product Moment correlation statistics was employed in testing the hypothesis. However, only 415 respondents gave the required information on their children. The results are shown in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 indicate that the calculated r value, .202 for perceived level of children's success and attitude to death is significant at 0.5 level and 413 degrees of freedom. This means there is a positive and significant relationship between pensioners' perceived level of their children's success and their attitude to death. This implies that as pensioners' perceived level of their children's success increase, their attitude to death becomes more positive. Since the observed positive relationship is statistically significant, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

DISCUSSION

The indication from the study is that family ties and level of success of grown children as perceived by the parents impact significantly on such pensioners' ability to come to terms with end-of-life issues, that is, their attitude to death. Pensioners, who have strong family ties and relationships and whose children have made tremendous strides, in the eyes of the parents, seem to have more positive attitude to issues related to death and dying. An explanation of this finding may rest in the fact that the parents are simply pleased because their adult children have met their expectations. Kivett (1991) noted that there is nothing more pleasing to an older adult than having lived long enough to see the grown children living on their own and generally doing well. They are happy and content in the fact that their children are carrying out the goals, principles and ideals they worked hard to impart in them.

Possibly, these pensioners children have acquired good education, are married to spouses they approve of, are engaged in friendship and affiliation that are satisfactory and relate well and show concern for the older parents and other younger and less fortunate members of the family. This could indeed foster a great sense of pride

and satisfaction that could easily lead to optimism about life, death and dying.

Indeed, Hartup and Stephen (1999) indicated that parents glow with a great sense of pride when their children are married to the appropriate class and status of persons, well anchored in family life and show concern and care for family members. More so, being the parents of successful children and being grandparents and great grandparents, bring to many older adults a good deal of pleasure and a great sense of fulfillment, especially here in Nigeria. It validates older adult as successful parents and boosts their sense of generativity. The feeling is that of "*I have seen it all, I am contented*". Taylor et al. (2001) stated that being parents of a grandmother or grandfather can be very fulfilling. The experience could make life worth living for as long as it lasts and death and dying very acceptable.

On the other hand, pensioners whose grown children have serious problems – drug use, unemployment, homelessness, inability to hold their lives together and other anti-social behaviors may consider themselves as having failed in their parenting. To them, there is a lot of unfinished business, they are lacking validation of their sense of generativity and they wonder "*where did I go wrong?*" Hence, according to Erikson et al. (1986) such older persons experience strong sense of despair and fear of death and dying.

It is recommended that individuals should stop from time to time, to examine the choices and decisions made, during the earlier stages of their adulthood, to see how they meet the needs of the individuals themselves and their family members. Wrong choices, wrong turns and neglect of their children, often come to haunt and taunt individuals in old age. It is the consequences of such wrong choices and decisions earlier in life that bring about regrets, despair and negative attitude of fear and denial of impending death.

Since family ties are important morale boosters in old age, it is therefore a crucial time to cement relationships, mend fences, create memories and contribute as much time and energy that the older individual can spare, thus firmly securing one's footprints in the sands of time. Coming to terms with the end-of-life journey is crucial for making the necessary preparation towards it. Such preparation include compiling one's autobiography, writing a will, deciding on burial place and form of funeral obsequies, grooming successors where

necessary and even writing a living will, in case of slipping into a vegetative condition.

IMPLICATION FOR COUNSELLING

Since strong family ties make significant impact on attitude of older persons to end-of-life issues, it is important that counsellors who work with children in nursery, primary and secondary schools reiterate to parents the need to spend more time with their children. In this rat race to survive, parents tend to neglect these duties. It is the bonds that are established early in life that yield the solid family ties and relationships which bring satisfaction in old age. Also, by spending more time with their children, parents would develop greater understanding of their children's abilities and direct and steer them into the appropriate pathways that would lead to their success as grown children.

CONCLUSION

In these twilight years, which are often characterized by physical problems, losses and other challenges of being in old age, family relationships become crucial to older persons ability to come to terms with end-of-life issues. Indeed, this study indicated that older persons who have more satisfactory family ties and relationships demonstrated more positive attitude towards matters of death and dying. There is therefore the need for parents to form strong parent-child bonds early in life, so that when they arrive at this final stage of life, they would have little or no regret or fear but will face this final journey of life with utmost preparedness.

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