

COVID-19 EXPERIENCE IN NIGERIAN FAMILY SETTINGS: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS AND FAMILY COUNSELLORS.

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Abstract

It has become very important to clarify the pandemic era following different waves of COVID 19 in different places. This is also important because the pandemic does not seem to be over yet. Therefore, this paper focuses on the experiences of the pandemic in Nigerian family settings and how such experiences have implications for researchers and family counsellors. To briefly understand how the pandemic has been experienced with associated levels of stress in the family system demands a deep appreciation of how different individual members of families expressed their beliefs concerning COVID-19, which reflected in their compliance or noncompliance to COVID-19 restrictions in their families. In this case, the general system theory could become an important lens for researchers and family counsellors who may wish to understand how the beliefs of some individual family members and their willingness to comply or not to comply with restrictions could become sources of increased levels of stress in the entire family system.

Introduction

To understand the impact of the pandemic on the Nigerian family structure, it will be important to make a brief remark on the meaning of family in context. There is every need to make a shift from the traditional understanding of family as a system of relationships among people who share blood ties to current conceptualizations. In this regard, Whall (1996) defined the family as a self-defined group of two or more individuals who are, or are not, bound by blood ties or law, but function in a way that makes them feel they represent a family. This definition implies a very reflective consideration of various constellations of families (Årestedt, Persson & Benzein, 2014) which usually generates a unique system of relationships especially in a place like Nigeria where family settings could be categorized as families with one mother, multiple mothers, and the extended family.

According to Priest(2021), the understanding of family as a system of relationships was derived from the general system theory (Bertalanffy, 1969). The general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1969) uncovers the principles behind the combination of interacting units which are known as sub-systems and their relationships to generate a new and unique system. In the light of family system theory, which is a derivative of the general system theory, the family in this context represents this new and unique system of relationships. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of the family is not complete without the appreciation of how the individual units or individuals that make up the family influence the nature and experiences of the family during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The immediate effect of the COVID-19 on the family system are grouped into two

in this paper which include the different beliefs about the nature of the pandemic, and the effect of COVID-19 on the family structure and its implications for researchers and family counsellors.

Different beliefs about the covid-19 in the family

Before any discussions on how different beliefs about the pandemic may differ among members of different families, a brief understanding of what family structure in Nigeria may look like is important. Because Nigeria is poly-cultural in nature, family structures or systems may be dependent on the different cultures exhibited. For instance, in the Igbo family structure, we have to take into consideration three kinds of family settings: Family with one mother which consists of father, one mother, children, dependents, and relatives; family with multiple mothers common in polygamous families, with father, two or more mothers, children, dependents and relatives; and the extended family setting in which father, mother or mothers, children, in-laws, from both sides, friends, and other relatives all live together as one household (Obindigbo, 2015). In the extended family settings, senior male figures and relatives are usually called uncles while females are called aunts.

In the context of the pandemic, a major point of interest is how certain families could be made up of some people who believe and those who would not believe in the reality of the pandemic. In this case, it would be difficult for the family as a unique system of individuals to either apply social distancing to the fullest or exclude and ostracize those who refused to observe social distancing from the family. So, living in a family with some people who did not believe in the seriousness and reality of the pandemic was a source of stress that posed great danger to family members who believed in the reality of the pandemic and to the entire family as a system. Therefore, this situation and associated increase in family stress has implications for both researchers and family counsellors. Lack of belief in the seriousness of the pandemic has been attributed to different conspiracy theories and individual desires to differ from what other people believe.

These beliefs in different conspiracy theories put both the individual and family at risk. Evidences suggest that belief in conspiracy theories undermines engagement in pro-health behaviours and support for public health policies (Earnshaw, 2020). Some people believed that it was part of a government plan to use COVID-19 to transmit bioweapons into people as vaccines. While some thought it was coming from 5G cell towers (Allyn, 2020), others thought it was part of the plans of some pharmaceutical companies to make profit through the spread of COVID-19. Some people also believed that the virus is not worse than the usual strain of flu people take shots for during flu seasons. Those who did not know anybody who had contacted the virus or died from it claimed it never existed for them. According to Muller (2020), some researchers have linked belief in conspiracy theories to the need for uniqueness. In other words, people want to feel powerful and special as though they are in possession of important information that other

people do not have. Some of these conspirators and those who believed them are part of family systems where there were family members who took the situation very seriously and were willing to comply with government restrictions as well as those who either refused to believe or wished to appear different. In this case, the hesitations of certain family members to believe in the reality of the virus and their corresponding nonchalant attitudes towards the restrictions put in place to curb the rate of infections had the capacity to increase the experiences of stress in the entire family system.

The stressors may vary from family to family. They include fear of infection and fear of coming into contact with objects or surfaces contaminated with the corona virus; fear of socio-economic impacts of the pandemic; fear of foreigners in case they are infected; pandemic-related compulsive checking and reassurance-seeking; pandemic-related traumatic stress symptoms. Researchers have implicated these stressors as the origin of a severe form of a syndrome called the COVID Stress Disorder, which is regarded as a pandemic-related adjustment disorder (Taylor, 2021).

Managing the Pandemic in family settings

The spread of COVID-19 had nothing to do with believing or not believing in the reality of the pandemic. Experiences have shown that some people who did not believe that it was real believed when they were hit by the pandemic. To reduce the rate of infections, social distancing was introduced, especially with people who were not members of the families. The idea of seeing people live in families as members of a safer social circle did not exclude the possibility that one or some members of the family may not have believed in the existence of COVID-19 as a serious pandemic. To deal with this, some countries like the United State of America recognized the need to protect senior citizens in the nursing homes from their loved ones with physical contact restrictions. Therefore, in as much as it is difficult for regular families where people lived together to control the in-and-out of individual members of their families, it seemed difficult for people living in such families to completely avoid being in contact with those infected with the virus. This is because COVID-19 has a pervasive effect on families and the individuals that make up the families (Lebow, 2020). This situation put families in danger of being victims of the disbelief of those who did not believe in the reality of COVID-19 and related consequences since social distancing was only easier among people who did not have to live in families together or where every family member shared the same belief.

Lack of belief in the reality of the pandemic by some members of families, increased anxiety among those who believed in the reality of COVID-19. Beyond the refusal to accept this reality in a family setting by some family members, there are other emerging realities that were not thought of among scholars, psychologists, and behavioural health experts as serious and possible triggers of stress in the family system with the experience of lockdown. Other family

variables such as changes in income, lack of places to eat, for those who dislike cooking, were sources of stress in family settings. Another emerging reality is the effect of an increased time together. It is possible that increased time together in the family had its positive effects like increased satisfaction in husband-wife, father-child, mother-child, and sibling-sibling relationships. It is also possible that some families experienced decrease in satisfaction in these relationship patterns as a result of increased time and inability to escape “family jail”. The consequences of these negative influences which demand more insights from researchers, pose new challenges for family counsellors, not only in raising questions on the influence of increased time together on the rate of family conflicts, divorce, intimate partner violence, and family violence increase (Lebow, 2020), but also on best counselling approaches in a COVID-19 or post COVID-19 contextual family counselling.

Therefore, the anxiety from COVID-19 experiences in families, lead to increased levels of stress in the entire family system. All the different forms of stress engendered by the pandemic consequently and no doubt elevate the prevalence of individual anxiety and psychopathology (McFarlane, 2016). Talking of psychopathology here, one may not be interested in descriptive psychopathology which tries to offer the precise categorization and definition of the experiences of the family members, but in the explanatory psychopathology which attempts to explain symptoms of distorted mental and behavioural health of people living in families as a result of the pandemic based on the family system theory as a theoretical model (Oyebode, 2018) which is a derivative of the general system theory (Bertalanffy, 1969).

Implications for researchers and family counsellors

Irrespective of the positive or negative effects of the pandemic on the family system, the general experience has raised the consciousness level of individual family members, psychologists, social workers and family counsellors directly or indirectly on the reality of the family as a system. The general system theory (Bertalanffy, 1969) on which the family system theory is based provides practical and scholarly explanations of how subsystems irrespective of the particular nature of their composition act together to form a new system that is different from the system. Researchers and family counsellors can use this theoretical model to understand how a more focused attention and increased awareness on the family as a system can offer a better and easier understanding of the contributions of each member of the family towards a unique family structure that becomes different in function and character from individual family members.

Therefore, looking at the characteristics of a family in context as a product of the characteristics of individual members of the family in Nigeria offers researchers and family counsellors the opportunity to appreciate the need for increased attention on different kinds of stress triggered by the pandemic among the individual family members which shapes the nature of the family. For the family

counsellors, this knowledge will enhance the understanding of the need to individualize the family stress since what the family suffers is an accumulation of different stress coping strategies that are either positive or negative among the family members. So, dealing with the effects of the COVID-19 on the family in counseling sessions starts with the effects of COVID-19 on individual members of the family. This suggests an adoption of the general system theory framework.

To adopt the lens of the general system theory as a framework, the researcher or the family counselor in Nigeria must be contextual in bracketing prior preconceptions, for instance, those based on the views of the Greek philosopher Aristotle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There must be a conscious separation of the meaning of the “whole” and the “individual” as in mathematical and some psychological constructs. This is because in mathematics, the whole is equal to the sum of all the parts, while in gestalt psychology the whole is different from the parts of the whole. This view used among gestalt psychologists to explain the relationship among things perceived in the perception system could make people think that it shares the same view with the general system theory where the whole system is also perceived as different from the individual parts. To differentiate the two views in contexts and application while focusing on the effect of the pandemic on families, the meaning of the “whole is different from individual parts” in gestalt theory means that one cannot understand the parts of something to understand the whole. But in a different manner, the application of general system theory enables an understanding of the whole family system from the understanding of the individual parts represented by the individual experiences of the family members. Therefore, after bracketing preconceptions based on Aristotle and gestalt psychologists, researchers can conveniently use the principles of the general system theory to understand how individual stress and pathologies increased family dysfunctions that contextually redefined families with the advent of COVID-19. This has great implications for researchers, especially family counsellors who should start with individual counselling first in a family counselling protocol.

Conclusion.

Until now, reactions to the pandemic have been conceptualized as what mostly concerned individuals without much known focus on how it could reshape the function of the family as a unique system. This paper has therefore, attempted a brief explanation of how Nigerian family systems may differ based on culture. The paper also explained briefly how COVID-19 experiences in Nigerian family settings based on different beliefs about the pandemic may have affected compliance to COVID-19 restrictions. For an understanding of the impact of individual beliefs, and acceptance of different conspiracy theories and their effects on the stress levels of families in Nigeria during the pandemic, this paper encourages researchers and counsellors to adopt the lens of the general system theory to see how the stress of individual family members lead to stressed families.

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