

## **Adaptive Behaviours among Adolescent Students from Divorce Homes in various Religious Backgrounds in Ghana.**

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### **Abstract**

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The purpose of this study was to determine the impact parental divorce has on adolescent students in Senior High Schools in Ghana and adaptive behaviours among adolescent students from divorce homes in various Religious Backgrounds in Ghana. The participants comprised of adolescent students from four Senior High Schools in Obuasi Municipality in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. A purposive sample of 396 students consisting of 198 males and 198 females participated in the study. The cross-sectional descriptive survey, using a questionnaire, was adopted in collecting the data. The questionnaire had Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. The results of the study indicated that adolescents from Christian divorced homes adapt better psychosocially than adolescents from Muslim divorced homes. It was also found that adolescent students who have experienced divorce from Christian homes demonstrate more externalising types of behaviour than those from Muslim homes. It is recommended that counselling be given to adolescent students in schools from divorced homes and that teachers should make efforts to identify such adolescent students. Parents should also be sensitized on the impact of divorce on their children.

Key words: social adaptability, externalizing behaviour, internalizing behaviour.

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### **1. Introduction**

Children have always faced the threat of family disruption from various sources. In the past, death was more likely to disrupt families than was divorce. Around the turn of the century, DeBord (1997) reported that about 25% of children experienced the death of a parent before age 15 as compared with 7% or 8% who experienced parental divorce. DeBord continued that as a result of the increase in longevity, the proportion of dependent children who lost a parent through death decreased during 21st century. Currently, only about 5% of children are so affected. However, the divorce rate increased over this same period, and at current rates, it is predicted that between two-fifths and two-thirds of all recent first marriages will end in divorce or separation. DeBord (1997) further expressed the view that the high rate of marital dissolution means that about 40% of adolescent children will experience a parental divorce prior to the age of 20. He emphasized that although a substantial risk of family disruption has always been present, today it is much more likely to be caused by divorce than by death.

Adolescence has been noted as a crucial period of cognitive, psychosocial and emotional transformations (Kelly, 2004). It is also recognized that perhaps the most influential determinant of adolescent success with the negotiation to adulthood is family structure (Fallon & Bowles, 2001). Indeed, to a large extent, family structure determines adolescents' academic and psychosocial development (Brown, 2006). In particular, family structure bears important implications on adolescents' abilities to successfully navigate through school and into adulthood. However, a key barrier to this success is divorce.

Amato (2008) reported that the divorce situation in the U.S.A has been souring. Amato reported that presently more children are disadvantaged through divorce than through death.

Amato (2008) pointed out that Americans traditionally have believed that a two-parent family is necessary for the successful socialization and development of children. Consequently, it has been assumed that parental

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death leads to many problems for children, such as delinquency, depression, and even suicide in later life. More recent studies indicate that, although parental death disadvantages children, the long-term consequences of the death of a parent are not as severe as the long-term effects of parental divorce (Kelly, 2004). In addition to the above, Brown (2006) assumed that children who “lost” a parent through divorce experienced serious problems similar to those experienced by children who lost a parent through death. Furthermore, whereas the death of a parent is usually unintended and unavoidable, marital dissolution is freely chosen by at least one parent. Consequently, the question of the impact of divorce on children often takes on moral overtones. These concerns, combined with the dramatic increase in the rate of divorce during the last few decades, have resulted in a proliferation of studies on the effects of divorce on children. Some of these researches, however, do not always lead to firm conclusions. Many gaps exist in our knowledge, and weaknesses in study methodology could mean that many findings are tentative at best. Nevertheless, Amato (2008) believed that a consensus is beginning to emerge among researchers about the consequences of divorce on children. In spite of the limitations of research methodology, this knowledge can help to inform policies designed to improve the well-being of children involved in parental marital dissolution.

Hewitt, Skrbis & Western (2008) have indicated that changes to family life in Australia over the last century have been numerous. One such change has been the increase in the number of couples divorcing. Accordingly about half of divorces involve children under the age of 18 years and it is estimated that around 25% of children are living in households with only one parent (De Vaus, 2004). Some of the studies that have investigated the consequences of parental divorce on children find that children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce themselves. Relatively little attention has been given to the ways in which parental divorce affect the psychosocial adjustment of adolescent students life (Hewitt, Skrbis & Western, 2008)

Amato (2008) observed that after divorce adolescents experienced anger, fear, loneliness, depression and guilt. Some feel pushed into adulthood if they must take responsibility for many new chores or care of siblings. He said adolescents may respond to parents’ low energy level and high stress level by trying to take control over the family. Others feel a loss of parental support in handling emerging sexual feelings and also may doubt their own ability to get married or to stay married. Amato (2008) believed that adolescents have the capacity to understand the causes leading to their parents’ separation. He emphasized that their ability to remember the conflict and stress of the divorce may interfere with their ability to cope with the changes in their family. Adolescents may also feel pressure to “choose” one of their parents over the other, or to fault one parent over the other for the “cause” of the divorce.

The divorce rate in Australia is currently 33% (Australia Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005). However, leading Australian demographers predict that recent marriage cohorts will experience rates of divorce around 45% (Carmichael 1997). Parental divorce has been found to be negatively associated with a wide range of outcomes in children including health and well-being, academic performance and relationship formation (Amato, 2000).

In Ghana the situation is not different from what has been discussed above. Mainoo (2008) reported similar situations in Ghana. He reported that records available in Ghana show a progressive increase in divorce over the past years. According to Mainoo (2008) in Ashanti region alone, divorce cases filed at High Court were as follows; 87 cases in 1996, 115 cases in 1997, 162 cases in 1998 and 752 cases in 2004. It is clear that cases filed in 2004 alone are greater than cases filed from 1996 to 1998. This is an indication that divorce rate is also high in Ghana. Mainoo (2008) however, pointed out that there is very little literature concerning divorce and its impact in Ghana. This study therefore sought to fill some of the gaps in our Ghanaian literature and create the basis for further studies. The study aims to find out the impact of divorce on adolescent students’ psychosocial adjustment.

### **1. Aims and objectives of the study**

The main objective of the study was to find adaptive behaviours among adolescent students from divorce homes in various religious backgrounds in Ghana. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to:

1. Find out the differences exist in social adaptability among adolescent students of various religious backgrounds?
2. Test the differences exist in the externalising types of behaviours among adolescent students of various religious backgrounds?

### **2. Literature Review**

According to a worldwide study by Gallup International Millennium Survey (GIMS, 2000), West Africans are highly religious people with 99% of the people belonging to a religious denomination, 82% attending religious services regularly, 97% giving God high importance in their lives, and 95% believing that there is a personal god or some sort of spirit or life-giving force.

Ghanaian religions are grouped into four main types including 'free thinkers', Christianity, Islam and Traditional African religion (Population Census of Ghana, 2000). Table 1 below depicts changes in the distribution of religious adherents in Ghana for a period of four decades from 1960 to 2000. Although, Christian adherents have grown from 41% to 69% making an increase of 28%, Islam has also grown from 12% to 15.6%, making a marginal increase of 3.6% for the same period of four decades from 1960 to 2000 (Population Census of Ghana, 2000; Ghana Census, 1984)

**Table 1: Changes in Religious Distribution in Ghana from 1960 to 2000**

Religious Groups	1960	1985	2000
			69%
Christianity	41%	62%	
Traditional African Religion	38%	17%	8.5%
Islam	12%	15%	15.6%
Free Thinkers	9%	8%	6%

Source: Population and Housing Census of Ghana, 2000; Ghana Census, 1984.

On the contrary, Traditional African religion and Free Thinkers made marginal declines in their numbers for the same period. Marginal percentage decrease was greater for Traditional African Religion (29.5%) than for Free Thinkers (3%) (Population Census of Ghana, 2000; Ghana Census, 1984).

The question that naturally arises is, are religious beliefs and practices a correlate of adolescent psychosocial adjustment following the divorce of their parents? In other words, will differences in religion account for changes in adolescent psychosocial adjustment post parental divorce? Northern Ghana is predominated by Islam through Islamic traders and clerics who came from peninsular Arabia for the Trans Saharan Trade in the 15th century (Owusu-Ansah, 1994). Islam advocates polygamy which incidentally affirms traditional marital concepts and so many Ghanaians easily identified with this religious tenet and converted to Islam among other reasons (Shenk, 1995). The presence of Christianity has been among the coastal dwellers of Ghana since the Portuguese missionary eras in the 15th century (Owusu-Ansah, 1994). Contrary to the Islamic principles of polygamy, Christianity, on the one hand, advocated monogamy but, introduced marital divorce among numerous polygamous converts without presenting any meaningful socio-economic agenda for the divorced wife and the offspring of the divorced families (Shenk, 2001).

Although western education and the Christian doctrine of monogamous marriage has made successive incursions into most African cultures including Ghana, it is ironic to observe the very 'westernized culture' coming under the pressure of rapid breaking of marital ties and families. There is also a dramatic increase in the decline of intact families leaving divorced mothers with children to form single parent mother headed families, or blended families or step families (U.S Bureau of the Census, 1997).

African Traditional religious groups in Ghana continue to enjoy the privileges of polygamous marriages and create larger families than their monogamous counterparts (Ezeh, 1997). They have a 'guaranteed' ease of divorcing spouses (in matrilineal marriages) through a less rigorous customary rite without formal demands or commitment to either their spouses' maintenance or their children's financial support (Naylor, 2000).

Generally, religion plays a very important role in the life of Ghanaian families and especially influences the way adolescents cope with challenges following parental divorce (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004; Pargament, 1997). Religious groups like Muslims and Christians provide accessible systems of support and identification of needs for assistance to adherents including youth members. These groups through formal counselling address emotional and behavioral concerns and foster positive emotions, such as hope, optimism, and empowerment that enhance adolescents' psychosocial functioning and processes.

Religious content, meaning, and behaviours are important in defining adolescent role identities, relationships, and behaviors. Family events such as Christmas, the Ramadan or the 'Odwira' that occur within the context of religious rituals enhance family bonding and emphasize the notion of family continuity as well as adolescents' awareness of their position as part of a larger extended family, regardless of parents' divorce. Thus, the several religious holidays, festivities and observances represent occasions for reflection and commemoration that reinforce the primacy of the extended family as well as the adolescent's particular roles within the divorced family (Naylor, 2000).

By and large, religion plays a part in the coping process of adolescents in single parent families with respect to specific coping behaviours and strategies (such as, receiving spiritual support from peers or general prayers, as well as the enhancement and use of coping resources (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Adolescent-religious-coping may function in a variety of ways, such as through anxiety reduction, search for meaning, and social cohesiveness (Ellison & Taylor, 1996; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Prayer is by far the most widely used religious coping behavior and it is a complex process that involves a range of orientations, motivations, expectations and outcomes (Ellison & Taylor, 1996; Taylor et al, 2004).

Recent research (Krause et al., 2000b; Taylor et al., 2004) examining the nature of prayer and its role in adolescent coping with adversity indicated that prayer is a transformative personal experience that changes the adolescent in several ways such as self-forgiveness, in situations of guilt and shame due to parental divorce. Religious counselling, on the other hand, helps adolescents manage their internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, that otherwise could have escalated into life crises or daily hustles (Krause, Chatters, Meltzer & Morgan, 2000b and Taylor et al., 2004), and teach them how to manage their stress to improve psychosocial adjustment. As a form of religious coping behaviour, requesting prayers and spiritual counseling from adherents signals the need for assistance and guidance (Taylor et al., 2004). This attitude enhances group cohesion and connectedness and may provide adolescents of divorced families with emotional and psychological wellbeing (McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Though, Ghanaian society is characterized by different religions presents a plethora of mystical activities to assist adherents through superstitious beliefs, psychic and performed medium rituals as well as prayers and libation to help families cope with life crises and to rebound (Population Census of Ghana, 2000; Ghana Census, 1984).

Ghana Demographic and Housing Statistics [GDHS], (2005) has found that due to the increasing numbers of single-parent, mother-headed homes in Ghana, more Ghanaian youths (4.5 million) continue to experience varying factors that affect their psychosocial adjustment following parental divorce. Ankomah (2002) and Mainoo (2008) have reported that the serious lack of empirical literature on divorce studies. Further the lack of empirical data on adolescent's psychosocial adjustment, suggests that social work, other social service professionals, and government officials largely depend on the wholesale import and reception of the findings of American studies and recommended practice for Ghanaian practice and policy formulation. Ankomah (2002) and Mainoo (2008) emphasized that to date, no study has related the psychosocial adjustment of adolescent to a comprehensive set of predictor variables that included Ghanaian adolescent participants.

Mainoo (2008) has recommended that given the differences in the cultures of Western and non-Western countries like Ghana; there is a need for an indigenous research data set of the factors which affect adolescent psychosocial adjustment following parental divorce to inform practice and policy formulation in Ghana. Although, several non- Ghanaian studies have identified one or more correlates of psychosocial adjustment for adolescents of divorced families, (Sun & Li, 2002; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) no study to date has examined the psychosocial adjustment in relation to predictor variables including religion, and adolescent gender in the Ghanaian context. This research was designed to address this problem.

#### **4. Methodology**

##### **Participants**

The target population comprised of adolescent students from the four Senior High Schools in Obuasi Municipality in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The population of the Senior High School students in Obuasi Municipality was 8,520 students.

##### **Sample and Sampling Procedure**

The sample consisted of 396 respondents out of the 8,520 students in the schools. The sample size was guided by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for sample selection. The 396 participants consisted of 198 males and 198 females.

Purposive sampling method was used to select the participants for the study since the list of students who came from divorced homes was not available. In each school, the lead researcher, together with some of the teachers moved from class to class to ask for students who were not staying with both biological parents to move into a secured classroom? The students were given follow- up questions such as why they were not living with both biological parents and whether their parents were divorced. The responses led to the identification of the appropriate students.

##### **Research Design**

The research design for this study was cross sectional survey design which utilized a structured questionnaire for the collection of quantitative data involving multiple variables that were examined to detect impact and patterns of differences. Surveys enable an examination of “large and small populations (or universes) by selecting and studying samples chosen from the populations to discover the relative incidence, distribution, and interrelations of sociological and psychological variables” (Kerlinger, 1986, p. 377). The major variables used in the study were impact of divorce, internalizing types of behaviour and externalizing types of behaviour.

### **Instrument**

The main instrument for the study was a questionnaire. Questionnaire is a widely used and useful instrument for collecting survey information as it provides structured and often numerical data. It is also useful for the collection of data without the presence of the researcher and it is often comparatively straight forward to analyze (Cohen et al, 2005).

However, a questionnaire has some weaknesses. It is expensive and time consuming to produce. Respondents may also not provide honest answers to questions since the method normally involves the use of structured questions. To overcome the problems associated with the questionnaire the instrument for this study was structured such that respondents were given the opportunity to only tick the answers to the items.

Formulated research questions and hypotheses informed the development of the items in addition to references made to available literatures. In addition, a thorough examination of the theories that were relevant to the research questions in order to identify concepts that had bearing on externalizing and internalizing measures of adolescents of divorced families was made.

The instrument is a 33 item self-reporting instrument utilizing Likert type response scale which facilitated numerical coding of data. The entire instrument was arranged into content sub-sections A and B. Section A consisted of 13 demographic and background survey items. Section B consisted of 30 measures generated through prior research to tap appropriate conceptual domains for this study. There were 2 boxes, with the headings; ‘Before my Parents Divorce’ and, ‘After my Parents Divorce’. Respondents were instructed to circle the appropriate number that corresponded to their most suitable option from the rating scale provided. (i.e. 1 = Not at all true of me, 2 = Somewhat true of me, 3 = Often true of me, 4 = Very often true of me, and 5 = Always true of me). Ten items in the questionnaire addressed adolescent externalizing type of behaviours (items 14 - 23), followed by another ten items that addressed internalizing types of behaviours (item 24 – 33). The initial items were reviewed by educational researchers to ascertain content validity and then piloted. The piloted items were then refined for use. In terms of reliability, the externalizing behaviours scale had a Cronbach’s alpha value of .84 while the internalizing scale also had alpha value of .84.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

A letter of introduction to request for permission to conduct the main study in schools in the Obuasi Municipality of the Ashanti Region of Ghana was obtained from the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Cape Coast. Copies of the letter were given to the headmasters of the four selected schools. With permission granted by the headmasters, specific dates were fixed for the collection of the data in each school. The lead researcher introduced himself to the teachers in each school. The lead researcher explained the purpose of the study to the teachers. However, in order to avoid stigmatization and possible psychological effect on performance and participants’ self-esteem during and after the exercise, the lead researcher secured an empty classroom in the schools visited. The lead researcher supervised the entire exercise in the four schools and addressed issues that arose from the exercise. The data was collected in March 2011 and the response rate was 100%

## **5. Results and Discussions**

### **Research Question One**

**What differences exist in social adaptability among adolescent students of various religious backgrounds?**

In order to determine if the results of the analysis show differences in the social adaptability types of behaviours such as unconcern, social self-caring, social withdrawal, social irritability, social involvement in bad friendship, social caring by relatives, social misconduct and social support for adolescent students of Christian and

Muslim backgrounds, an independent- sample t- test was conducted. The researcher only used data collected from students from Christian and Muslim backgrounds for the analysis. This is because the data collected from Traditional African and those who did not belong to any religion were very few. The sample size was 382. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 21.

**Table 2: Comparison between Religious Group and Social Adaptability of Adolescents**

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Christianity	114	31.8	7.2	380	7.31	0.0001
Muslim	268	26.0	7.1			

Results from Table 2 shows that social adaptability of the 2 religious groups Christianity (M= 31.8, SD= 7.2) reported more significantly than Muslim (M= 26.0, SD= 7.1),  $t(380) = 7.3$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ . It was found that adolescents from Christian divorced homes adapt better psychosocially than adolescents from Muslim divorced homes. This is a new discovery since no such discovery was disclosed in the reviewed literature.

## Discussion

Religion is significant criterion variable predicting adolescent social adaptability behaviours in the study. Religious response analyses in this study consistently confirm the notion that religion moderates psychosocial behaviours of Ghanaian adolescents of divorced families. Several researched have established the significance of religious belief and practice as a coping mechanism for negotiating the effects of parental divorce and other life stresses for adolescents (Furrow & Wagner, 2003; Mahoney, Pargament, Jewel, Swank, Scot, Emery & Rye, 2006; Donahue & Benson, 1995; Pearce et al., 2003; Ellison & Levin, 1998; Idler & George, 1998).

Research has also shown that people tend to utilize religious coping to deal with situations where they have little control, compared to situations over which they have high control (Pargament, 1997). Religion serves a particular function in that it can help people create meaning out of their experience while coping with uncontrollable situations such as parental loss (Mahoney et al., 2006; Pearce et al., 2003). Various studies have demonstrated the importance of paying attention to the diverse cultural and religious dimension of religious coping (Ai., 2003; Frable, 1997). Ghanaian adolescents in this study used their religion as a means to engage in reactive coping.

Reactive coping (Spencer, 2006; Ker & Bowen, 1981) entails an effort the adolescent expends to deal with the cumulative stress of parental divorce with a view to compensate for the harm and loss. This type of reactive coping is problem focused, emotion focused and social-relation focused (Spencer, 2006; Ker & Bowen, 1988).

## Research Question Two

### What differences exist in the externalising types of behaviours among adolescent students of various religious backgrounds?

In order to determine if the results of the analysis show differences in the externalising types of behaviours such as drinking, sexual involvement, delinquency, aggressiveness, anger, truancy, obedience, stealing and drug involvement for adolescent students of Christian and Muslim religious backgrounds an independent sample t-test was conducted. The sample was 382. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 23.

**Table 3: Comparison between Religious Group and Adolescents' Externalising Types of Behaviours**

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Christianity	114	32.3	7.8	380	14.4	0.0001
Muslim	268	20.6	7.0			

Results from Table 23 shows that externalising types of behaviours for adolescents from the 2 religious background indicates that Christianity (M = 32.3, SD= 7.8) reported significantly more than Muslims (M= 20.6,

SD= 7.0),  $t(380) = 14.4$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ . The result from this question points out that adolescent students who have experienced divorce from Christian homes demonstrate more externalising types of behaviour than those from Muslim homes. Again this is a new discovery since no such discovery was disclosed in the reviewed literature.

### Discussion

Anarfi (2004) has indicated that those adolescents who were religious and used their religious involvement to negotiate psychosocial behaviours had a conducive and supportive family environment coupled with strong personality attributes which reduced the risk factors, and promoting the protective factors, enhanced their coping abilities and positive adjustment. According to Anarfi (2004) those adolescents may demonstrate fewer externalizing behaviours.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, it was found that adolescents from Muslim backgrounds demonstrate less internalising types of behaviour than those from Christian backgrounds. However, adolescents from Christian backgrounds demonstrate more externalising behaviours than those from Muslim backgrounds. Finally, this study did not confirm the finding in the literature that those who participate in religious guidance and counseling adapt psychosocially better than those who do not participate.

Based on the findings and conclusions from the study, the following recommendations are made. In order for children to cope with the divorce situation, parents should help improve upon the living conditions of their children from divorced homes through provision of needs such as text books, school fees, clothing and exercise books. These would let them overcome their social misconducts such as stealing and sexual promiscuity. Again, it is recommended that in helping teachers to identify and assist students to cope with the challenges of divorce in school, in-service training should be organised periodically for teachers on how to identify and assist children from divorced homes to enable them cope with their academic challenges.

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