

**REGULATION OF TODDLER TEMPERAMENT. A
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DIVORCED AND
MARRIED MOTHERS' RESPONSES TO TODDLERS'
TEMPERAMENT DURING INTERACTION**

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ABSTRACT : The study sought to find out how divorced and married mothers regulated their toddler children's temperament. The study looked at mothers' responses to their toddlers' behaviours to establish if there were any significant differences or similarities in the way divorced and married mothers responded to their children. The study was undertaken in a high density suburb of Masvingo city in Zimbabwe. The interview and observation data collection methods were deemed most appropriate for the study as they made possible the collection of data directly from participants in the context of their environments, hence their use. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample from the identified population. The sample comprised four mothers aged between twenty-four and twenty-six years, two of them were divorced while the other two were married, and their two and half year old sons. The study revealed that both divorced and married mothers responded to and treated their toddlers in basically similar ways. The divorced mothers were seen to show love and affection for their children, just like the married mothers did. It was evident from the observations that, despite their seemingly different marital and other social circumstances, the women were to some extent influenced by their former husbands' relatives who related well with them. When parents and caregivers should show love and warmth to toddlers under their care during interactions, there is likely to be close attachment and cordial relationships between the two parties.

Key words : divorce, marriage, interaction, toddler, temperament

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Introduction and background to the study

Temperament is a critical aspect in the child's personality development. Regulating children's temperament is one important function of parents and caregivers, especially the primary caregivers. Parents, especially mothers take great responsibility in taking care of the young children and therefore play a critical role in regulation of the children's temperament. The nature of the family, to a large extent, determines the developmental trajectory of children's temperament. In this respect, Green (2002) points out that the nature of the family and the quality of social relationships should ideally provide children with opportunities to come to terms with their feelings, whether negative or positive. Similarly, Giddens (1997) expresses the view that children whose parents have died, divorced or are poor may receive little encouragement and support from guardians, caregivers of parents as the caregivers or parents from such families are usually under stress and may not have the patience and courage to entertain their toddlers' turbulent behaviours. It is such situations that prevailed in the suburb where the study was undertaken that prompted the research. Temperament is defined as an individual's characteristic style of approaching or relating to people or situations, (Papalia and Olds, 1992:153). They proceed to state that unusual events or parents' handling of a child can change the temperamental style of the child.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which informs this study, views the family as a divided into four systems, the micro, exo, meso and macro. The micro-system, which consists of the family, introduces the children to their first socialization where they interact with primary caregivers. The family relationships in each social system have a serious impact on children's development of character, of which temperament is a component, (Santrock 2007, Berk 2002). It is in the context of these relationships that the research to determine how divorced and married mothers regulated their toddlers' temperament during interaction. Beith, Tassoni, Bulman and Robinson (2005) assert that children's earliest and strongest relationships are usually with their parents and such relationships play a crucial role the children's later development. Similarly, Papalia and Olds (1992) stress that the quality of a marriage determines the way parents behave

towards each other and their children, and that, in most cases, happily married couples shared time together and communicated amicably with their children. Their considered view is that divorce can be very stressful, especially where one party did not expect it, but where the marriage has been unhappy, the divorce may be a welcome relief to one or both parties. The family, therefore should not only meet children's physiological needs, but should satisfy the psychological needs as well. This situation of a plethora of divorces and families headed by mothers prevailed in the suburb where the respondents were staying and this proved to be fertile ground for this study. The existence of such a plethora of families with different interests and living under different social circumstances in Masvingo city fascinated the researcher to the extent of him finding it necessary and worthwhile to undertake this study to determine how divorced and married mothers' responses to their toddlers contributed to the toddlers' regulation of temperament.

Temperament is defined by Papalia and Olds (1992:153) as "... an individual's characteristic style of approaching or relating to people and situations". Papalia and Olds (1992) go on to state that although temperament seems to be inborn, unusual events or [parents' handling of a child can change the temperament style of a child. Temperament, therefore, in as far as it refers to the way people behave when confronted with different situations, to a large extent is also controlled by external influence, especially during socialization in the family. This implies that the parent or primary caregiver gives plays a critical role in regulating a child's temperament. Beith, Tassoni, Bulham and Robinson (2005) point out that there are three types of temperament, namely, easy, difficult and easy to warm up, and each type has its own problems and challenges. In view of the differences in and unpredictable nature of the temperament of toddlers, the researcher deemed it worthwhile to study how divorced and married mothers' reactions contributed to the toddlers' regulation of temperament. The study was therefore carried out in the context of all types of temperament, as it was deemed that it would be cumbersome to identify toddlers of a certain type of temperament and isolate them for the study. The study thus looked at how mothers' responses contributed to their toddlers' regulation of temperament in the different family systems.

The nature of the family, be it nucleus, extended, child-headed or single parent, and the quality of social relationships within each system, should ideally provide children with opportunities to come to terms with their feelings, whether positive or negative, (Green, 2002). After realizing that divorced and married mothers raised their children in different social contexts as a consequence of their different family systems, the researcher found it necessary to find out how the mothers' attitudes and responses during social interactions affected the toddlers' regulation of their temperament. In this respect, Giddens (1997) points out that children whose parents have died, divorced or are poor, may receive little encouragement and support from guardians, caregivers or Parents as caregivers or parents from such families are usually under stress and may not have the patience and courage to entertain toddlers' turbulent behaviours. In order to achieve the objectives of the study in the context of the different family compositions, the researcher saw it necessary to involve mothers of the same age, with similar occupations and academic or professional qualifications. The toddlers, of the same sex, were aged two and half years. The mothers were aged between twenty four and twenty five years and resided in the same high density suburb in Masvingo city, Zimbabwe. The researcher was interested in finding out how the large numbers of divorced and married mothers reacted to their toddlers' temperamental nature during day-to-day interaction. The researcher was keen to compare how divorced and married mothers compared in the way they raised their children in the high density suburb, especially during the tough economic times prevailing in Zimbabwe.

The researcher was thus fascinated by the prospect of also witnessing and analyzing the various variables within each mother-toddler relationship, such as siblings, toddlers, parents and relatives, to gain a holistic view of the participants' social contexts. The researcher believed that every member in the family set-up contributed in shaping the context of each mother-toddler dyad, hence the need to adopt a holistic approach of looking at the mother-child interactions and relationships in this qualitative study.

Conceptual Framework

The research was undertaken to determine in the ways in which divorced and married mothers' reactions to their toddlers during interactions contributed to the toddlers' regulation of temperament. The study focused on interactions between others, both married and divorced, and their toddler children in an effort to determine any trends, similarities or variations in the ways toddlers' temperament was regulated within the two family settings. The study was carried out in the context of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems theory which stipulates that children develop within social systems, whose core is the family in the micro-system, extending to the international community in the macro-system, (Santrock, 2007). The family environment is influenced by what happens in the macro-system. Hence, events such as the economic melt-down and military confrontations affecting the world have an adverse impact on family relationships. Similarly, Beck (2003) asserts that children's socio-emotional development occurs within the context of family relationships. In Bronfenbrenner's theory, the family is regarded as the micro-system within a complex system comprising various social networks.

It is within the family that the child is first socialized into the society's culture. It is also in the family where there should be high quality caregiver-child relationships that promote positive development in the physical, intellectual, emotional and social domains. In this respect, Beith, Tassoni, Bulman and Robinson (2005) assert that children's earliest and strongest relationships are usually with their parents and such relationships play a crucial role in the children's later development. On the same note, Papalia and Olds (1992) point out that the quality of a marriage determines the way parents behave towards each other and their children and that, in most cases, happily married couples shared time together and communicated amicably with their children. On the other hand, Papalia and Olds (1992) contend that divorce can be very stressful, especially where one party did not expect it, but where the marriage has been unhappy, the divorce may be a welcome relief to one or both parties. The family, therefore, should not only meet children's physiological needs, but should meet the psychological needs as well.

The ideas of Lieberman, in her thesis on toddlers' emotional development, were also considered as part of the context within which the study was undertaken. Lieberman (1993) points out that toddlers are full of emotional exuberance that should be regulated within the socio-cultural contexts of their families. The relationships between toddlers and their caregivers provide the nurture necessary for positive development of the toddlers.

The social context within which the study was undertaken, as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, consists of social systems in the micro-system, exo-system, meso-system and macro-system. The mother-toddler relationships were therefore studied in the context of the family system as it exists within or alongside other social systems whose influence assumes a significant role in the way the mothers socialize their children. The theory emphasizes that a family system in which children develop does not exist in isolation but is an integral part of a complex system comprising other variables. Thus, the families which were the focus of this study did not exist in isolation, but there were other people and events whose influence may have contributed to the manner in which the mothers behaved in response to their toddlers' outbursts.

The study, therefore, was undertaken in the hope of understanding the ways in which divorced and married mothers' responses to their toddlers, in their particular family environments, contributed to the toddlers' regulation temperament.

Purpose of Study

The study sought to find out the contribution that divorced and married mothers' responses had on their toddlers' regulation of temperament during social interactions. The research focused on analyzing the way divorced and married mothers dealt with toddlers' emotional behaviours such as temper tantrums, crying, negativism and egocentric tendencies meant to exert their autonomy. The study was particularly interested in finding out how the mothers from the two different family settings handled their toddlers at times when they would be exhibiting difficult behaviours that

tested mothers' patience. The whole purpose of the study can be summarised as finding out how and the extent to which married and divorced mothers' reactions to their toddlers' emotional dispositions during day-to-day social interactions contributed to the way toddlers regulated their temperament. The following research questions summarise the purpose of the study.

- How do married and divorced mothers react to their toddlers' emotional outbursts such as temper tantrums?
- In what ways does the family composition affect the way married and divorced mothers behave and regulate their toddlers' temperament?
- What similarities and/or differences are evident in the way toddlers' regulation of temperament is affected by the behaviours of their mothers during social interactions?

Statement of the problem

Divorced and married mothers in Masvingo city raise their children under different social contexts. Although they may have similar qualifications or jobs, are of the same age and have similar educational qualifications, the mothers are faced with the task of interacting with their toddler children in their different family settings. The question therefore, is: *What contribution do the different social circumstances have on the way divorced and married mothers respond to their children's temperament during interactions?*

Delimitation

The study was carried out in a high density suburb in Masvingo city. It was confined to divorced and married mothers aged between twenty four and twenty-five years of age and their two and half year old male toddlers.

Research Methodology

The qualitative research design, the case study in particular, was adopted in this study. The

qualitative research design was selected as it enabled the researcher to experience firsthand interactions between divorced and married mothers and their toddler children in their natural settings. The qualitative research design was found to be suitable because the nature of the study entailed that the researcher stayed and observed participants in their natural environments, their homes in this instance. This approach enabled the researcher to understand the participants' behaviours from an insider perspective. Nachmias and Nachmias (1996) point out that qualitative research design dictates that the researcher must look at both historical and subjective aspects of human experience. It implies that in this study the researcher had to understand human behaviour by getting to know the participants and their backgrounds, values and rituals. The researcher came to understand the participants' culture by staying with them in their communities. Similar view is expressed by Gray (2004) who asserts that in qualitative research, the researcher involved in field work should venture into the participants' cultural environment in order to get first-hand information about how they live, talk and behave. By going into the participants' environments, the researcher was getting acquainted with and understanding the subjective meanings of the language the participants were using as well as observing their body language. The qualitative research design was also chosen because trustworthiness of data was possible through prolonged engagement with participants, comprehensive descriptions, member checking and triangulation of data through the data collection techniques that were used. On the same note, Bell (1997) stresses that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in the people's experiences of that reality. In this study the researcher visited and stayed with [participants over a period of twelve weeks, with each family being visited twice per week, including weekends, for periods ranging from one hour during the week and two hours during the weekend. Interviews and observations were the data collection methods used. Informal interviews were done during the observations while the formal interviews were done at the end of the period of observation.

Observation

Observation was the major data collection method used in this study. The observations were

carried out over a period of twelve weeks in the participants' homes, which was a fairly long time for the type of study as the duration reduced the risk of artificial behavior by the respondents. In this type of observation, which Bogdan and Biklen (1992) call naturalistic observation, individuals or participants in the study are observed in their natural settings. In observation, the researcher is able to understand relationships between participants and note behavior patterns within contexts of the events in which the behaviours were exhibited, (Tuckman, 1994). The researcher was able to observe, record and understand behaviours exhibited during interactions in the participants' homes as well as observe their body language. This made the observation technique a vital and appropriate method of collecting data in this qualitative research. Any issues that remained hazy during observations were clarified through interviews.

Sample and sampling procedure

The sample, comprising two divorced mothers and two married mothers and their two and half-year old male toddler children was purposively from the population. They all resided in the same high density suburb. Purposive sampling, according to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003:100), '... is done for a specific purpose of the research in which the researcher uses personal judgment to select a sample. The mothers were specifically selected on their capacity to meet the strict criteria in terms of the qualities and characteristics that were of interest to the researcher. This was deemed to be a reasonable sample in this qualitative study. Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) describe a sample as a group in a research study on which information is obtained. This was a small sample, typical of qualitative research, as stated by Gall and Borg (1980) who assert that the sample in qualitative research is typically small as the purpose of the research will be to develop a deeper understanding of the issue being studied, in this study mothers and their toddler children. The sample was thus justified on the basis of its capacity to provide the data relevant to the study.

Interview

The researcher employed interviews to collect data from the respondents. The interviews were

used to seek clarification from the mothers on some issues that arose from the observations. Formal interviews were done at the end of the observations while informal interviews were done during the observations. There is greater opportunity to obtain quality data in interviews as the interviewer gets the interviewees' perceptions, feelings, beliefs and other cognitive variables, (Eichelberger, 1989). In this study, the researcher was able to observe the body language of the respondents as well as probe and seek clarification on some behaviours exhibited during their interactions with their toddlers. The body language and voice intonation of the respondents allowed the researcher to 'see' and 'feel' the way the mothers felt about their toddlers' behaviours. The informal interviews were quite revealing as they allow the interviewer to get the participants' version of events while they would still be in the mood of the events, (Gray, 2004). The researcher in this study gained valuable insights through this interview method.

Ethical considerations

The participants were assured of the confidentiality of the information that they supplied, and that their names and identities would not be divulged to anyone. They were also guaranteed that the information gathered would be strictly and specifically used for the purpose of this academic study.

Data analysis techniques

Descriptive analysis was used to present and analyse data collected through interviews and observations. The data was discussed under the captions of Toddler A, B c and D where each mothers' interactions with the child was analysed. Emerging trends would be used to come up with the overall analysis.

Discussion of findings

Toddler A

The data on Toddler A-mother dyad were collected over twelve weeks. The family comprised the father, mother, child and maid who were staying in two rented rooms. Although the mother stated

with her husband, most of the observations were done in the absence of the father who usually went to the bar for drink with friends after work. In one episode, the child, on seeing the mother coming back from work, abandoned his friends and ran towards her. The mother cheerfully commented on the child's unkempt state as she patted the back of the boy's head, "Vakomana, manga muchiteiko kuzoita shena kudai" (Literally translated: What were you doing to look so messy?) In the house the mother gives the boy some bananas which she had bought along the way home. However, things took a nasty turn one Sunday when the researcher accompanied the mother to the shops. On arriving at the shops the little fellow demanded some sweets which the mother could not afford. Her response was "Unondinetseriko? Enda undopiwa nababa vako" (Why are you pestering me? Go and be given by your father". When the researcher asked her why she was saying this to the child, her response was forthright, as she replied that the father was always in the pub instead of taking care of 'his child'. The mother's sentiments indicated that while she showed love and affection to the child most of the time, she was sometimes tested by the child's demands which she could not meet. She ended up venting her anger on the child for the failure of her husband to be with her and assist her. The mother was not consistent in her responses to the toddler's consistent, difficult behaviours. This could result in the child becoming ambivalent in his attachment to the mother as stated by Ainsworth in Crain (2000). The child might also develop shame and doubt and lose his self concept as he may fail to resolve the crisis of autonomy versus shame and doubt as espoused by Erikson in Santrock (2007).

Toddler B

The home environment consisted of the father, mother, child and maid. The majority of the observations were carried out in the absence of the father who the researcher suspects deliberately absented himself to enable him to do his research without his presence obstructing him. He would make sure that we got home together but would leave after a short while to "visit" a friend in the neighbourhood. On most days on our arrival at the house the toddler would always run towards the mother and then his father. He would then be told to greet uncle, meaning the researcher. The

mother always addressed the child by his totem, “mukanya”, just like she did to her husband, the child’s father. At times she would call him baby. The interaction between the mother, child and father was quite smooth and friendly. The interactions reflected cordial relations and effective communication in the family. This quality parent-child and parent-parent, according to Macoby, Snow and Jacklin (1984), ensure positive regulation of children’s temperamental dispositions. In relationships of such high quality socialization, there is great possibility of children developing secure attachment to their parents, (Berk, 2003). Ainsworth in Berk (2003) points out that secure attachment produces a child with a stable personality characterized by the ability to adjust to new situations.

Toddler C

The home environment included the mother, child and maid. The mother was a divorcee. In one particular incident, the mother wanted to bath the child to go to church. The child was refusing and the mother had to literally drag the boy to the bath tub outside the house. The child cried as he resisted the mother’s initiative. The mother commented thus, “Chinenharo chimwana, ichi kufanana nababa” (Literally, this little boy is so argumentative, just like his father). As she dries the child the mother tries to console him by commenting, “Hauchioni, wachena manje” (Now you are smart). The child stops crying as the mother applies lotion on his body. The researcher observed that when the child resisted her initiatives, she raised her voice and spoke angrily to the child to frighten the child. After dressing, the boy asks for a drink and some food which he is given hassle-free. The mother, in the formal interview, Question 5, replied that she was bitter at being divorced from the toddler’s father, as she felt that she did nothing wrong to warrant the divorce.

Gross and Thompson (2007) reveal that positive regulation of toddlers’ emotions requires a great deal of patience and positive thinking on the part of the primary caregiver, in this case the mother. By referring to the child’s father in a negative manner, the mother was to being positive in regulating the child’s temperament.

Toddler D

The home environment comprised the mother, child and maid. The mother is a divorcee. On most occasions when we arrived home, the child would run to his mother and ask her what she would have brought him from town. On one particular day he said to his mother. “Mhamha, ndoda ice-cream”(Mother, I want ice-cream). The mother replied :Mwan uyu vasikana, unotoda ice-cream unoti inonongwa here?” (Do you think ice-cream is just picked from the street?). After I asked her why she was talking to the child in this way she was forthright in her response, “Saka munoti ini ndingaiwanepi mari yeice-cream every day, ivo baba vacho achingodya mari yake ega?” (Where do you think I can get money for ice-cream everyday when his father is squandering money?). She takes out some biscuits from her handbag and gives them to the child. In the described episode and several others that were witnessed the mother would continuously complain about the failure of the former husband to assist her in fending for the child. She would complain every time the child asked for something. The mother’s constant complaints about her lack of capacity to adequately meet her child’s needs are indicative of someone who is unable to handle a stressful situation.

Conclusion

Analysis of the responses by both divorced and married mothers revealed that, despite their different social and economic circumstances, the mothers cared for their children in almost the same way. The divorced mother in Toddler-mother dyad D showed impatience with the child because of the father’s unwillingness to assist in the upkeep of the child. Similarly the married mother in Toddler-mother dyad A displayed the same behavior in which she complained about husband spending money and time on beer and flirting with friends. The mothers in the other dyads, that is, B and C were generally more loving and warm to their children than the other two. The mothers in dyads A and D who were at times rude to their children also showed signs of contrition and love as they ultimately did something good to the child though not what the child would have demanded. It is critical, therefore, that mothers always portray a positive disposition to

young children so that children are not confused or feel threatened. This promotes positive regulation of children's temperament, as stated by Macoby, Snow and Jacklin (1984). Similarly, Gross and Thompson (2007) reveal that regulating emotions of toddlers positively requires a great deal of patience and positive thinking on the part of the primary caregiver, in this case the mother. By referring to their children's fathers in a negative light the two mothers in the study were not being positive in regulating their children's temperaments. This lowered the children's self esteem and this might lead the toddlers to fail to resolve the autonomy versus shame and doubt (toddler) crisis as in Erikson's psychosocial theory of personality development, (Crain, 2000). The toddlers may develop low self concepts and fail to regulate their temperaments effectively as a consequence of the mothers' negative responses to them.

In the formal interviews, all the mothers pointed out that they thought they were regulating their children's temperaments positively, despite being rude to the children at times. They also pointed out that their good relations with their husbands' and former husbands' relatives caused them to respond favourably to their children's behaviours. They all confirmed that the relatives, though at irregular intervals, gave them some financial assistance. It is also apparent that in the context of the present study, some of the mothers were probably regulating the children's temperaments negatively, as a consequence of divorce and/or unhappy marriage, as in dyads A and D. Divorce or unhappy marriage, according to Haralambos and Holborn (1991) causes disruptions in both parents' and children's life routines, which may lead to a deterioration in the child rearing standards as well as temperamental regulation of the children. The study thus revealed that despite different social circumstances, married and divorced mothers' regulated their children's temperaments in similar ways, with slight variations.

Recommendations

Mothers, both married and divorced, should always respond with love and warmth to their toddlers' emotions and provide children with opportunities to come to terms with their feelings, which may be confusing, upsetting or frightening. The mothers should not vent their frustrations on the

innocent children, who have no role in their relationships with their husbands and former husbands. The mothers should at all times try to communicate with their partners so that the child is afforded support of both parents to foster positive regulation of the children's temperaments. Caregivers should adopt care giving methods that suit their children's types of temperament. Parents need to understand the temperamental dispositions of their children so that they may respond to each child accordingly, without causing tension in or traumatizing the child. Policymakers should conduct seminars and workshops for ECD service providers to equip them with current trends in the care and education of young children. This will ultimately improve the quality of services offered to children, toddlers included.

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