

‘Eager to talk, but waiting for the invitation’: Expectation mix-up and lack of spousal communication on fertility and family planning in northern Nigeria.

Abstract

Fertility levels are generally higher in northern Nigeria than other regions of the country. Lack of spousal communication on family planning and fertility has been identified as a key contributor to this situation. Available research on spousal discussion in Northern Nigeria continues to focus on its socio-demographic correlates. Currently, we know very little about the direct perspectives, experiences, and beliefs of the region’s men and women regarding spousal discussion. Relying on recent qualitative data from northern Nigeria, we investigated norms, attitudes, and beliefs surrounding spousal discussion on matters of fertility. Participants generally considered spousal discussion to be important and useful and were not disinclined towards it. However, owing largely to mix-ups in the expectation of spouses regarding who should initiate them, spousal discussions hardly occurred. Strategies to help couples to, early on in their marriages, open up to each other on matters of fertility and reproduction are urgently needed.

Introduction

Compared to other regions of Nigeria, northern Nigeria is characterized by very high fertility regimes and low use of modern contraceptives. The region’s current total fertility rate of 7 and contraceptive use rate of 1.5 sharply contrast with national rates of 5.8 and 6 respectively (Adamu, 2006). Lack of spousal communication or discussion on fertility has been identified as a major contributor to this scenario (Feyistan, 2000, Caldwell and Cadwell, 1988, 1990, APHRC, 2007, 2008). Evidence from authoritative sources (including APHRC, 2007) indicates that several couples in the region desirous of planning their childbearing are unable to do so owing largely to lack of or poor spousal communication. Currently however, we know very little about the issues constraining spousal discussion on reproductive matters in northern Nigeria. Available studies seeking to understand the factors that promote or hinder spousal communication have focused largely on national large-scale surveys, including the Nigeria Demographic and Health Surveys of 1990, 1999 and 2003 and other localized surveys that are only able to describe the socio-demographic characteristics of couples in the region who do or not engage in spousal communication. To be sure, these studies reveal very little about the attitudes, views, and beliefs circulating about spousal communication among the region’s men and women. Yet, understanding local attitudes, beliefs, and views on matters of fertility and reproduction in any group presents an important scope for social and policy action and could be key to the development of strategies for shaping current efforts aimed at helping couples plan their fertility and childbearing.

The present study sought to broaden knowledge of the issues surrounding poor spousal communication in northern Nigeria by interrogating the direct views, attitudes, and beliefs about

spousal communication among men and women in the northern Nigeria. In highlighting this neglected aspect of research on spousal communication, our aim was to deepen understanding of the socio-cultural issues that structure it and add to the literature on the theme. Emerging from the study is evidence that men and women in northern Nigeria are aware of the importance of spousal communication on fertility and reproduction and are not disinclined towards it. They are also aware of a host of ways that spousal communication could help them implement their preferences and better plan their childbearing. However, only very few of the men and women in our study reported ever discussing fertility issues and contraceptives with their spouses. We introduce the term 'expectation mix-up' to explain why so is. Spousal discussions on matters of fertility and contraceptives hardly occurred not because couples did not want to discuss matters of fertility and family planning or had no need to discuss it. Rather, the lack of spousal discussion resulted largely from a mix -up in the expectation of couples regarding who should initiate it. Participating men and women were interested in discussing fertility matters and contraception with their partners but, for a host of reasons considered it their partner's rather their own responsibility to initiate the discussions. The evidence suggests that while they waited for each other to broach the matter of family planning and size believing it was their partner's duty rather than theirs to do so-many couples had more children than they would ordinarily want to have.

Theoretical Issues

In 1964, Kitty Genovese was stabbed to death by a serial rapist and murderer. Scared off by a neighbor, her assailant initially fled the scene. However, ten minutes later, he returned to finish her off. She was already wounded and desperately trying to hide herself but he realized that nobody came down to help Kitty. The murder lasted about half an hour during which bystanders failed to help Ms Genovese though they had the chance to. Following this incident, *Genovese incident or effect* is used to describe a situation in which an urgent task fails to be performed because everybody assumes that someone else is going to intervene and each individually refrains from doing so and feels less responsible. Otherwise called *bystanders' effect*, this situation leads to the diffusion of responsibility and leads to social loafing. According to social psychologists, the bystander effect results from many factors including that bystanders monitor the reactions of others in a given social situation to see if others think that it is necessary to intervene. People also fear the consequences of taking a lead in situations where the rules are very unclear and where their actions may be misconstrued. It so often happens that since others are doing nothing about a situation, everyone concludes from the inaction of others that other people do not think that help is needed. Also emotional cues to action can be powerful as irrational ones, and the presence of a group of inactive others is a critical pre-rational emotional cue to inaction that must be overcome. The current paper borrows heavily from this

theoretical viewpoint. We use 'expectation mix-up' to describe a situation in which a task fails to be performed because of a mix-up in expectations regarding whose duty it is to initiate action regarding the task. Individuals involved in an expectation mix-up refrain from initiating the task largely because they are persuaded it is another person's duty, rather than theirs, to do so. The men and women we worked with in northern Nigeria are very eager to discuss matters of fertility and family planning with their spouses. But they do not because they considered it their partner's rather than their own responsibility to initiate discussions on the theme.