CHILD ADOPTION AND THE NATURE AND NURTURE CONTROVERSY: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract
One of the major concerns of prospective and adoptive parents is the apprehension regarding the eventual character and personality of adopted children. The paper examined the concept of child adoption and indicated the cultural and general reasons why people adopt. It also critically reviewed the nature and nurture controversy. The paper maintains that intelligence, behaviour and the whole gamut of the human personality are so complex as to be solely determined by either biological factor or environmental experience. It asserts that the necessity of the interplay of the forces of nature and nurture in determining character and personality cannot be over emphasized. Consequently, the paper recommends that parents should provide accommodative, democratic and intellectuality stimulating home environments that would help to unveil the potentials in children, especially the adopted ones.

Keywords: Child, adoption, nature, nurture, controversy

Introduction
In Nigeria child adoption used to be an obscure practice that was shrouded in secrecy. However, in recent times, the situation appears to be changing. The phenomenon of child adoption is increasingly gaining limelight. This awareness and prominence has been attributed to the influence of christianity and globalization (Nwaoga, 2013; Omeire, 2015).

One of the issues that agitate the minds of prospective (and) adoptive parents is the question of what adopted children would grow to become in terms of morals, character, physique and total personality. Would the personalities of these children be molded by the environment where they are nurtured or by the naturally inherited genes. Even with respect to biological children, the issue as to whether a child’s character is formed by his biological origin or the environment where he is groomed is also germane. Child adoption and the nature and nurture dichotomy is the focus of this paper.

Conceptualizing child adoption
The Blacks Law Dictionary (1990) defines adoption as the legal process pursuant to state statute in which a child’s legal rights and duties toward his natural parents are terminated and similar rights and duties towards his adoptive parents are substituted. As used in this paper, child adoption refers to the permanent absorption or integration of the child of another person into one’s nuclear family and guaranteeing such a child the rights, privileges and duties of a biological child, including the use of the adoptive parent’s surname.

It is the rearing, caring, nurturing and acceptance of a child not related to a person by nature as though it is the person’s biological child. When child adoption is consummated through the issuance of an adoption order by a law court, an adopted child is legally recognized as having equal status, in all ramifications, with any biological child of the adoptive parents.

**Reasons for child adoption**

The reasons for child adoption can be broadly categorized into two, namely, cultural and general. One of the cultural reasons for child adoption is the desire to have a heir. For example, in Igbo land particularly and many other African societies in general, the issue of heirship and succession is of critical cultural importance. The Igbo philosophy of “ahamefule”(my name must never be lost) is a potent force that could drive infertile Igbo couples to adopt children, particularly, sons to become heirs, succeed the father and perpetuate the lineage. As Isiugo-Abanihe (2003) points out, in Africa, children especially sons, are celebrated as agents of continuity for the family name, a characteristic that encourages polygyny and prolific child bearing to ensure that sons survive to perpetuate the lineage. However, in modern times, with the harsh economic reality, the influence of Christianity and globalization, it appears that most people prefer adopting children especially sons, to polygyny and bearing many children.

Another cultural reason for child adopting is in order to fulfil a condition for traditional title. As Nwaoga (2013) points out, in some communities in Igbo land, before a man qualifies to take certain traditional titles, he must, in addition to other conditions, have a male child, to serve as heir and successor. A man from such a community who desires the title and meets other conditions except not having a male child, may
decide to adopt a son in order to take the traditional title.

The untimely death of a husband without a son can also serve as a cultural reason for child adoption in Igbo land and some other societies in Africa. In some cultures child adoption can also be a means to stabilize marriages that have become fractious owing to lack of biological children by the couples involved.

A further cultural reason for child adoption can be found in some western societies where same gender marriages have become legalized. Some of the same gender couples may decide to have children they can call their own. Child adoption, therefore, becomes a viable option for them to achieve such desire. The general reasons for child adoption range from infertility, to couple with only one child, avoidance of the discomfort of pregnancy and labour and obsession with one’s career. Other general reasons include preference for older children, health conditions that make pregnancy difficult or risky, magnanimity or philanthropic gesture towards a child in need, providing companion of the opposite sex to same gender siblings, intense love for children, and single parenthood.

Despite the good reasons that make child adoption a viable option, some people still have reservation about it. Eke et al (2014) identified the reasons for the discomfort to include social stigmatization, lack of biological or genetic linkage with the child, apprehension regarding future claim by the biological parents, fear of the unknown, high cost of child adoption, hijacking of the adoption process by middlemen and the religious belief which teaches that none shall be barren. Vander Akker (2001) indicates that some people with fertility challenges may prefer to have children through technological means rather than adopting children.

The nature and nurture controversy
As Runco (2008) points out, historically nature and nurture represented a dichotomy. The ancient Greeks, for example, debated the role of nature and nurture as influences on character and human nature. Papalia and Olds (2002) rhetorically posed the question: is our future laid out at birth by the many traits we inherit? Or is each of us a tabula rasa, “a blank slate” that waits being written on by the styles that our life becomes. Similarly, Minet (2000:48) poses the question more succinctly thus: “if a child in a musical family grows up to be a good musician, is it
because he inherited his musical ability or because he was in the right environment. Is obesity inherited or due to living in a family where fatty food is the usual pattern?"

The nature and nurture controversy has continually raged with each side strongly advancing its position. As Johnson (2008) indicates those who hold the heredity or nature position also known as nativist postulate that human personality, intelligence and capabilities are tied to a person’s biological background. Those who subscribe to the environmental or nurture school of thought also referred to as empiricist posit that each person is a tabula rasa or “a blank slate” and is shaped primarily by experience, how and in what circumstances the individual is raised or “nurtured”. According to Johnson (2008), empiricists believe that genetic endowment is a romantic myth, used to keep kings in their thrones, but of no use to science. It is the psychologists involved in developing IQ test who were most influential in developing the heredity position. The psychologists involved in developing learning theories were most influential in developing the environmental position.

Psychologists such as Herrnstein and Murray (2004) and Toga and Thompsons (2005) hold that intelligence is overwhelming a product of heredity, that children’s intelligence is largely determined by that of their parents and is set the day they were conceived. Rathus (1998) reports that research suggests that heredity is a factor in personality traits such as extraversion (Loehlin, Willerman and Horn 2000), neuroticism (Scar and Weinberg 1983) and shyness (Kagan 2000, Plomin 1989). According to Johnson (2008) the American psychometricist Arthur Jensen (2000) reviewed the research on IQ and concluded that intelligence is basically inherited and immutable. Jensen argues that genetic differences determined about 75 to 80% of intelligence, whereas environmental influences determined about 20 to 25%.

As reported by Rutter (2006), further support for genetic contribution to IQ comes from adoption and twin studies. Empirical result from twin studies suggest that monozygotic or identical twins that were reared in different environments exhibited similar behaviour and intelligence. This illustrates the fact that nature, not environment, is the determinant of behaviour. As with twins’ studies, the genetic contribution is quite glaring in adoption studies.
Rutter further reports that studies showed that biological parents tend more often to have IQs that are similar to their children than to foster or adoptive parents.

Similarly Fisch, Bilek, and Chang (1976) carried out a study in which they compared 144 adopted children matched (for gestational age, birth weight, sex, and their biological mothers’ socio-economic levels) with a control group of 288 children who were reared by their biological parents. The adoptees were raised in higher socio-economical status than they had been born into or that their matched controls grew up in. They further reported that at the age of 7 all the children took IQ test. The result showed that the elevated socio-economic status in the adoptive families’ homes did not serve to raise children’s IQ scores. However, the adopted children did better than the controlled group in achievement test that measured reading and spelling. This is understandable given that an IQ test is supposed to show a person’s innate capacity to learn, while an achievement test measures what that individual has already learned.

Making their deduction from the above study, Fisch Bilek, Deinhard and Chang (1976) aver that it is possible that the unknown construct that we call “innate intelligence” may be determined largely by heredity, but the children environment influences the way we use intelligence. Consequently, they argue that children from lower socio-economic environment fall behind in academic achievement because of the lack of some of these essential learning prerequisites. Corroborating the finding of Fisch et al (1976), Papalia and Olds (2002) postulate that the classic study of intelligence favour genetic components to the quality, if we define intelligence as an innate cognitive factor, or a basic potential for learning. They further point out that the actual learning that occurs, the educational attainment as evidence in one’s ability to read, spell and calculate, is more subject to environmental influence of family and schooling.

In their quest to find out if intelligence is determined by nature or nurture, Snyderman and Rothman (1987) conducted a survey of expert opinion on the matter. They questioned 1020 American experts and reported that most believed that intelligence is inherited to a significant degree. Similarly, Eysenck and Kamin (1981) indicate that some of the results of the
Texas Adoption projects show that the correlation on intelligence between adopted children and their biological mothers is higher than between the adopted children and their adoptive parents.

On the other hand, scholars who hold that nurture or environment plays a more prominent role in determining behaviour have also strongly advanced their perspective. Psychologists such as Gordon and Bhattacharyya (2004), Plomin (2003), Rifkin (1998) vehemently assert that intelligence is shaped by most factors in a person’s social environment, such as the length of time a child is read to and talked to. Some proponents of the nurture school of thought have used IQ research to argue that intelligence is mutable and susceptible to environmental intervention, especially in the period of life from birth to age four. They maintain that if lower intelligence is caused by inferior environments, environmental factors can be modified to improve intelligence.

As Johnson (2008) points out, there is considerable evidence that home environmental can affect IQ with respect to adopted children. Mercer (2008) indicates that good foster homes and adoptive families can turn out children whose IQs are substantially higher than would be predicted from the natural parents’ IQs. According to Plomin (2003) the relationship between advantages in home environment and intelligence is clear, and sometimes yields correlations as high as +.76. Focusing on adopted children, Scarr- Salapatek and Weinberg (1975) indicate that the earlier the child was adopted, the better the care of the child’s later IQ score is likely to be.

Johnson (2008) maintains that parents (biological or adoptive) who are most likely to stimulate growth in IQ are warm, comfortable, free of anxiety, and relaxed with children. They run democratic households in which adults and children participate in many activities together. They also provide a great deal of intellectual stimulation. Johnson insists that there is considerable evidence that intellectual stimulation and the quality of early home life are important in helping children develop their intelligence to the maximum. Further environmental influences on a child’s intelligence include everything from the health of the mother during pregnancy to the amount of teaching a child receives (Woolfolk, Hughes and Walkup, 2008). Scarr and McCartney (1983) also affirm that environment plays a large
part in language development. According to them, if parents encourage their children’s first efforts to make sounds by babbling back to them, they will start to speak earlier than if the earlier vocalizing is ignored.

Regarding adoption and nurture, Capron and Dayme (1991) and Schiff and Lewontin (1986) report that French studies of children of low socio economic status (SES) parents adopted into high SES families find strong positive effects on the children’s IQs compared to non-adopted children raised in low SES families. This therefore shows that the environment in which a child is nurtured, the quality of food he eats and the experiences he passes through significantly shape the person’s intelligence, personality and behaviour (Ellis, 2000; Feuersten and Kozulin 1995). In support of the nurture position, Lefrancois (1992), states that Scarr and Weinberg (1983) in one of the Minnesota Adoption studies found that black children adopted into white homes performed as well on IQ tests as the natural white children in the adoptive homes. The results further showed that these black children had higher average intelligence test scores than their biological parents.

Conclusion
On the basis of available (reviewed) literature on the subject we are inclined to agreeing that intelligence, behaviour and the whole gamut of the human personality are so complex as to be solely determined by either biological factors or environmental experiences. The necessity of the interplay of the forces of nature and nurture in determining behaviour cannot be overemphasized. Consequently, we agree with Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), Fubes and Martin (2000), Berk (2006), Bee and Boyd (2007) and Cook and Cook (2007) who affirm that, nature and nurture combine to influence personality development, with biological factors playing stronger role in some aspects, such as physical development, and environmental factors playing a stronger role in others such as moral development.

The interplay of nature and nurture in the evolution of character and personality is also empirically evident from adoption studies. As Loehlin, Horn and Willerman (1982) report from their study, the IQs of adopted children correlate moderately with those of their adoptive parents while the children are young. However, this positive correlation appears to be for a
while because Plomin, Fulker, Corley and Defries (1997) in their own adoption research found that as adopted children grew older, their IQ scores gradually correlate more with those of their biological parents. This therefore illustrates that the forces of gene and environment conjointly play active role at different stages of an individual’s physical development (changes in the body), personality development (changes in an individual personality), social development (changes in the way an individual relates to others), and cognitive development (changes in thinking) (Woolfolk, 2004)

**Recommendation**

From the foregoing it is important for parents, particularly adoptive parents, to recognize that nature and nurture combine to shape the character and intelligence of a child. Consequently it is recommended that parents should provide accommodative, democratic, intellectually stimulating and creative home environments that would help to bring out the best potentials in children, particularly the adopted ones.

**References**


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