

# Cultural Practice Being Recycled by Migrants in Modern Societies: The Education and Health Nexus for Renegotiation

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## Overview

*In this global environment with various challenges, it is important to consider “The Africa We Want Education and Health Nexus”; but the worry is on the real-life examples to contextualize. The concern is “regarding lack of educational and health aspirations among the youth of African migrant communities”. Hence, this presentation is on health aspiration that most of us subconsciously negate in our embrace of social support. It stems from cultural practice that constitutes a basis of mental trauma, which impacts on our health. It is hoped that the exposition stimulates discussion on ethics, which will translate to education among the Africans in diaspora and possibly arouse interest in health profession among the youth.*

## Introduction

In discussions on early marriage and associated domestic violence, lack of awareness on responsibilities in marriages is a major problem and, in some cases, this leads to murder (Agege, Nwose, and Odjimogho 2018; Agege et al. 2017). In developed countries there is conflict of laws on early marriages and the issues are arguably suppressed or under-appreciated (Agege et al. 2017). There are factors of expectations including dependence of female on the male and un-equal relationship, since the male in most cases is older and is the breadwinner, but the impact and the problems are yet to be part of sex education in institutions. The purpose of this paper is to briefly analyze how early marriage as well as child adoption are probably ‘what is left unsaid’.

**Reproduction context:** Teenage pregnancy is like early child marriage, especially based on age (Psaki 2016). What is overlooked are the conflicting laws whereby there is sexual protect act on one hand and legal provision for age on consent for sexual intercourse on the other. For instance, sexual activity with under 18 years old may be prosecuted, assuming the other person is over 18 years. Yet,

under-aged girls are entitled to confidentiality and can access sexual service without presence of parent or parental consent (Rogstad and King 2003). The implication is that teenage pregnancies fester over the world (World Health Organization 2018). With reference to Africa and Australia, while lack of social support in some African countries may serve as a deterrent, Centre Link payments possibly foster it in Australia. Further, the context of World Health Organization (WHO) statistics is based on lack of affordances for sexual services. That is, poverty, lack of education or early marriage may be predominant factors in Africa (World Health Organization 2018). There may be availability of sexual services in Australia. Nevertheless, social support is a thorny point in the discourse of teenage pregnancy in Australia, because it still constitutes a social issue (Robson, Cameron, and Roberts 2006). What is known is that teenage sex and pregnancy is associated with adverse health impact (Fig 1), but what is arguably unknown is how extra-marital teenage pregnancy in the Western world amounts to recycling of outdated cultural practice of early marriage.

***Domestic violence:*** There are issues of domestic violence resulting in long or lasting mental trauma. In discussions on early marriage, ignorance and/or lack of awareness in male and female on responsibility and expectation in marriages are potential causes of e.g., violence in marriages, while health effects include murder (Agege, Nwose, and Odjimogho 2018; Agege et al. 2017). Regarding lack of awareness on responsibility and expectation in marriages, a point worth emphasizing is that dependence of the female on male partner leads to un-equal relationship since the male in most cases is older, breadwinner and probably more educated since some cultures prioritize male schooling. A point was made that conflict of laws operates vis-à-vis social values in the developed countries, which possibly promote teenage pregnancies, and this is analogous to early marriages in Africa (Agege et al. 2017). Hence, the focus of discourse “*regarding lack of educational and health aspirations among the youth of African migrant communities*” is to highlight how early marriage constitutes steppingstone to domestic violence and mental trauma suffered in families.

***Implications for public health:*** The health consequences of early marriage or teenage pregnancy include adverse birth effects (Nour 2006). Given legalities surrounding socio-cultural practices and values (Hampton 2010; Agege et al. 2017), and the necessity to work within customary and statutory laws; it is pertinent to recognize the causes and consequences of early marriage (Hampton 2010). It is likely that knowledge of these risks in the proponents of early marriage is a deterrent; in other words, ignorance of these risks may be factor to perpetuation of early marriage (Fig 1). This presentation endeavours to expose how the cultural reproduction practice of child adoption and early marriage are now recycled in modern families with attendant effect of mental trauma in mother and child.

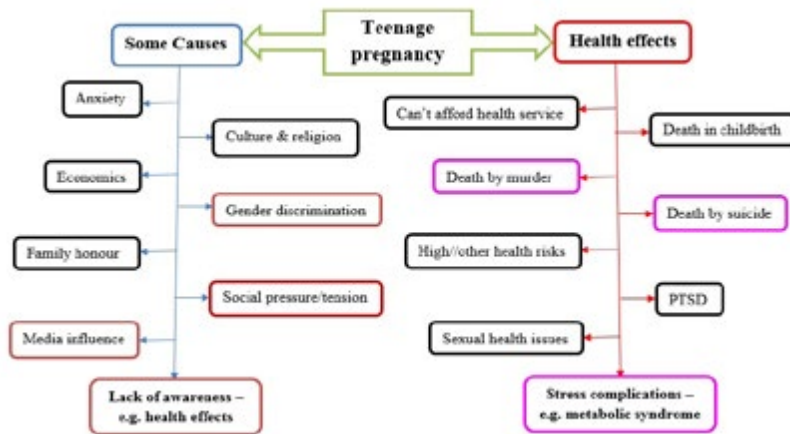


Fig. 1: Overview of causes and health effects of teenage pregnancy (Agege, Nwose, and Odjimogho 2018)

### Three case scenarios

**Framework:** A drama at the Sydney Opera House weekend of 17<sup>th</sup> May 2019 was celebration of feminism, discussing women, misogyny and emotional trauma and the performance was by five young Australian women with parental lineage in Croatia, Iraq, Nigeria, Tonga and Vietnam. In the play, culture-induced misogyny and associated emotional trauma of women were remonstrated as they shared “their experiences and ideas through culture, song and dance” (Sydney Opera House 2019). What rushed to mind was my health science classroom experience and the concern that ‘this is separate from the emotional trauma of being an adopted or a surrogate child’. Then two cases of child adoption and one of domestic violence came to mind.

1. Comtish (not real name) is an 82 year old woman who with a younger brother constitute the only two biological children of her mother. Out of illiteracy-driven love, Comtish was not sent to school to prevent being flogged or smacked by teachers. Permitted by culture, she was nurtured to produce at least another boy and girl from extra-marital relationship by her mother (i.e., olden form of adoption arrangement in Africa *per se*), before she could marry and have her own children. The two girls and a boy are doing well in life, but events still unintentionally cause emotional trauma to both Comtish and the children. In particular, the boy adopted let-them-say as a nickname because he was never given compliment. He later added ‘Redemption’ when he found himself completing secondary school after the experience of his mother funding his final year of secondary school; but had to drop the nicknames as one of the means to relieve post-traumatic stress disorder associated with the parentage.

2. Jomur (not realname) was adopted as a child from Asia by Australian childless couple. At some stage, the adopting parents divorced and both remarried. At mid-30s, Jomur was known for mood swings and loudly lamented one day: ‘what life am I living -- don’t know my parents? She was raised by separated adopting parents and stepparents who tried to sympathize. Jomur fell in love with a guy who equally had no biological home-base but has now abandoned her thus she now has to start life afresh.’
3. A 52-year-old man entered matrimonial relationship with a 20-year-old woman. Sixteen years on, they had two teenage children who have been entangled in a custody battle between the parents who have turned 68 and 36 years, respectively. Specifically, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2018; the man shot both two children and himself to death. Thus, this is a case of domestic violence albeit worst public health scenario being death. This storyline is a case of domestic violence trauma resulting in “premeditated and planned” shooting of the children. The children’s mother was treated for shock before been handed over to relatives for further care and the mental trauma is very likely to continue for a lifetime (Cormack and Rawsthorne 2018; Rawsthorne and Clun 2018).

## **Discussion**

This paper is to briefly analyze 3 case stories to highlight how old cultural practice of early marriage as well as child adoption are being recycled in migrants in Western countries. This discussion will consider African old culture, current social ‘Western’ values, concept of verbal overshadowing vis-à-vis what is left unsaid, independence versus social support, and personal ethics questions.

### **The African old culture**

The practices of having children by concubine relationship and surrogacy date back to ancient times, and were culturally normal (Sharma, Saxena, and Singh 2018). There have always been health impacts that are downplayed; albeit, suppressed and never presented to the conventional healthcare practitioners for management. The mental trauma i.e. health impact constitute the lamentations in *Case scenario 1*. Also, being called ‘illegitimate’ evokes emotional trauma, especially as it is associated with cultural and social denials. Such was the pain in *Case scenario 2*. The cultural practices of concubine relationship and old form of African child adoption arrangements are outdated, but unfortunately being recycled in modern families as governments amend the rules to relieve the occasions of denials. However, the mental health of the adopted or surrogate children are of concern such as indicated in a report from Sweden (Armuan et al. 2018; Keyes et al. 2013).

### **Current social values**

With the recycling in modern families, health impacts that were not presented and hence non-issues previously are now global public healthcare concerns. Another sublime effect is the emerging influence on teaching methods, which needs to be discussed for ‘learning and teaching’ of e.g., genetics.

- Women are the drivers of surrogate mothers (Sharma, Saxena, and Singh 2018). The first case scenario of African adoption arrangement story epitomizes the illiteracy factor, while the second case depicts the child’s trauma being worse compared to the African’s extra-marital child.
- People can now have children with the plethora of options including use of sperm bank and *de facto* relationship. What will continue discussion is how these impacts on teaching especially of genetics (Smith and Wood 2016). What is significant at the individual level is moment of emotional trauma (Riddle 2017).

A recent court ruling in Australia is probably worth noting (Byrne 2019). Notably “there are men who thought they were sperm donors and had no obligation to the child ... and have now discovered that potentially they have the full responsibility, including potentially child support and inheritance”. The other-side-of-the-coin is that there are women who have been unduly bearing the burden of parenting. The trauma underpins the abandonment of the cultural reproductive practices and change in government laws. Child-support policies partially eased the financial burdens in modern lifestyle, but not the trauma that is sustained. For instance, “underage mothers remain of interest, as they are more likely than older mothers to experience broader disadvantage because of their younger age, including access to education, employment and social support” (AIHW 2018).

### ***Verbal overshadowing***

Verbal descriptions often lead to distortion of reality, and this underlies the concept of verbal overshadowing (Hatano et al. 2015; Dodson, Johnson, and Schooler 1997). Associated with verbal overshadowing is the concept of inhibitory control of thoughts, which revolves around cognitive function of inhibiting unwanted information that may influence social behavior (von Hippel and Gonsalkorale 2005). Yet, this is arguably akin to political correctness where, for example, psychiatrists may accept plaintiffs’ statements at face value and limit treatments to management of damage without assessing psychodynamics (Feldman-Schorrig 1995). Probably more pertinent is that psychologists have described the phenomenon of verbal overshadowing to be “verbalizing the appearance of something previously seen impaired its future recognition” (Castillo 2013). Therefore, we may speak how something looks to the extent that we fail to recognize it when it occurs. The first case depicts African old culture of child adoption whereby the boy suffered domestic violence in different forms including neglect and emotional abuse. While the African culture may have prevented the

child from being weighted with the sense of abuse, the ‘new social values’ among African-Australians living in Australia can likely do the opposite. At this juncture, it is probably pertinent to note that withholding complement from a child constitute mental abuse; and neglect is the most prevalent form of domestic violence against children (Fig 2). Further, it is known that single parenthood constitutes a major risk factor in child neglect and abuse (Pekarsky 2018). What probably needs to be brought to the fore is that new social values encouraging *de facto* and partner relationships have verbally overshadowed the disdainful old cultures concubines.

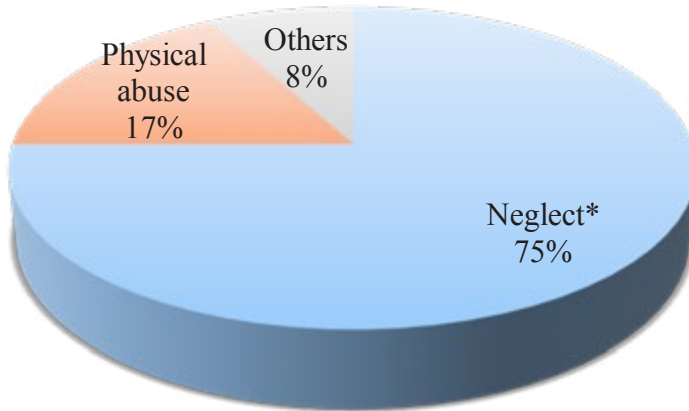


Fig 2: Relative proportions of physical abuse and neglect in child maltreatment (Pekarsky 2018)

The third scenario presented involved three deaths, plus the surviving victim at risk of lifelong trauma. There is likelihood that the surviving victim will depend on psychological counselling (if not mental health) support. Cases of domestic violence resulting in several forms of health conditions have abounded (Bugeja et al. 2015) and may continue to occur (Henrion 2014). The efforts to stop domestic violence such as emotional abuse and a family member denying access to money have improved, but not the level and fatalities of domestic violence (Henrion 2014). This therefore implies that current efforts are more of verbal overshadowing. For instance, it is pointed out that age-difference between spouses and age at the marriage are indicators of domestic violence and divorce (Erlangsen et al. 2017). In terms of verbal overshadowing, one piece of information prone to inhibitory control of thoughts, especially buoyed by infatuation, is that rate of divorce increases with spousal age gap (Fig 3). In the story line presented, a 52-year-old man went into a family relationship with 20 years old, which is 3-decades of generational gap with its sociocultural differences. On the other hand, probably over-exaggerated i.e., over shadowed piece of information is divorce rate in stratified age of couples at time marriage. While speculated divorce statistics

seems quite lower than talked, it is also lowest among those who marry at 24 years or younger (Fig 4); and this is contrary to both popular impressions.

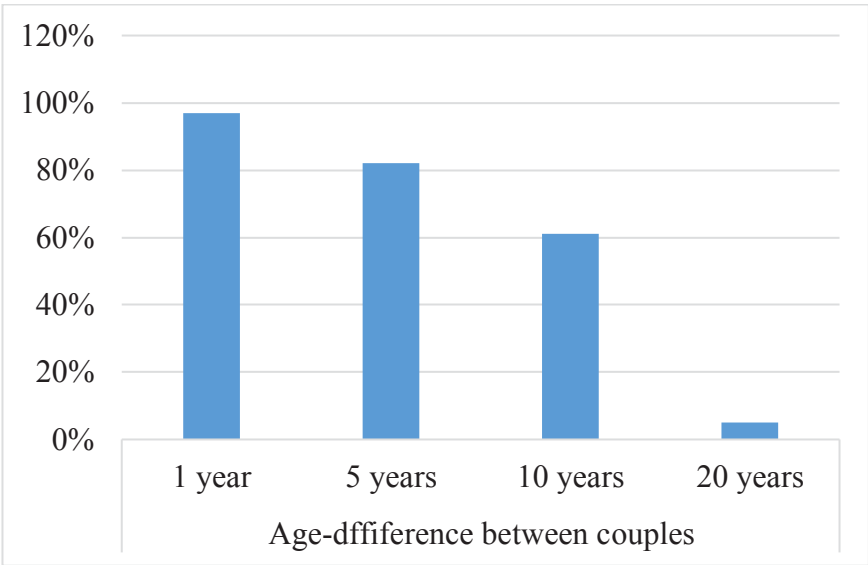


Fig 3: Age-differences between couples and likelihood of 'no divorce' (Fottrell 2014)



Fig 4: Divorce rate relative to couples' age at marriage (Budget Direct Life Insurance 2019)

### **Independence & social support**

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to two ways that society is responsible for tragedies of mental trauma with health sequelae that is befalling families such as in 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> case presentation; with a view to recognize it in young adults who are yet to enter relationship. First, racial denigration and prejudice have meant that focus on early marriage have been on low-mid income countries. The conflicting of laws and political correctness that operates in the developed countries, which promote early marriages in analogous formats (Agege et al. 2017), needs to be reviewed. There is a trend of teenage children being eager to attain 18 years with the zeal to become independent; and a 21years old daughter can stand on the politically correct definition of adulthood to ignore or circumvent parents' advice on such sensitive issue as marriage. This calls for public health practitioners to review how social debates and parenting policies impact family health, especially in domestic violence.

Secondly, political correctness is also likely to intimidate commentators to ignore the mental torture that led a man to commit suicide. It is pertinent to note that suicide prevention helpline is available for free in Australia. Therefore, why this helpline option was not adopted in preference to committing suicide is a clarion call for family medicine, public health, psychologists, and psychiatrists. It may be that the mental torture stems from lack of trust in the system. For instance, designating it as criminal amounts to justification for not seeking help i.e., the man probably did not contact helpline due to non-confidence. Thus, there are two groups in need of help in domestic violence and suicide prevention. One group includes the family members as well as spouse (Pitman et al. 2014; Erlangsen et al. 2017) and the other group includes the psychologists and psychiatrists who assess the credibility of a plaintiff's allegations "that could be crucial in the clarification of legal questions" and create the trust that prevents suicidal idea (Feldman-Schorrig 1995). In summary, the story line of man killing his children may end as domestic violence resulting in death of children. It may progress to different divides of critics castigating either the dead man and/or the woman. What may be left unsaid, which this paper advances, is that the society failed the man and woman as well as their parents. While the man and his children have suffered irreversible health fatality being death, the help needed by the victim as well as other victims of domestic violence is a review of sociocultural values.

### **The personal ethics questions**

Problem-based learning and teaching is one valid pedagogy applicable not only in health professions (Greece, Wolff, and McGrath 2018; Moore and Barnett 1992), but in individual development. The latter is about learning by or from experience. However, there are ethical challenges especially in teaching genetics that have been highlighted (Smith and Wood 2016; Nagle and Kažoka 2014). This 'Case for Discussion' advances two scenarios of ethical concerns (Fig 5), which requires practical discussions on ethics in the context of teaching.



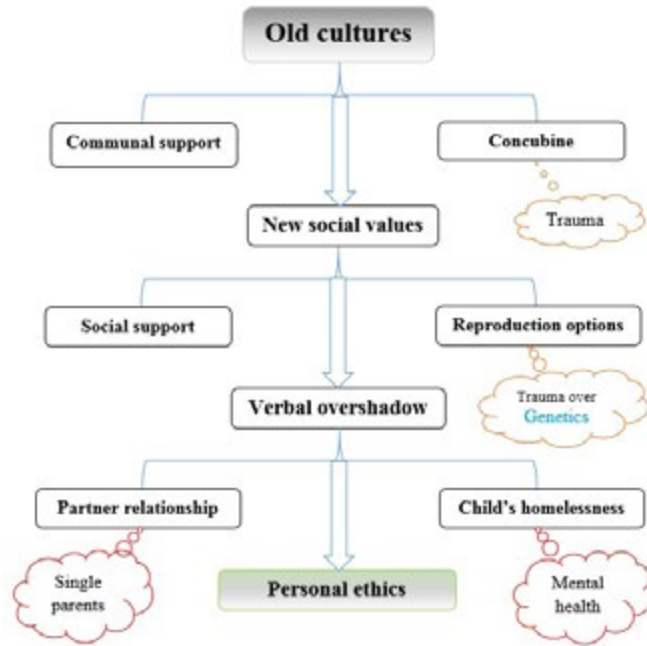


Fig 5: Graphical abstract depicting the place of personal ethics

1. Guiding against accusation of ‘othering’: How can the academics and public health practitioners educate the populace without being at fault of ‘othering’? The relevant ethical concern here is that the “problem of othering defies easy answers” (Powell and Menendian 2016). For instance, giving example that identifies with any axis of difference such as disability, gender, or social orientation can be interpreted as ‘othering’, which can come under the error of unconscious bias, if not discrimination and prejudice (Powell and Menendian 2016).
2. The paradigm of problem-based learning in genetics: How can academics teach genetics such as blood group inheritance without asking students to review their parents – that is, to avoid causing emotional trauma among those students who have no parental history? Problem-based learning is never intended to cause trauma in a student. However, this case for discussion presents a scenario were asking a student to solve personal blood group inheritance led to emotional trauma. Two concerns are imperative here – firstly, this should raise occupational health and safety in the teaching environment: and secondly, the ethics of learning genetics from individual’s family secrets.

Perhaps, it is pertinent to briefly draw attention to patient advocacy being the purpose of clinical ethics consultation that has been a subject of debate (Brazg et

al. 2016). The patient in the discourse includes adopted and surrogate children of all ages who are undergoing some form of emotional trauma. The ethical concerns on helping the homeless where family trauma may be a factor has been brought to the fore – i.e., whether we are *morally obligated as a society to help* (van Leeuwen and Merry 2018). What is being added here is ‘how you wish to help in the public health education – whether in problem-based classroom teaching scenario, or guidance of an African-Australian family member’, whilst being conscious of ethical legalities. Another addition is the perspective of personal ethics (Fig 5). Two personal ethics questions are

Why have you come to Australia? Tick as many that applies to you

- a. Live a better life
- b. Improve the life of relatives in Africa
- c. Live permanently in Australia
- d. Have children that should face mental trauma due to parentage
- e. Have children who will add to the mental health burden of Australia
- f. Help to solve the mental health issue

What are your principles i.e., personal ethics regarding the following?

- i. Reproduction
- ii. Domestic violence
- iii. Dependence on social support (Centre Link)
- iv. Client or consultant aspiration?

## **Conclusion**

This paper is “regarding lack of educational and health aspirations among the youth of African migrant communities”. This presentation has revolved around trauma as the health aspiration that most of us subconsciously negate in our embrace of social support and values. There is need to discuss ethical concerns regarding how to address emotional trauma associated with adopted/surrogate children in the public health expositions and classroom lectures on genetics. The emotional trauma of being an adopted or surrogate child is now being amplified with some people not knowing their family history. Yet, the legality of ‘othering’ conflicts with the desire for problem-based teaching pedagogy; such that ethical questions may always arise.

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