

**Running head:** PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN 'EMPTY SHELL' FAMILIES

Parents and Children in 'Empty Shell' Families: A Case Study on  
Selected Families Residing In Addis Ababa

By: Aissetu Barry

A Thesis Submitted To the Research and Graduate Programs of Addis Ababa  
University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

Advisor: Prof. Sandhya Jhoshi

June 2006

Addis Ababa

Parents and Children in 'Empty Shell' Families: A Case Study on Selected  
Families Residing In Addis Ababa

By: Aissetu Barry

Graduate School of Social Work

Addis Ababa University

**Approval of board of examiners**

Advisor \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Examiner \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

First and for most I would like to praise God for blessing me with the strength to go on.

Then, my heartfelt gratitude goes to Prof. Sandhya Joshi, my research advisor, for her constructive comments and her patience during the difficult times.

I would also like to thank my husband- Theodros Kebede for his care and willingness to stand by my side in every situation. Thank you Wede, this wouldn't be real without you!

Last but not least, I would like to thank all my classmates, instructors and the staffs at the Graduate School of Social Work.

Thank you friends - "AMBA\*S" - for being there for me when ever I need your support and brightening my stay in the school

**TABLE OF CONTENT**

**List of Tables** **ii**

**Abstract** **iii**

**PART I. BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM** **1**

Operational Definition.....4

Purpose of the Research .....5

Objective of the Research .....5

Research Methods.....6

Scope of the Study.....8

Limitation of the Study.....8

Ethical Concerns .....8

**PART II: BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF FAMILIES UNDER STUDY** **9**

**PART III: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ‘EMPTY SHELL’ FAMILIES ON PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN** **16**

Overview.....16

Underlying Causes That Create an ‘Empty Shell’ Family.....18

Impacts of ‘Empty Shell’ Family on Parents and Children.....30

**PART IV- WHY DO PARENTS CHOOSE TO STAY IN ‘EMPTY SHELL’ FAMILIES?** **39**

**Summary and Conclusion** **44**

**PART V- SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF ‘EMPTY SHELL’ FAMILIES** **45**

Family and Marriage Counseling.....45

Family Conferencing.....50

Support Groups .....50

Spiritual Approaches.....51

Reference

Annex

**List of Tables**

Table 1: Causes That Prompt Families to Be ‘Empty-Shell’ .....19  
Table 2: Psychological and Emotional Hurts On Parents Living In ‘Empty-Shell’ Family...33  
Table 3: Psychological and Emotional Hurts on Children Living in ‘Empty-Shell’ Family ..37  
Table 4: Why Do Parents Stay in ‘Empty-Shell’ Family Settings?.....40

## Abstract

*'Empty-shell' family is a family setting where couples have no more sexual and emotional ties while they are still living together under the same roof with their children. This research is a case study that incorporates 15 individuals who are from five families, i.e. five couples who are parents and five children. The research tries to assess the causes that prompt families to be an 'empty-shell' and consequences of being in 'empty-shell' families on parents and their children. Furthermore, the underlying reasons why parents choose to stay in 'empty shell' families are assessed and the implication of social work for 'empty-shell' families is identified. This paper has also taken into consideration the ethical and cultural issues.*

## **PART I. BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM**

The family is the crucible of character, implicitly "teaching" about virtues of honesty, loyalty, trust, self-sacrifice, personal responsibility, and respect for others.

*Inter-religious federation for world peace*

*international (2004)*

Family is the most important value of life, for almost all individuals. Children are procreated and socialized first in their family settings. They form their behaviors, and learn societal expectations from their families. Thus, families should be kept intact to have a healthy functioning future generation.

A family can be categorized as functional or dysfunctional based on the connectedness among family members and their wellbeing. Functional is used to describe the effectiveness of family patterns in achieving their collective goals. Whereas dysfunctional families represent family patterns that are unworkable and distressful (Walsh, 1993)

'Empty shell family' can be embraced under dysfunctional families. According to Granham (1994) 'empty-shell' family is defined as *...a type of family organization whose members continue to reside together with little communication or interaction and fail to give emotional support to one another. Hence, it involves breaking of sexual relations and other relations* (Granham, 1994).

Ideally, children grow up in family environments, which help them feel worthwhile and valuable. Yet, 'empty-shell' families may fail to provide for many of their children's emotional and physical needs since they will be taken up with their own problems. In addition, the communication patterns in the families may severely limit the child's expressions of feelings and needs. Children growing up in such families are likely to develop low self-esteem and feel that their needs are worthless (Craig, 2000).

According to Burgess, Locke and Thomes (1971), family has inner and external aspects. The inner aspect is illustrated as "... *interaction and communication between family members which is friendly and congenial results in a fusion of attitudes, values, objectives so that the family will have we-feeling*". Moreover, the external structure is expressed as "...*configuration of a man and a woman living together as a husband and a wife and with the addition of children living together as father, mother and children*". In this case, 'empty shell' family will only qualify to the assumptions in external structure since the inner ties are already broken. However, for a family to be 'family' and to create a healthy functioning and productive generation, inner ties are very important and decisive.

'Empty-shell' families exist at the verge of divorce and share most of the experiences with divorced families. According to Bohannan (1970) cited in Morgan and Marliyn(2004), several overlapping stages and experiences of divorce are cited as emotional divorce, the economic divorce, the co-parental divorce, the community divorce and the psychic divorce.



Emotional divorce involves letting go of the feelings about the marriage. The spouses recognize that they are detached and become disappointed and angry at each other. Hence, one or both of them become aware that the marriage is no longer meeting their needs. Similarly, couples in 'empty-shell' families experience these circumstances and the emotional ties between them start to fade away (Morgan and Marliyn, 2004).

Parents who hold the physical custody of the child, usually mothers, are more likely to suffer financial hardships after divorce. This condition gets harsher in developing countries like Ethiopia, where there is no welfare system and the overall economic situation is humble. Divorced mothers are often forced to work in lower status jobs like cooking in households, washing cloths, petty trading, etc extensively in order to sustain their children and themselves (Aissetu, 2004)\*. Thus, couples, especially mothers prefer to stay in 'empty-shell' families than to divorce and face the negatives consequences alone (Morgan and Marliyn, 2004).

'Empty-shell' family settings can also be considered as co-parental divorce as spouses in this family setting can nurture their children together. Community divorce is defined as the changes in relationships with friends and community during divorce. At the time of divorce, divorcees might not feel comfortable around their married friends as they could perceive that these friends will no more be an active support group. Hence, they would try to avoid

---

\* In accordance with Ethiopian custom, the first name or given name is substituted for the surname and the father's name.

social involvement. In this case, 'empty-shell' families seem to benefit, since they are still living together and are recognized as married in their neighborhood and community they don't need to change their social environments (Morgan and Marliyn, 2004).

According to Bohannan (1970) as cited in Morgan and Marliyn (2004), the psychic divorce is the process of separating oneself from the spouse and developing autonomy. This situation is usually observed after divorce hence it is not commonly seen in spouses living in 'empty-shell' families.

Keeping all the above things in mind, this research will assess the impacts of 'empty-shell' families on couples and their children. In addition, it will study the causes that prompt a family to be an 'empty-shell' and why the couples choose to stay in 'empty-shell' family settings rather than being separated. This paper also assessed the implications of the problems in 'empty-shell' families for social work.

### **Operational Definition**

In this research paper a couple of terms that are linked to 'empty-shell' families and that characterize such families are used. In order to have a common understanding, these terms are defined as follows:

**A Family:** is a fundamental social unit consisting of a group of two or more individuals related by marriage.

**'Empty-shell' families:** 'Empty-shell' family is a type of family setting in which the couple- usually parents, have no more emotional and sexual attachment while

they are living together in the same household. In 'Empty-shell' families, the couples may share different household utilities and resources.

### **Purpose of the Research**

This research will provide a brief description of the advantages and limitations of being in 'empty shell' families for both parents and their children. In line with this, this paper will also assess why couples choose to stay in 'empty shell' families rather than to divorce. Moreover, the implication of 'empty-shell' families to social work is highlighted.

### **Objective of the Research**

#### **General objective**

The major objective of this thesis is to study the psychosocial and economic impacts of 'empty-shell' family on the couples and their children.

#### **Specific Objectives**

- To assess the underlying causes that prompt a family to be an 'empty-shell'
- To understand how 'empty shell' families function and/or how decisions are made in these families
- To understand why couples chose to stay in 'empty shell' families rather than to be separated

- To assess the implication of the problems in 'empty-shell' families for social work

## **Research Methods**

### **Data Source**

To go through this research, both primary and secondary data sources are used.

**Primary sources-** the primary sources will be the information gained through in-depth interviews that are carried out with the parents and children in 'empty-shell' families.

**Secondary sources-** different books, magazines, articles and several unpublished writings are used to supplement the primary data gained from primary sources.

### **Selection Criteria**

To carry out this research five 'Empty-shell families comprising both parents and children were interviewed. The first two families were identified through purposive sampling which is based on the researcher's previous information and the rest three were included with the application of snowball sampling method.

The interview included the opinions of both parents and one child who are from the identified families. Since it was impossible to discuss with the elder children as they have started their own life away from their parents, the interviewed children

were the last or the immediate elder who are currently living with their parents. In general, the interview included the view of fifteen respondents.

### **Method of Data Collection**

This research was a case study. Thus, it has relied on qualitative information obtained from respondents. In-depth interviews were held with parents and children guided by a semi-structured interview questionnaire.

The researcher visited the houses of the identified families before the time of interview in order to determine their willingness to take part in the interview. Furthermore, the pre-interview visit helped to establish rapport with the respondents and to create a friendly environment- especially with the mother and the children who were the first contacts.

### **Settings**

In-depth interviews were held in the houses of the respondents. To carry out the interview without bias and ensure privacy, all the interviewees were interviewed at different times. As a result, the researcher had a chance to visit the families more than three times. During this time, the families provided refreshments that enhanced the formation of a friendly environment.

The pre-interview visits to the respondents' households provided the researcher adequate time to clarify the purpose of the research and ensure confidentiality for the interviewees. In addition, visiting the families in their household

several times has created multiple opportunities to observe the general household settings and the way the different household activities are carried out.

### **Scope of the Study**

In this study, ten parents and five children who are living in 'empty-shell' family settings at present, and dwelling in different parts of Addis Ababa were interviewed.

### **Limitation of the Study**

- It will be very difficult to infer for the general population due to the small size of the sample. In addition, lack of random sampling and protection against other threats to validity.
- Lack of adequate time and resource

### **Ethical Concerns**

- Respondents were made aware of the purpose of the study prior to the interview. In addition, respondents have signed a consent form to reflect their willingness to take part in the interview.
- The questions to be asked could be too personal and sensitive (some times offending) for the respondents. Hence, the researcher had informal visits to the families' home before hand, in order to win their rapport so that they will feel free to talk.

- Confidentiality of the information that the respondents provide is ensured. Therefore, different codes were used to nominate their ideas than their real names.
- It was explained to the respondents that this research is only educational research. Thus, they would not expect any intervention from me. Usually, people expect to see some tangible evidences of intervention if they will be called on to provide necessary information.
- Some times the respondents may talk out what is hidden inside for many years. And I suppose letting the respondents to talk would help people to free/reduce their depressions. Hence, I was an active listener and I have tried to use some of my counseling skills.
- The respondents were told to stop me any time, if they do not understand what I am saying, or if they do not feel comfortable with the forwarded questions. This condition has empowered my respondents.

## **PART II: BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF FAMILIES UNDER STUDY**

### **Family One**

The couple in Family One got married 45 years ago. This family resides in Addis Ababa, Arada Sub-City. Both of them are from the Amhara ethnic group. They got married through customary marriage that is arranged by their parents. At the time of their marriage the bride was 12 and the groom 26 years old. Now, the mother is 57 years old and the father is 71. During these years of marriage they had seven

children-five sons and two daughters. One of their sons is dead. The mother had basic education hence, she can read and write. She is now is a housewife. The father was a high school drop out. He used to work as a driver and retired. However, he is still working as a personal driver.

The first child of Family One, who is their daughter, is married and living in London at present while, their second child, who is their first son, has a degree in computer science and is an instructor in a computer school. He is now 42 years old and preparing himself for marriage. There is another son who is 40 years old. He has a diploma in filming and photography and now, a photographer. Unfortunately, the fourth child died 10 years ago when he was in his twenties. The fifth child is a General Mechanic. He got married three years ago. He has a four years old son who lives with his grandparents, while; the sixth, who is the second daughter, has a diploma in typing and computer science and learning hardware. She has three children that are born out of wedlock and live with their grandparents. The last son\* is 25 years old. He is a computer hardware technician and works in a Private Company.

Family One has their own house filled with all the necessary household utensils. Almost all of the household expenses are covered by the monthly remittance from their eldest daughter who is living in London. Right now, the parents live with their last two children and four grandchildren. The father has his own bedroom and the mother shares a room with her daughter and grandsons.

---

\* The child interviewed for the study



## Family Two

Family Two resides in Kolefe Keraniyo Sub- City. They are farmers. They have been married for about 43 years. And during these years they had eight children-four daughters and four sons, one of whom died recently. Both of the spouses are from the Oromo ethnic background. The couple got married through customary marriage arranged by their families. At the time of their marriage the bride was in her early adolescence and the man was in his late twenties. Both of them have basic education and can read and write.

Family Two has a son who developed mental disorders beginning from the last four years. The other children are all school dropouts except one who is a high school student now. The first child, a son, is a farmer who lives around *Sebeta*. He was an elementary school dropout who got married six years ago and has three sons. Their second child is dead and the third child, who is female, is a day laborer and sometimes engage in petty trading. She lives alone around *Sebeta*. The fourth child, who is their second daughter, works in a factory and she got married eight years ago while the fifth son is mentally ill. The sixth child is a son who is married and has a son. He works as a guard, while the seventh is a daughter who works in a factory. And the eighth\*, who is their last daughter, is a high school student.

At present, Family Two has the parents, their two last daughters, and their mentally ill brother. The father has his own bedroom and the mother shares a room with her daughters. This family lives in deteriorated housing with a huge problem.

---

\* The child interviewed for the study

There is a problem of alcohol and domestic violence. Moreover, the presence of mental illness in the household has complicated the crisis in the family.

### **Family Three**

Spouses in the third family have been married for 52 years. Both spouses have Amhara ethnic background. At the beginning, they were married by customary marriage, when the wife was sixteen and the husband thirty-two years old. There are ten children in this family-five daughter and five sons. The mother is a housewife and the father was a heavy truck driver and now a retiree. Both spouses had basic education and the father was in a formal school until he reached grade three. This family resides in Kolfe Keranio Sub-City with their two daughters and a granddaughter.

From the ten children, the last two were born out of wedlock and have a different mother but they are grown in Family Three with their father, stepmother, sisters and brothers. The sixth child, who is the third daughter, is mentally retarded. The last son for the mother and the eighth child committed suicide a few months ago.

All of the children of Family Three have completed high school and most of them have joined higher institution. The profile of the children can be summarized as follows:

- The first child for this family is a son. Now he is 50 years old. He had a degree in management and he works in a governmental organization in a

management position. He was married twelve years ago and has four children- one son, the eldest, and three daughters

- The second son had MSD in Agricultural economics after graduating with honor from Alemaya University. He was divorced and remarried three years ago. From his previous marriage, he had a son and now he has a two years old son and the third baby is coming. At present he works as a general manager in a governmental institution
- The third son is general mechanic and works in a government organization as a supervisor. He got married 23 years ago. He has three children one of whom is a graduate from a university.
- The fourth child and the first daughter for the family, has a diploma in Accounting and now works as an accountant in a governmental organization. She is married and has two children- one daughter and a son.
- The fifth daughter has a diploma in tailoring, computer science and teaching and now she is a teacher in an elementary school. She has a twelve years old daughter who lives in the family setting. Now both the mother and the daughter live in Family Three.
- The sixth daughter has a diploma in catering, hotel and tourism. Now she is working in the Republic of South Africa
- The seventh daughter is mentally retarded and she is living under the care and supervision of her parents and the whole family

- The eighth child was a son and is deceased
- The ninth\* is a driver in a governmental organization. He is married and has one daughter.
- The eighth one is an office girl. She recently got married and now pregnant.

Family Three resides in their own house equipped with all the necessary utilities. Their children cover almost all of the household expenses and other costs are supplemented by the father's pension. Both spouses have their own rooms however they share all the household utilities and resources.

#### **Family Four**

The fourth family inhabits in Arada Sub-City. This family has seven children, four daughters and three sons. The parents got married when the mother was thirteen and the father twenty six years old, through customary marriage that was arranged by their parents. Both of the spouses are from the Amhara ethnic group. They have been married for more than 36 years. The mother is a housewife and the father was a driver but is now a retiree. The couple has basic education so they can read and write.

The first daughter died recently, and the second daughter works in the bank and she has gotten married recently. The third child is a son, who is a mechanic, working in a Garage. He is a widower and has one daughter. The fourth\* daughter

---

\* The child interviewed for the study

\* The child interviewed for the study

also works in a Bank and she lives with her parents, while, the fifth son is an engineer and a lecturer in Nazareth Technical School and lives in Nazareth. The sixth child, a son, works in the Ministry of Revenue and he lives with his parents. The last daughter is a third year university student studying in Alemaya.

Family Four can be categorized as a poor family. The father has his own room and the mother shares a room with her children. The father has a part time job but does not share any thing with the family he even dines alone. The children in the family cover every expense in the household that is used by the mother and the children who are living in the family.

### **Family Five**

The fifth family lives in Kolfe-Keraneo Sub-City. The couple has been married for more than 36 years. The mother is 56 and the father is 65. They got married when they were young, through customary marriage arranged by their parents. During their years of marriage the couple had six children – three daughters and three sons. The father is from the Amhara ethnic group while the mother is a Gurague. Both the mother and the father are businesspersons. The mother runs a hotel and the father runs and manages a butchery that belongs to the family. Both the mother and the father can read and write.

All the children have completed high school. The first child of the family who is also their first daughter, has a daughter who grew up with her grandparents. Now, she is married and a housewife, while the second daughter lives with her parents, helping her mother in running and managing the hotel. The third and the fourth child

for the family are drivers working in a Private Company. The elder one has a daughter who is born out of wedlock and she lives with his parents. The last daughter i.e. the fifth child of the family lives with her parents helping her mother in the hotel while the last son\* is a student living with the family.

The parents live with their five children and granddaughters. Both the mother and the father have their own rooms. It has been ten years since the parents separated their beds. And the father has his own room and the mother hers. Considering the Ethiopian's economic condition, this family can be said to be upper middle class family. The mother with the help of her daughters manages the hotel, and the butchery that is a bit far from the house is run and managed by the father. And the income from the business is used for the household consumption.

### **PART III: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF 'EMPTY SHELL' FAMILIES ON PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN**

#### **Overview**

The family is a microcosm of society as it provides the foundations for culture and civilizations. In many societies, family is defined by marriage that makes the sexual union of a man and a woman legitimate. Hence, marriage and family are the cornerstones for successful individual and community life, for having 'good' societies, and, by implication, benevolent nations (Saunders, 2004).

---

\* The child interviewed for the study

Different studies show that peaceful family settings can be the best ground for successfully nurturing the next generation. Thus, the deterioration of the family contributes to the decline in society (Saunders, 2004).

Nevertheless, it is surprising to observe how quickly marital relationships slide and partners lose their physical, emotional and spiritual attachment with one another. During this time, couples could be frustrated due to a growing sense of confusion and misunderstanding, which will end up in feelings of resentment as they struggle with their hurts and distress while still craving a successful marriage (Craig, 2000).

According to Bryan Craig (2000), there are nine warning signs that indicate a couple's relationship is struggling:

- Abandonment of joint activities
- Complaints about a loss of feeling as one or both partners begin to speak of no longer being in love with the other
- Loss of interest in sex
- Becoming emotionally or sexually involved with another person outside the marriage.
- Engaging in recurring arguments that are never resolved
- Experiencing feelings of dissatisfaction and unhappiness
- Being preoccupied with interests and activities outside the marriage that leads to one partner's feeling neglected

- Constant arguments about child rearing that tend to divide a couple, leading them to form an alliance with one or more of the children against their partner.
- Experiencing an increased sense of fatigue and inability to meet day-to-day responsibilities

Craig further explained that, if these issues are not addressed and resolved the couple will find themselves far-off from each other. Hence, their relationship is most likely to be filled with an increasing sense of frustration and disillusionment.

### **Underlying Causes That Create an ‘Empty Shell’ Family**

Several studies demonstrate that marriage can be troubled and finally ended due to several reasons. Some of the identified causes are a lack of marital commitment, adultery, addiction and substance abuse, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, and conviction of felony, financial problems, failed expectations and poor communication and lack of conflict resolution skills (Aissetu\*, 2004)

In this study, the stated causes for creating ‘empty-shell’ families are identified by the parents in the study.

---

\* In accordance with Ethiopian custom, the first name or given name is substituted for the surname and the father’s name.



**Table 1: Causes That Prompt Families to Be ‘Empty-Shell’**

Family No	Underlying Causes That Prompt a Family to Be ‘Empty-Shell’				
	Early Marriage	Domestic Violence Related With Alcoholism	Adultery	Impotency	Suspicion on a Child’s Identity
<b>Family One</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-
<b>Family Two</b>	Yes	Yes	-	-	-
<b>Family Three</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-
<b>Family Four</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
<b>Family Five</b>	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	-

From this table shows that all of the couples living in ‘empty-shell’ families that are under the study got married at early age and by the willingness of their parents.

**1. Early Marriage**

Marriage is one of the important ‘rite de passage’ in the lives of humankind and it has been playing important roles in the creation of a family and the definition of it. The Holy Bible tells us all that marriage is a wonderful gift that we should honor and uphold (Heb. 13:4). However, building a healthy, happy marriage requires constant nurture and attention (Craig, 2000).

In traditional societies like Ethiopia, marriage plays an important role in the development of humankind. It influences the biological functioning of adults and children in ways that can have important social consequences. Married people are highly expected to stay away from ‘deviant’ activities and divert their attentions towards the needs of their family. This societal expectation could prompt couples to

stay away from dangerous, antisocial, or self-centered activities. However, the quality of the relationship of intimate partners is related to the degree of commitment these partners have to their marriage (Wilcox, et al, 2002).

The type of marriage contract, at the beginning has a big impact in the future of the marriage and the family. In Ethiopia, arranged marriage was common and still persists in some parts of the country. Children, especially girls, marry after their parents choose their spouses without their consent and at an early age. This situation usually results in gloom between the couple as they are forced to live with a person they have never met before for a lifetime. Hence, it is difficult to be happy in their marriage.

All the spouses in 'empty-shell' family settings that were interviewed were married using customary marriage arranged by their parents. The spouses had never seen each other before their wedding day.

The mother in Family One explained about her marriage saying:

Parents used to arrange marriage. Their mate selection criteria were blood ties- if you have a blood relation with the emperor- Hailesilase, even if you are far remote, you would be the ideal for marriage. Due to the blood relation I had, there were many husbands that were coming for me. Then, my father decided to marry me with my present husband after detecting his blood ties and his potential property ownership.

The wedding day was a puzzle for me. I didn't even know that day was my wedding day! I didn't know the guy who married me. We have never met before. But when I discovered that the day was my wedding day, I felt miserable but I can do nothing about it. I should respect and obey my parents especially my father. His word was considered as God's Words! I could never reject any thing and I was only 12 years old. Wedding was the end of my happiness. I got pregnant and give birth after nine months, when I was 13. It was a painful experience...

When she was talking, she seemed to be taken way by the past time. She seemed to remember every thing that happened on that day and her face was getting pale.

All the mothers interviewed share this situation and feelings. All of them got married at the beginning of their adolescence while they were in the age range between twelve to sixteen years.

A father from Family Four explained his marriage saying

... I married my wife when she was a child around 13/14 years old and I was also young...she was beautiful and I usually see her playing in the field...when my parents start to discuss about my marriage I told them that I want to get married to her. Therefore, my father sent a mediator to her family and after giving all the dowry required we got married...

As it is true for the families in the study, we can say that early marriage can be taken as underlying cause for creating 'empty-shell' families since the spouses do not know one another and they were not prepared physically or mentally for marriage, which is a big, and a lifelong commitment.

## **2. Domestic Violence related to Alcoholism**

To have a successful and flourishing marriage, spouses should be loyal to each other and avoid their self-centeredness (Saunders, 2004). Respecting one another is very important in marriage. Nevertheless if there is a problem of alcoholism and domestic violence i.e. wife battering and child abuse, spouses start to disregard each other. This situation results in frequent conflict between the spouses, escalated violence and further alcohol related health and social problems.

A father from Family One explained how loss of respect among couples could affect marital relations, especially in countries like Ethiopia where men have the superior hand, in the following manner:

... I think I loved and respected my wife since she is also the mother of my children and the live of the house, however sometimes she is very haughty and when she felt angry, she shouted on me and insulted me. She disregarded me in front of my children and neighbors. I am a men and I think I should be respected. I don't like it when a woman insults me in front of audiences. Moreover, I usually have a drink or two with my friends before going home, so patience would be impossible at that moment. Therefore, we usually end up in a big fight...

All the fathers that were under study shared similar perspectives in the issue of respect and its importance for having a healthy relationship in a household.

When we look at the psychosocial impact of alcoholism on families, children and mothers living with an alcoholic father are often stigmatized because if the father batters his wife and children after being drunk the whole neighborhood can be disturbed. Children will also be hurt since they hear their peers calling their father 'sekaram'- which means 'the drunker' when it is literally translated. Moreover, the neighborhood could also discriminate against the father himself due to his misbehavior related to alcohol.

The problem of alcohol and domestic violence is evident in the families under study. The mother in Family Two explained the problem of alcohol and domestic violence with anger and depression in the following manner

... As you can observe we are poor however, my husband always drinks. We have been married for more than forty years but I don't remember a day he gets in to his house with out having a drink. I was always angry about his alcoholism and mismanagement of money. During harvest times we would have enough money to live on. However, if this money is not managed well it will be over. But, he never thought about tomorrow. He loves to invite his friends when he has money. He even drinks borrowing money. Due to his drunkenness the whole family some times starves.

Besides, after being drunk, when he gets in to the house he will start insulting everybody. If I asked him to calm down or sometimes to shut up he starts beating me. He often said that he would love to kill me. I remember someday he came home very late at night, around midnight and started a fight. He was so hot hence I suspected that he must have heard something bad about the children or me. I could not calm him down. I got so upset, angry and even victimized. Hence, my situation adds a fuel in to the fire, and then he started beating me. That day I would have died if it was not for my neighbors and my children.

Adding to the above, a child from Family Three described the problem of alcohol and domestic violence in the family saying:

My father was so frightening. Nobody in the house looks into his eyes- I am now 32 years old and he is seventy-six but still I cannot look into his eyes. All of the children would rush to our bedrooms when we hear his footsteps. But mom, she should open the door and offer his dinner. I have never seen him respecting her like his wife. We will always pray that he is not drunk or angry when he came home. We were all afraid for mom when he came home late since he always strike a fight and beat her when he is drunk.

Moreover, we [the children] were so careful not to make mistakes since he used harsh punishments. It was so painful, even the memory still hurt. I remember one day I had a fight with a boy in the neighborhood and the boy's mother told my father that I beat her child. ... I was shivering when father called me that day since I saw her coming. Then, he ordered me to

dig a hole at the back of the house. I dug the hole and when I was pulling out the soil from it he came with a big stone and threw the stone on me when I was still inside. ... I managed to rescue my head, but the stone hit my back. I can't forget this incidence since I still have the scare on my back. After that day, I run-away from the family and I was hired as a gardener in a household. I have never wanted to see him again. I hated him so much. Now I am sorry for him since he is old, usually sick and very isolated.

Enriching the above statement a child from Family Four said:

...our father is frightening, his face is always serious...when he is home nobody will speak loud or laugh because he believed that children who laugh and speak louder are not decent...we grow up in fear. Sometimes he came home being drunk and start to complain about the food and the drinks. Then insult and beat our mother... it was terrible even to remember...

The above cases are examples of the negative impacts of alcoholism and domestic violence in a family setting.

### **3. Adultery**

Marriage, as a commitment between a man and a woman, should be respected for its healthy functioning. As it is confirmed by several studies, adultery brings evils to the family. It has psychological, social and economic harms. Once external marital affairs are discovered by spouses, the situation brings jealousy, and the couple is often forced to live in suspicion. Moreover, adultery creates feelings of betrayal in the innocent spouse. The culpable spouse could also suffer from a 'guilty

conscious. Furthermore, the economic problems can be manifested since the breadwinner; usually the husband could have additional expenses that could result in reduced income for the family.

A mother from Family One explains this situation with a voice full of anger saying:

... I discovered my husband's affair when my last son was around ten months old. My husband was very careful in keeping his things, but one day he forgot his wallet and went to work then I found several pictures in his wallet. I felt so depressed and betrayed. It was a horrible experience for me since I have never expected this to happen. He seems so serious and innocent. ... I kept quite. I could do nothing about it, since I know that could bring a serious conflict and I have eight children, and without anything to live on.... There were also times when he was imprisoned for five years after being caught with a judge's wife.

Extramarital affairs are not only the problem of the men but also the women, this problem is manifested in Family Five and a child from this family explained this situation saying:

...I know that my mother had an affair with several men. This could be because we have a hotel and she had a chance to entertain some of the well to do clients. Dad knows that she had an affair but he can't do anything about it since he needs and value his marriage. This could also be because



he is sexually impotent and the problem is out of his control... it was a shame for the family since the whole neighborhood knows about it.

The child seems very upset and unhappy. He was intentionally avoiding an eye contact with me and I felt that he still feels the shame he was talking about.

Another mother, from Family Three said the following when she talks about the issue of adultery;

My husband was very arrogant and difficult to live with. Especially when he was drunk, he insulted everybody in the house and beat me but there was nobody who confronted him. He was a heavy truck driver hence he used to work in the fields, far away from home.... I suspect that he could have an affair since he is a man. And one day I while he was in Gojjam, he sent the family a letter. It is from him but had a wrong address. When the envelope was opened, we found a letter and some money. Then this letter acquainted me with his other two children that were born during his stay in Gonder and Gojjam. ... When he came back there was a big fight in the house. After that fight we separated our bed- it is now about 30 years since then...

Her face was so calm when she was talking about this issue and I assumed that she has accepted every situation of the family.

#### 4. Impotency

Several studies posit that sexual incompetence between married couples could cause marital conflicts that could lead to divorce at the end (Aissetu\*, 2004). This situation is experienced by one of the families under this study and identified as a cause for 'empty-shell' family setting.

A child in Family Five articulated the situation in the following manner

... Around ten years back my father was so sick and was admitted to hospital. In addition, I remember when he recovered the doctor told him and mom that he should not be sexually active anymore. I will never forget his depression and anger that could be seen in his pale face. After that day, that gentleman was gone. He was never happy. He was nagging everybody in the house. He preferred to make himself so busy at work. He started coming late at home... and you know we had a hotel and mom runs the hotel so she had a chance to meet different guys and everybody talks that she has started an affair with some of them.... Therefore, they [parents] separate their bedrooms and stop talking with one another. This way the situation in the family gets worse. And now they [parents] simply live together but their soul is separated and there is no meaning in it.

The father in Family Five also explained the situation being in pain and hatred by saying:

---

\* In accordance with Ethiopian custom, the first name or given name is substituted for the surname and the father's name.

I know that my wife had an affair but I can't do any thing about it. I am impotent and y doctor has warned me time and again to avoid sex, and I believe that I have to be alive... I can't do any thing about it divorce will be meaningless at out age. We have six children and I believed that it was worth for us all to be with our children at least...

### **5. Suspicion On A Child's Paternity**

In our country, it is very difficult to know the identity of a child since there is no DNA test center. Moreover, it is very difficult for fathers if they are in doubt of the child's paternity since they have no proof. This situation could end up in disturbing the relationship among the family members, and the couple since there will be jealousy and the couples could develop hatred for one another.

Members of Family Four explained this situation since it is defined as the major cause for freezing the relationship of the spouses in the family. The mother described the beginning of the conflict and the current situation of the family as:

... it has been almost 18 years since we [the husband and I ] are living together without any emotional and sexual ties...when I gave birth to my last daughter who is now 18 years old and a university student, there was a big fight in the house. My husband doubted that he might not be the father of this child since she is exceptionally beautiful and has a light skin. I told him again and again that I am his loyal wife and this daughter is his. I even begged him to believe me but he cannot take it, still now... He thought I betrayed him and hated to see the whole family and me because he felt that

they knew something and hide it from him. He even hated to see his children as he felt that they had taken my side...

She seemed very depressed and angry when she was talking about this issue and her eyes were filled with tears. Hence I felt that this situation still aches even after 18 years.

However, the father still seemed so sure that the child is not his daughter. While discussing on the cause of their marital conflict he said

... I can never miss my children you know, my instinct would tell so. I have never been suspicious about the others. I had six children and nobody told me that they are mine, I just know. ... I hate her [his wife] because she tried to betray me. I can't stand it. And I know that the children hear what she says but I don't care, I can live on myself and I am living... but believe me that child is not mine!

Generally, most of the causes identified by the families under study are interdependent and commonly shared among the families.

### **Impacts of 'Empty Shell' Family on Parents and Children**

Living in 'empty- shell' family settings has both advantages and adverse impacts on parents and their children.

Being married and nurturing children together is one positive identifiable aspect for both parents and children in 'empty-shell' families. Children could grow up

under the care and affection of their natural parents. Studies indicate that children who live with their own two married parents enjoy better physical health, on average, than children in other family forms (Aissetu\*, 2004). They would never encounter the interference of a stranger stepmother or stepfather in their life.

Moreover, in countries like Ethiopia, where culture and tradition play important roles, breaking marital ties is not encouraged. Marriage asks people to relate responsibly not only to one another, but to whole new community of people that are related like “in-laws,” friends and associates who have been part of the spouse’s life (Saunders, 2004). Hence, the social ties the family has with the neighborhood and the surrounding community is so important for the couples. Spouses in ‘empty-shell’ families do not need to change their social environment. They can be part of their ‘idir’, ‘mahiber’, ‘equb’ and several other associations, living in the same neighborhood with their old friends. Moreover, their children could learn in the same school with their childhood friends.

### **Drawbacks of ‘Empty-Shell’ Family for Parents**

The psychological pain of the loss of a relationship is deep-seated. When marital relations fall, couples could be frustrated due to a growing sense of confusion and misunderstanding, which will end up in feelings of resentment as they struggle with their hurts and still craving a successful marriage (Craig, 2000).

---

\* In accordance with Ethiopian custom, the first name or given name is substituted for the surname and the father’s name.

Craig, (2000) explained the process of separation in phases and described them as:

*... At first, there is a period of shock, panic, and disbelief, which may be accompanied by disturbances in sleep, changes in appetite, and feelings of anger, anxiety, and vulnerability. Then comes a “roller coaster” phase, when emotional highs and lows force a person to reflect, react, and review the past. This phase will stir up feelings of shame, self-blame, and depression, generate the temptation to live with near constant rehearsals of “What if . . .?” and “I should’ve . . .”*

*As emotions become stable, a third phase emerges in which individuals begin to focus on issues of personal identity, personal potential, and a sense of future possibilities. The final phase involves the development of a new sense of “self”—with new choices, new awareness, and new relationships (Craig, 2000- [www.adventistreview.org](http://www.adventistreview.org)).*

The following table summarizes the psychological and emotional hurts being in ‘empty-shell’ families have on parents as it is articulated by them.

**Table 2: Psychological and Emotional Hurts On Parents Living In ‘Empty-Shell’ Family**

Families	The Psychological And Emotional Hurts On Parents Living In ‘Empty-Shell’ Family Settings									
	Unhappiness		Depression		Anger		Fear		Confusion	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes

**\*Note-** ‘M’ represents the mothers while ‘F’ is used to represent the fathers under study.

All of the interviewed parents- both the mothers and fathers, in ‘empty-shell’ family settings share the psychological impacts like feelings of unhappiness, depression, anger, fear, confusion. In these families, according to their response and their feelings during the interviews they have lost the meanings of their marriage and the purpose of their lives.

A mother from Family One said, looking depressed and unhappy,

... I am not happy. I was never happy in my marriage. I don’t even know what to do in the future except to sit and wait for God. I feel ashamed. Divorce is unthinkable since we are both too old for that...sometimes I am

afraid for my live since he always say that he love if I am dead... however; I think it is better for us to live this way since we can never and ever reconcile our feelings and needs. ...Thank God that I have my children with me and I can chat and laugh with them. Some times it is better to let things go...

The father in this Family One explained the conditions in bitterness saying that:

We have lived like this for more than ten years. We are living like neighbors-quarreling neighbors... I don't know what our future would be. I can't even guess. Sometimes I will be so depressed. No body in the house wants to talk to me. When I got home, I will directly go to my room. I don't even feel that the house was mine too. Nobody cares for me and it hurts so much...there is no one to take care of me when I am sick. But there are two of my children and four of my grandchildren. They are all in her side. I feel really sorry...

Another father from Family Three explained his feeling for the family saying:

... I hate living this way but what would I do about it. I have 10 children. Isn't it laughable for us to divorce? I don't know why God let me live this way and killed my son. I should have died in his place. I am old with no future, no peace of mind and I am often sick but I am alive sitting here and he is dead and in the grave. What a curse! You know what I don't want to live anymore...



He looked so bitter and fed up when he is talking. And I thought that he is still in grief even I discovered that seven months have passed since his son's death. I even suspected that he could have suicidal tendency. Hence, I tried to calm him down and reminded him that death is a natural thing and it is with us all the time. Then, I said that he is still important and the other children need him so much that he has to live for them.

The mother in Family Three explained her being in the family setting saying:

... It is ok to live this way after so many years of physical and psychological abuse. I am lucky. I don't care about other things any more. Thank God, my children are all grown and in a good position now. He cannot do anything to me now, no insult, no battering, no alcohol and drug abuse... no body will allow him to do that it is peaceful now. Much better of than before...it is better this way...

The other families had more or less similar explanations of their situations and feelings about their family settings.

Even if it is hard to generalize from such small cases, I think that mothers in 'empty-shell' family settings are better off than the fathers since they have managed gain the support of their children. Hence, the psychological impact would be more or less reduced for the mothers than that of the fathers.

### **Drawbacks of “Empty Shell’ Family for Children**

The children that were incorporated in this study are the last children, or the immediate elder who are living with their parents. These children fall in the age range of 18-32. All of them, except one girl who is from Family Two, have completed high school and are now engaged in their respective careers. Since, all of the elder children in the families interviewed have started their own lives away from their parents, it was impossible to hold discussions with them. Moreover, the interviewed children have more experiences in living in ‘empty-shell’ settings for most of their lives.

It is important to note that the relationship between parents has powerful effects on young children. Mostly, quarreling parents expel their anger on their children, especially on the awkward ones. This parental hostility inline with physical and emotional child abuse could lead children to delinquency. Young children usually react to quarreling parents by disobeying, crying, hitting other children, being much more antisocial than their peers (Fagan, 1995).

Children living in disrupted family settings are more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems than children who are living with their biological mother and father. Children of single parent and blended families are more susceptible to psychological problems like depression, low self-esteem and suicidal thoughts. Moreover, they are likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, and to be engaged in delinquent behaviors (Saunders, 2004).

**Table 3: Psychological and Emotional Hurts on Children Living in ‘Empty-Shell’ Family**

No.	Psychological and Emotional Hurts on Children Living in ‘Empty-Shell’ Families			
	Unhappiness	Depression	Disenchantment with marriage	Loyalty to parents
Family One	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Family Two	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Family Three	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Family Four	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Family five	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

As the interviewees indicated living in ‘empty-shell’ family settings have several diverse impacts in their attitudes towards the importance of marriage. In addition, confusion, unhappiness, dissatisfaction in life and question of loyalty...are the common feelings that are shared by all the interviewed children.

A boy from Family One explained his stay in ‘empty-shell’ family setting as:

I have lived in ‘empty-shell’ family settings almost all my life. I don’t remember my parents being in love and discussing things peacefully... Living in such a family setting is meaningless. But I am glad that they are not divorced... I love my parents and I think that I love my mother more. If it were not for her we [the children] wouldn’t have been where we are now. ... This kind of marriage is lifeless. And I am afraid of being married in the future I don’t even think that I would marry...

A young girl from Family Four enriched the above statement saying:

.... As far as my memory goes, my parents were never happy in their marriage but their situations worsen after the birth of my sister... I really feel sorry for her since she considered herself as a cause for their conflict and makes herself guilty...she is usually unhappy and she hates staying in the house. Thank God now she is away for her higher education...living in such away is very shameful. I usually feel depressed...don't you think that it is odd when your parents live together but consider each other as strangers after having seven children? It is very weird and meaningless for me...

She seemed very sad when she was talking about these issues hence I tried to tell her that there are several children who live in 'empty-shell' family settings and there is nothing special about it.

A young man from Family Three explained the impacts of growing in 'empty-shell' family on him as a child and now saying:

... I don't exactly know the root cause of my parent's problem since I joined the family when I was seven years old... My father snatched my sister and me from our mother and brought us to his family when I was seven and my sister four years old. At first we like strangers in the house after we grew up...it was not easy for me to adapt to the family since it was completely a new environment. There was nobody I know except my father and he is so frightening. I don't remember him playing or chatting with his children. Moreover, there is no peace in the family... as a child I hated to live there and when I discovered that we [me and my sister] the immediate

cause for the couple's conflict I felt so depressed. ... My mother [stepmother, I hate to call her that] was so nice and caring I love her so much...I feel really sorry for them...leaving in such family setting is embarrassing. You would not have anything to talk about your family for your children since there is nothing adorable. Yet, it was a ground for me to take practical lessons on how I should lead my family...

Generally speaking, as the interviews prevail most of the situations in 'empty-shell' family settings seem very problematic and/or stressful. But luckily, most of these problems lessen with time as the couples start to adapt themselves with the prevailing situation- as one mother pointed out saying “ ‘<a "K<f Snw` ÄVnM” which means literally translated “if one accepts situations as they are, one can make graveyards a suitable places to live on”. The impacts of being in 'empty-shell' family settings have more of psychological than economic consequences for both parents and children.

#### **PART IV- WHY DO PARENTS CHOOSE TO STAY IN 'EMPTY SHELL' FAMILIES?**

Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults. During the day of their marriage couples promised to stay together and look for one another for better or worse.

Marriage is perceived as a lifetime contract. This perception still holds true for parents that are embraced in they study living in 'empty-shell' settings for more than a decade. These couples understudy articulated several reasons for staying in 'empty-shell' family settings than to separate. These reasons are summarized as follows:

**Table 4: Why Do Parents Stay in ‘Empty-Shell’ Family Settings?**

Family No.	Why Do Parents Stay In Empty-Shell Family Settings?							
	For The Sake Of Their Children		For Economic Reasons		For Socio-Cultural Reasons		Due To Their Religious Believes	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
<b>Family One</b>	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Family Two</b>	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-
<b>Family Three</b>	Yes	-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Family Four</b>	Yes	-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Family Five</b>	yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-

**1. For the sake of their children**

Almost all the respondents, especially the mothers, identified their children to be their only bond left in their marriage. All the mothers under study shared the feelings for their children and their desire for them. They want to be there for them being patient until they grow up and start defending them. Moreover, no mothers want their children to live with a stepmother and suffer their childhood, since they believed that if they leave the house, their husbands would re-marry for sure.

The mothers’ situation in ‘empty-shell’ families and their attitude towards their children could be enlightened by Saunders (2004) explaining parenthood saying;

*The apex of selfless love is reached when couples become parents and give of themselves and of their resources to nurture the well-being of another. Parenthood is to “have your heart go walking around outside your body”. The priceless fruits of one’s entire being—one’s children—are outside of one’s self, and in many ways outside of one’s control. To protect, to nurture, to give all good things and benefits to, to cherish and support in every way, to love fiercely and yet with great vulnerability—this is parenthood. It is the greatest love of all (Saunders, 2004, pp, 6)*

One mother from Family Three explained the situation, which is shared among all the mothers under study saying:

... I stayed in this marriage for the sake of my children. They were small babies and he [there father] was harsh on everybody-even his children. I always felt sorry for them for having such an arrogant father. And I wanted to be their protection. I love them too much...thank God, now they are my protection...there is nothing more satisfying in life than watching your children growing and being in the best place... I am so happy with my decision now...

A father from Family Five explained his reason for staying in ‘empty-shell’ family settings as:

... I believe that children should have both of their biological parents to be healthy and productive in the future. ... I love my children very much. They are the essence of my life...I wanted to give them all the best I can

to see their best future...now thank God they are all grown with the best care and love... and by their own...If we [the parents] were separated about ten years back, it wouldn't happen today. And now I am glad that it didn't happen...

## 2. For Economic Reasons

All the mothers identified that they do not want to separate because they have nothing to live on with their children if they left their house. As they identified the fathers had been the bread winners and it was difficult for them to separate and live independently.

A mother from Family Three explained this situation briefly as:

...I have no job and nothing to live on. And I had children that would be looking forward for my hand. I can never leave them with their father...so it was better for me to stay with my children being abused by my husband than to leave my house and starve my children to death...

And a mother from Family One said in a thick voice full of anger;

...I don't want to leave my house and property for him. Why? I don't want to go out and suffer searching for a house...you can see that I am old now so my body will leave out of it not me alive...

The fathers also indicated that they did not want to divide their properties for their spouses. One father from Family Five said:



...I don't want to divide any properties with her...unless it is forced. All the family's property should belong to my children...

### **3. For Socio- Cultural Reasons**

As indicated by the interviewee parents they do not want to be called divorcees and be an issue of discussion in neighborhood after having children together and being in their middle and old age.

A father from Family Two said;

...I don't want to be ridiculed by the entire neighborhood and the community divorcing my wife. I don't want to leave my 'idir' for that....

A mother from Family Four enriched this idea saying:

...I don't want to be called a divorcee...in addition I don't want to be blamed for leaving my children...

### **4. Due to their religious and believe systems**

All of the families under study are orthodox Christians and they say that divorce is impossible according to the bible.

A father from Family One said

... Since the children encouraged it, we have taken the Holy Communion so after that I will never and ever think of divorce... I am a Christian and I

have to respect the rule of the church. Now, even if I am not fortunate living in a disturbed family setting, it is time for me to pray and live for God's words...

A mother from this family- Family One also confirmed to this situation and another father from Family Four said that

It would be better for both of us [my wife and me] to separate after death than to divorce...as God's words no one can separate a husband and a wife...I prefer to stick to that word...

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Family, as a building block of society, needs to be protected. Its healthy functioning is essential for the bright future of the next generation as parents play vital roles for the family in nurturing and socializing children.

'Empty-shell' families are one of the dysfunctional families where the emotional and sexual relations between couples are broken while they are living under the same roof. Even if it is difficult to infer for the larger population, in this study it has been found that early marriage, domestic violence, adultery, impotency and suspicion on a child's identity are the major causes that create an 'empty-shell' family.

The study further demonstrates that being in 'empty-shell' family settings has more of psychological impacts on parents and their children than social and economical. The research also found that the psychological impacts are less on the mothers than the fathers since the propensity of the children are usually towards their

mothers. Moreover, the reasons for binding couples in 'empty-shell' families together is found to be their children, economic reasons, socio-cultural reasons and religious believes.

Even if it is difficult to bring couples in 'empty-shell' families in to peace, there should be an intercession to make sure that these families are safe to live on. Thus, well integrated social work intervention should be designed to address the problem of 'empty-shell' families and to prevent families from being 'empty-shell'.

## **PART V- SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF 'EMPTY SHELL' FAMILIES**

For correcting disrupted families like 'empty-shell' families and restore the frozen ties among family members- especially between couples, long-term structures are needed to rebuilding trust between parents in the family. Hence family and marriage counseling plays a vital role. In line with this setting up a support groups and using spiritual approaches could be beneficial to members of the family.

### **Family and Marriage Counseling**

Counseling involves forming relationship with clients. And it can be defined as the use of professional [counselor-client] relationships to teach interpersonal interaction skills and to facilitate problem solving. Counseling also involves dissolution

of relationships as the client's skills grow to be improved and when the improved skills start to be manifested in their own relationship (Kilgo, 1975; Fox, 2001).

The major goal of counseling is, to ensure self-understanding and acceptance, to restore insight in to behavior, motivation of self and others; to bring about significant behavioral change; enhance problem solving capacity; to help improve interpersonal relationships and generally, to bring about greater happiness and wellbeing to clients (Kilgo, 1975).

Marriage counseling, as part of counseling, has similar objectives. Yet, as its name implies, its major focus relies on marital relationship and strives to keep troubled marriages intact. The goal of marriage counseling is to provide a husband and a wife an insight and enhance their understanding of their personal and marital conflicts and difficulties. Moreover, marriage counseling tries to build their emotional strength to deal with their relationship and problems so that each of them can make a conscious decision concerning their marriage (Kilgo, 1975).

It is certain that a healthy marriage is a base for harmonious family and nurturing healthy and productive society. Hence, marriage counseling plays an important role in resolving marital conflicts promptly and contributes a lot in keeping families intact.

According to Morgan, Johannis and Fowler (1953), family counseling can be defined as *"... an attempt to get at all the factors involved in the contribution of the family to the individual and of the individual to the family"* (Morgan, Johannis and Fowler, 1953, pp. 120).

Family counseling is a problem solving process that focuses on the strengths and weakness in the family as a whole; the interaction and communication patterns of the family and impacts of these relations on various family members as a whole. Furthermore, family counseling encompasses the shifts in the living patterns of the family and change that is brought in to the family throughout the family life cycle (Kilgo, 1975).

In 'empty-shell' family settings, the couples decide to quit their emotional and sexual ties, while they are still living together, after recurrent and long lasting physical and emotional hurt. Hence, it would be challenging to restore these relationships. Even so, I believe that family counseling would be of a great help in avoiding open conflicts between the couples and minimizing the psychological and emotional hurt the situation trigger on the couple themselves and their children since the major focus of family counseling is the satisfaction of family interaction in various stages of its life. This includes physiological, psychological, social and cultural environment of the family as a whole (Morgan, Johannis and Fowler, 1953).

Nonetheless, keeping all the above things in mind, the client's should believe that they need a counseling assistance from professionals and value every counseling session to bring change in their current situation and their future life (Callis, 1963).

### **Models of Family Counseling**

Family counseling is a positive approach that focuses on strength with which the family may build its maximum contributions to all family members. As mentioned

in the above section, 'empty-shell' families have very strong and important points. Thus, family counseling could strengthen these positive aspects and minimize the psych-social and emotional hurts on the spouses and especially, on their children.

According to Morgan, Johannis and Fowler (1953), family counseling can be individually oriented, group oriented and the combination of the two.

### **1. Individually Oriented Counseling:**

- Counseling with individuals presenting family problems by focusing on personality structure of the individual and assuming that personality adjustment will carry over into the family situation
- Counseling with one or more family members by considering the individual as most important and the family as secondary.

Individually oriented counseling model facilitates discussions with all individual members of the family i.e. the mother, the father and the children alone at different juncture. Hence, the counselor could have enough knowledge and understanding of their individual perception about the family and their current psychosocial and emotional state.

### **2. Group Counseling**

- Counseling with one family member in same-sex or mixed groups on the assumption that the reduction of tension by group participation will materially improve the family situation.

- Counseling with husband and wife, as members of one therapeutic group, in the assumption that improved interaction and communication will carry over into the family situation.

The Group discussions could help to reconcile all family members living in 'empty-shell' settings. During group discussions, different constructive ideas could be forwarded. In addition, because a long time has passed since members in 'empty-shell' families discussed things together, group discussions could help to bring back the emotional ties in the family. Moreover, counseling a husband and a wife together the counselor would help parents communicate with each other, make reality checks of their mutual distrust and monitor the situation

### **3. Combinations of Individual and Group Counseling**

The combination of the individual and group discussion would produce successful results since it allows viewing individual alone and the group interaction.

'Empty-shell' families comprise 'the mother', 'the father', and 'children' who are residing together. However, there is no emotional and sexual relationship that ties the couples together. So, we can say that such families are only symbolic. Nonetheless, as it is discussed in the above sections, 'empty-shell' families have traceable strengths like nurturing children together and hence, the children could have the care and affections of their natural parents.

To further strengthen the constructive aspects and minimize the psychological and emotional hurt that could be caused by being in 'empty-shell' family settings,

family counseling could be of a very much help. Through family group discussions and individual discussion, Family Counseling could create a good environment in bringing the family together and sharing their views and opinions openly. Therefore, there could be a possibility of restoring peace in these families since the couples are living together.

### **Family Conferencing**

Family conferencing is effective in mediating marital and family conflicts. It is usually used to address individual problems that could have impacts on the family and to resolve family problems. The participants in family conferencing could be relatives, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, who are close to the families and/or individuals in problem and identified by the 'stakeholders'[person and families in problem] with the help of a social worker or a counselor.

Family conferencing allows every stakeholder to air their feelings on a given situation and discuss on solutions that would be proposed. Hence Family conferencing that involve both parents and children with the identified participants that are very near and significant to the family, could help 'empty-shell' families resolve their problems and to restore the emotional ties among the family members.

### **Support Groups**

Support groups could be of much help for the mothers, the fathers and the children to share experiences and let out their psychological feelings in their own respective groups. In addition, support groups could help parents and children as they



start to learn that there are people like them. These groups can help keep members involved and will give them someone to talk to who can relate to their situation.

### **Spiritual Approaches**

As it is indicated in the above section, all the families-the parents and the children -under study are Orthodox Christians. In Orthodox belief, every family is expected to have a 'Godfather' that are religious leaders, who helps the family with spiritual matters. The Godfather is expected to teach the family about God and mediate conflicts that could rise among family members and outside of the family. The family is also expected to confess a sin to the Godfather. Hence, Godfathers are very near and influential to family members and have frequent contacts with the families. As religious leaders, they are also very respected by the whole community.

Keeping the above points in mind, religious leaders can be used for reconciling families and restoring the emotional ties for parents living in 'empty-shell' families since they can encourage parents to ask excuses to one another whether they are guilty or not. In addition, they can also prevent families from being 'empty-shell' by preaching the worth of a family and sanctity of marriage for the youth and married people in Sunday Schools and during different rituals celebrated by followers.

## References

- Aissetu Barry. (2004). *Divorce: Its Psycho-social and Economic Impacts on Mothers and their children*, a senior essay for the fulfillment of BA degree in Sociology and Social Administration, AAU, Addis Ababa
- Anderson, E. (April 13, 2006). *Glossary of Relationship Terms & Polykoity: Marriage, Love Relationships*, <http://home.comcast.net/~walkswithastick/relationships.html>
- Browne, K. (1992). *Introduction to Sociology*, Policy Press, UK
- Burgess, EW, Locke, HJ, & Thomas, MM. (1971). *The Family*, (4<sup>th</sup> ed), D.van Nostrand Company, NY
- Callis, R. (1963). Counseling; *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 33, no. 2, Guidance, Counseling, and Personal Services pp 179-187
- Cooper, D. (1971). *The Death of the Family*, Pelican books Ltd, Harmondsworth
- Craig, B. (2000). *Divorce, dealing with the unthinkable*, Adventist review, [www.adventistreview.org](http://www.adventistreview.org)
- Fagan, P. (October 1995). The Real Root Causes Of Violent Crime: The Breakdown of the Family, *Imprimis*, Vol 24, No.10
- Fox,R. (2001). *Elements of the Helping Process: a Guide for Clinicians*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), the Haworth Press, NY

Kilgo R. (April 1975). Counseling Couples in Groups: Rational and Methodology, *The Family Coordinator*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp 337-342

Morgan M, Johannis T, Fowler S. (May 1953). Family Counseling: Toward an Analysis and Definition: *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol.15, No 2, pp 119-121

Morgan, M. & Marily, C. (2004). *Focus on families' Divorce and Adults*, Coleman, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Missouri-Columbia

Saunders, A & Saunders, J. (2004). *The Centrality of Marriage and Family in Creating World Peace*, by Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace

Walsh, T. (1993). *Normal Family Processes*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), Guildford Press, New York

Wilcox, W. B, Gottman, J. L Waite, L. Galston, W. Wallerstein, J (2002). *Why Marriage Matters*, [www.americanvalues.org](http://www.americanvalues.org)

## **Annex**

### **Annex 1. Instruments used for the Study**

#### **I. Interview Guide for parents**

##### **1. personal data**

- A. code
- B. sex
- C. age
- D. educational background
- E. place of origin
- F. occupation
- G. number of children
- H. type of marriage
- I. age at first marriage
- J. years of marriage

##### **2. Sources Of Conflict**

- a. Were you happy in your marriage before?
- b. Was there a problem of Alcoholism in your house?
- c. What do you think are the causes of conflict in your family?
- d. Can you tell me the immediate cause?

- e. Since when have you been strangers in beds?

**3. impacts of living in ‘empty-shell’ family settings**

- a. What do you think of your marriage?
- b. What do you feel about it?
- c. Can you tell me the pros and cons of living in ‘empty-shell’ family setting?
- d. Is there any thing you lost because you are living in ‘empty-shell’ family settings?

**4. How Families Function/ Decision Making Power**

- a. Who is the breadwinner in your family?
- b. Who holds the decision making power in your family?

**5. Reasons For Being In ‘Empty Shell’ Families**

- a. Why do you choose to stay in ‘empty shell’ family than to get a divorce?
- b. What do you think of your future?

**6. In your current situation, what are your pressing needs? Can you prioritize them please?**

**7. Eco-map (help her/him to draw an eco-map)**

**8. What do you think are the best solution/s for your problem?**

## **II. Interview Guide for children**

### **1. Personal background**

- A. code
- B. sex
- C. age
- D. educational background
- E. place of origin
- F. occupation

### **2. Impacts of being in 'empty-shell' families**

- a. Are you happy with your family?
- b. What do you think of your parents and how do you judge your family as a whole?
- c. Can you tell me the positive and negative aspects of the family?
- d. How does it feel to live in 'empty-shell' family setting?
- e. How do you value marriage?

### **3. In your current situation, what are your pressing needs? Can you prioritize them please?**

### **4. Geno-gram ( help her/him to sketch his/her geno-gram)**

**Annex 2.**

**Statement of Informed Consent**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, am being asked to participate in the study conducted by Aissetu Barry as a fulfillment to get MSW, on parents and children in ‘empty-shell’ families.

I understand that the general purpose of the study is to know the causes of having ‘empty-shell’ families and the impacts of being in ‘empty shell’ family setting on parents and their children. Moreover, I understand that the researcher wants to know why parents choose to stay in ‘empty shell’ family settings.

I realized that I would be sharing information with the researcher and great precaution will be taken to ensure that this information will remain confidential and the reports of this research will never refer to individuals by name.

I also understand that as a participant, I have the right to withdraw from the interview process for any reason and I will participate in an interview that will take around an hour. Moreover, by sharing this information, I will assist the study in showing the benefits and problems of being in ‘empty-shell’ family settings and recommending on how these problems could be solved. Moreover I will be given birr 50.00 as a compensation for my time and participation.

I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions, and I have received a copy of this consent form. Signing in this document, I freely and voluntary consent to be interviewed as a participant in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Declaration**

I, the undersigned, declare that this thesis is my original work, has never been presented in this or any other university, and that all resources and materials used herein, have been duly acknowledged.

Name: Aissetu Barry

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Place: Addis Ababa University,

Graduate School of Social Work

Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_