

COMMUNICATION AS MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGY ON MARITAL STABILITY AMONG MARRIED PEOPLE IN SOUTH-EAST GEOPOLITICAL ZONE OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This is a correlational study which investigated the influence of communication as marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. A sample of 1028 respondents comprising 542 married people and 486 marriage counsellors participated in the study. The sample was drawn from the population of married people and marriage counsellors from the three states of the South East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria using proportionate stratified sampling technique. The instruments for data collection are Communication in Marriage for Marital Stability Questionnaire and Communication Effectiveness for Marital Conflict Resolution Questionnaire designed to elicit relevant information from the married people and marriage counsellors from the three states selected for the study. They were validated by experts in the relevant fields. Data generated from the instruments were analyzed using percentage and simple regression analysis to answer the research questions and test the null hypothesis. The results of the study revealed that communication in marriage as a marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in South-East Geopolitical Zone had a high positive and significant influence on marriage stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. Marriage counsellors also confirmed that communication in marriage as marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in South-East Geopolitical Zone was effective. On the basis of these findings, it was recommended that married people should avoid secrecy, but rather keep communication channel open at all times in order not to give room to speculation and suspicion and the attendant counter-reaction for peace to reign at home and in the society

Keywords: Marital Conflict, Marital Stability and Resolution Strategy

Introduction

Marital conflict is a phenomenon that knows no boundary. It can occur everywhere in the world including Nigeria of which southeast is an integral part. Marital conflict is a kind of interpersonal conflict involving two individuals who are legally married as husband and wife, but

enmeshed in a clash of interests. It is as overt opposition between spouses which generates disagreement and relationship difficulties (Luthans, 2018). It is a situation which arises when a husband and wife struggle or have a clash in pursuance of different goals or needs (Agbola & Oluwatosin, 2018). So, marital conflict is

restricted to misunderstanding, opposition and strife involving couples only.

Marital conflicts are attributed to several factors including but not limited to income, in-laws/relatives, sex, recreation, friends, number of children or lack of them, sex of children, profession, love and care, etc (Onyekuru, 2019). Family income and how it is spent or managed can influence marital conflict and stability (Onyekuru & Ugwu, 2017). Every family is desirous of comfortable living. Basic physiological needs of human beings must be satisfied. The amount of resources available to couples determines the extent of comfortable living and enjoyment of life. When a family finds it difficult to meet their financial obligations, the couples may likely become dissatisfied with the marriage, themselves and life. Poor families may want to economize and downplay the role of money in people's lives. They may try to tolerate hardship occasioned by lack of money. However, there is a limit to tolerance of deprivation. Beyond certain threshold, deprivation becomes intolerable. Respect the couples accord each other may wane when they can no longer meet their basic physiological needs. This may breed anger and frustration and degenerate to conflict. Beside availability of financial resources, the way they are managed can still breed

conflict. Managing the family resources in nontransparent manner or in a way that a spouse does not sufficiently benefit from them can create friction and quarrel.

In-laws and relatives may sometimes become a source of conflict to the family of married people. Most parents love their children and want the interests of their children protected. In a situation when the interests of their children are at variance with those of their spouses, parents take sides with their children. Some parents may be less objective or overly biased against the spouses of their children. When parents with a show of bias begin to middle in matters in their children's homes providing narrow advice that fails to protect the interests of both parties, anarchy looms. Parents who criticize their children's spouses or teach their children how to punish their spouses or how to rebel against their spouse or how to revenge on perceived maltreatment meted out to them by their spouses are only helping to destroy the peace in their children's families. The same blame goes to the married people who think that their parents love and care for them and hence they take unfair directives from parents on how to treat their spouses. The influence of third party in the family also applies to the relatives of the spouses. Some married people spend their resources excessively

on their parents and siblings to the detriment of their immediate families. Keeping family projects and other financial obligations pending as money is spent on extended family members of the spouses or their projects may bring about squabbles between the couples. People who are biased against the spouses of their relatives and proffer advice against their relatives' spouses are destroying peace in the families of their relatives.

The type of friends that spouses keep can also cause conflict in the family. People copy mode of dressing, behaviours, manners, attitudes and general ways of life from their friends. Copying mode of dressing, behaviours, manners, attitudes and general ways of life from friends perceived to be indecent and unacceptable by their spouses can give rise to marital conflict. People should be sufficiently sensitive to the needs, wishes and preferences of their spouses. They should be mindful of the type of friends they keep. Keeping friends who teach them to antagonize their spouses rather than make peace with them is an invitation to anarchy. Bonmi (2018) warns that the influence of third party such as friends and relatives in marriage can generate serious and dire consequences if not properly handled. Persistent wrong advice given to inexperienced gullible and obstinate

spouses is most likely to lead to separation or divorce.

The main aims of marriage are companionship and procreation. Couples want to spend quality time with each other. However, pressure of work apparently makes some married people keep away from home as they spend more time outside than they do at home. Such people may provide everything at home except giving their families quality time. Trying to replace quality time at home with material things can be unsatisfactory and counterproductive. Again, marriages are contracted for raising children. When marriage is not blessed with children, or is blessed with insufficient number of children, it is seen as a failed marriage. In other words, marriages not blessed with children for a considerable length of time are more unlikely to enjoy marital stability. Marriages with no child shows the most marital disruption, hence the absence of children tend to increase the chances of marital conflict, marital instability, separation or divorce. Apart from number of children couples may have, sex of the children can also be a source of conflict. Some couples may be dissatisfied with their marriages for lack of children of a particular sex. Such people may be ready to opt out of marriage and remarry in search of the type of children

they want. Even when couples are willing to pray and wait for God's time to have their own children, pressure from parents and other relatives for another spouse may create hostility and break the marriage bond.

Sex is a single factor that can make or mar a marriage union. It is the obligation of the spouses to ensure sexual satisfaction of their partners. When couples are too weak to satisfy their partners, it may be permission to promiscuity. The same applies to partners that are difficult to satisfy sexually who exert excessive pressure on their partners for sex. Again, promiscuity results when their partners cannot cope with the pressure. Promiscuity breeds diseases, separation or perhaps divorce.

A very important factor in marriage is love and care for the spouses. People going into marriage apparently love each other at the beginning. After the marriage proceedings, they also apparently care for each other. Love and care is the magic that safeguard the longevity of marriage. It makes couples sensitive to the needs and plights of each other. With love and care, married people would not want to hurt each other or see each other in discomfort, pains and misery. They would not want their partners to lack anything they can afford. They would want to do anything within their

power to please each other. Through love and care, the spouses become sufficiently sensitive to know and practise what they are expected to do or say at every point in time. Love and care is a precursor to other good things in marriage. However, the love and care some married people show to their spouses wane with time for one reason or the other. For this, they no longer care for each other. When this happens, they become individualistic and self-centred. They may no longer be much interested in the welfare of their spouses. At very low ebb of love and care, couples become disenchanted with their marriages. Grudges, fault finding, unforgiveness and quarrel starts which may culminate in separation or divorce.

Despite the problems inherent in marriage, it is the wish of people going into it to have an enduring and stable marriage. This is to ensure they establish a decent family, have children and rear them to their taste. However, some marriages are fraught with unmet expectations, breach of trust, misunderstanding and quarrel which may likely make it unstable. What is then marital stability? Marital stability is a relationship between husband and wife such that the chance of separation or divorce is slim. Spouses witnessing marital stability have reduced sources of friction, disagreement and quarrel. Such marriages

are blessed with peace, unity of purpose, oneness and mutualism. They bring about happiness of spouses and their children and increased chance of achievement and self-fulfilment. On the other hand, some marriages plagued with many problems are usually said to be unstable. The problems may be in the areas of parenting, financial management, children, how to treat in-laws, relatives, family friends and issues bordering on domestic work. In some occasions, these problems may become so enormous and overwhelming that the marriage is threatened. In a situation like this, we say that the marriage is witnessing instability. Marital instability was defined by Usoroh, Ekot and Inyang (2010) as a marriage with a high propensity for divorce, which is determined by the presence of thoughts or actions capable of precipitating separation. It is a situation in which disagreement and quarrel is a common occurrence and where one spouse or both spouses are dissatisfied with the marriage. Couples passing through marital instability experience turbulence at homes and the attendant marital conflicts.

Findings by McGarry and Maqsood (2020) showed that social, behavioural, sexual, religious and financial variables are some of the factors that influence marital stability. Spanier (2016) reported that women who marry between the ages of 14

and 17 are twice as likely to divorce as those who marry between the ages of 28 and 30. The divorce rate was 3 times higher when the 14 to 19 year old category was compared to the 28-30 year old category. These rates were similar for males of corresponding ages in the same study. The level of education is also seen as a factor that influences marital stability. Couples with less than a high school education had especially high levels of marital stability. There are mixed findings on studies involving educated women. Women who are graduates had much more marital stability than non-graduate women (Spanier, 2016). A study by Hymann (2019) revealed that couples with a high level of education are happier in marriage than the couples with low level of education. Research findings also showed that marriages involving people with high economic status are relatively more stable than marriages involving people of low economic status (Harsheed, 2018). A study conducted by Caprez (2016) aimed at investigating risk factors for turbulent marriage, found that lack of counselling, couples' indisposition for discussion, individualism in marriage and conflicting standpoints are risk factors for turbulence in marriage. Boddi, Fanni, Castellini, Fisher, Corona and Maggi (2015) carried out a research on some common causes of conflicts within the family particularly

among couples. The results of the study showed that differing viewpoints, sexual incompatibility and breakdown in communication of couples were found to be risk factors for marital conflict while couple's locus of control was not a risk factor for marital conflict. The intervention strategies adopted by couples for resolving marital conflict included diagnosis of the causes of conflict.

To entrench enduring peace and stability in marriage, family and society, couples should among other things keep open the channel of communication. Egbo, Egbo and Asogwa (2020) defined communication as a process of expressing ideas and feelings or of providing information to the people. It is an act of conveying meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood symbols, signs, semiotic rules (Egbo, Egbo, & Asogwa, 2020). Communication is a means by which information is passed from one person (the speaker) to the other (the receiver) or a means of transmitting messages from one person or group of persons to another. It is also a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviours.

Discussion and openness is a very important tool in marriage as it is an

essential ingredient of happy marriage. It is the bridge that can link or close the rift developing between the couples. Issues concerning the marriage and family must be brought for discussion and agreement reached before action is taken. Acting independently without consultation of the partners amounts to high handedness and could be counterproductive. Similarly, individualism, secrecy and unilateral decisions in marriage breeds suspicion, distrust and possibly hostility. Communication in marriage creates an atmosphere which allows couples to express emotions, differences, love and admiration for each other (Wickrama, 2012). It is an elixir which maintains the structure of mutual understanding, love and peaceful coexistence. Esere (2011) stated that communication is a key to a stable relationship for it allows partners to experience love, trust, tolerance, patience and management of conflict for marital stability and enduring family peace. Idoko (2011) acknowledged that more than half of the failed relationships are attributable to communication gap between couples. Couple must develop a mechanism to talk frankly over their problems, accept their faults, forgive, forget and move on. Uncompromising stance and unforgiving spirits on the part of the couples do not augur well for good family relationship. Marriage with reservation and secrecy

must be avoided by couples (Onyekuru, 2019). Hence, secrecy must be kicked out of marriage at all cost. Inability of couples to communicate to each other what they do gives room for suspicion, allegation and ill-feeling. Couples must keep the communication channel open at all times to guarantee free flow of information. In this way, both couples will feel they are carried along in the scheme of things and suspicion will not find a place in the marriage. Verbal and nonverbal communication, openness, assertiveness, active listening, empathy and respect for the style of communication are positive communication strategies for marital conflict resolution (Islami, 2016). Lack of communication between couples is a recipe for marital instability. Communication reduces turbulence in marriage, saves couples from broken heart, separation and divorce and the attendant emotional instability of the children from broken homes who are most likely to experience improper upbringing and ensuing conduct disorder or antisocial behaviour which may be a clog in the wheel of their personal and national development. Egbo, Egbo and Asogwa (2020) found that communication influences marital stability by building up love, tolerance and trust among couples in Enugu Metropolis to a great extent. Chikwe (2019) working on influence of

communication on marital adjustment and stability using a sample of 385 married people found that communication had a high positive influence on marital adjustment and stability. Highly communicating couples enjoy relatively high marital adjustment and stability. Agbo (2016) found that communication gap between couples is among the largest contributors to marital instability. The study conducted by Wonosike and Orji (2014) revealed that couples with low rate of communication recorded higher rate of separation and divorce in comparison with couples with a high rate of communication.

Statement of the problem

It is the wish of every couple to keep marital conflict out the home. For those who are successful in doing this, love, peace, tranquility and happiness pervade their homes. However, marital conflict is an inevitable problem. It can occur in any home at any time. If properly managed, it can bring out the best of the couples ensuring stability in the marriage and progress in the family as the husband and wife can work together as a team. Efforts of the couples therefore should be geared towards nipping marital conflict in the bud by keeping the channel of communication open at all times. If by any means the resolution of the marital conflict eludes the

couples, the gap between the husband and wife may widen. Antagonism and hostility may begin. The marriage becomes unstable which may culminate in heartbreak, loss of property, litigation, separation, broken homes, divorce, single parenthood or loss of life. Children nurtured by single parent may exhibit more antisocial behaviours than children nurtured by both parents and children exhibiting antisocial behaviours cannot realize their potentials and are thus problem to themselves and the society.

Some studies have been conducted on marital conflicts and their resolution strategies for marriage stability with varying results (Egbo, Egbo & Asogwa (2020; Chikwe, 2019; Agbo, 2016). However, the dearth of work on the influence of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in the southeast informed the decision of the researcher to embark on the present study which is to investigate the influence of communication as marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria.

Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the influence of communication as marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. The objectives of this study are to:

1. find the influence of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria.
2. find the effectiveness of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria.

Research questions and hypothesis

The following research questions were answered and null hypothesis tested in this study

RQ1: What is the influence of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria?

RQ2: What is the effectiveness of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone as perceived by marriage counsellors?

HO1: There is no significant influence of communication as a marital conflict

resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria.

Methodology

The design of the study is correlational research design. The population of the study consisted of all the married people in the Southeast Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria who are registered church members and marriage counsellors from churches that are global in nature. Through simple random sampling technique, three states of Abia, Imo and Enugu were drawn from the five states that make up the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. The populations of married people from the three selected states include 1,341,844 married people from Abia State, 1,947,152 married people from Imo State and 1,588,002 married people from Enugu State totaling 4876998 of married people from the three states (Source: Major church marriage registers). The total population of marriage counsellors from the three states as obtained from recognized churches was 8479. From the population of married people and marriage counsellors, a sample made up of 542 married people and 486 marriage counsellors from the recognized churches

was obtained using proportionate stratified random sampling technique. Hence, a total of 1028 respondents among whom were 542 married people and 486 marriage counsellors participated in the study. Two instruments were used in this study. One of them is Communication in Marriage for Marital Stability Questionnaire. It was designed to obtain some relevant information on the influence of communication on marital stability based on the perception of married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone. The other is Communication Effectiveness for Marital Conflict Resolution Questionnaire. It was designed to elicit relevant information from the marriage counsellors on the effectiveness of communication in resolving marital conflict. The instruments were validated by experts in the relevant fields. The coefficient of reliability of Communication in Marriage for Marital Stability Questionnaire is 0.74 while the reliability coefficient of Communication Effectiveness for Marital Conflict Resolution Questionnaire is 0.82. The statistical tools for answering research questions were regression and percentages. The statistical tool for testing the null hypothesis was t-test associated with simple regression.

Results

RQ1: What is the influence of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone?

HO1: There is no significant influence of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in South-East Geopolitical Zone.

Research question 1 was answered using simple regression. Null hypothesis 1 was tested using t-test associated with simple regression. The results are shown in table 1.

Table 1: r-value and t-value for the influence of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability among married people in South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria

N	R	r ²	Adjusted r ²	t	Sig	Result
542	0.78	0.61	0.56	12.59	0.00	Reject HO

The data obtained from the responses of 542 married people on the influence of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy on marital stability as perceived by them were analyzed simple regression statistical tools. The results as presented in table 1 show that the r-value for the influence of communication on marital stability among married people in South-East Geopolitical Zone is 0.78. This value indicates that communication has a high positive influence on marital stability among married people in the Southeast Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. The value of r-square is 0.61. The adjusted r-square value is 0.56. The adjusted r-square value shows that communication accounted for 56 % variation in marital stability. The t-value associated with simple regression is 12.59 which is significant at 0.0 alpha level and also significant at 0.05 alpha level. As the t-value is significant at 0.05 alpha level, the null hypothesis was rejected and alternative hypothesis accepted. This implies that communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy has a significant influence on marital stability among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria.

RQ2: What is the effectiveness of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone as perceived by marriage counsellors?

Research question 2 was answered mean and the results are as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Percentage responses on the effectiveness of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria

	Items	Yes	No
1	Talking about everything with one's spouse is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy	477 (98%)	9 (2%)
2	Confiding in one's spouse in everything is an effective strategy for resolving marital conflict	482 (99%)	4 (1%)
3	Keeping the communication channel open to guarantee free flow of information with one's spouse is effective as a strategy for resolving marital conflict	481 (99%)	5 (1%)
4	Sharing information freely with one's spouse is an effective marital conflict resolution strategy	483 (99%)	3 (1%)
5	Keeping the channel of communication open with one's spouse to avoid speculation and suspicion in marriage is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy	479 (99%)	7 (1%)
6	Discussion and openness with one's spouse is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy	483 (99%)	3 (1%)
7	Overall mean for 486 respondents	481 (99%)	5 (1%)

Table 2 shows the responses of 486 marriage counsellors in relation to the effectiveness of communication as a marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. From the table, it can be seen that 477 respondents representing 98% of the respondents accepted that talking about everything with one's spouse is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy, but 9

respondents representing 2% of the respondents disagreed. A total of 482 respondents representing 99% of the respondents agreed that confiding in one's spouse in everything is an effective strategy for resolving marital conflict while 4 respondents representing 1% of the total respondents did not accept. A total of 481 respondents representing 99% of the respondents accepted that keeping the communication channel open to

guarantee free flow of information with one's spouse is effective as a strategy for resolving marital conflict while 5 respondent representing 1% of the respondents did not accept. The respondents numbering 483 and representing 99% of the total respondents were of the view that sharing information freely with one's spouse is an effective marital conflict resolution strategy while 3 respondents representing 1% were not. A total of 479 respondents representing 99% of the respondents accepted that keeping the channel of communication open with one's spouse to avoid speculation and suspicion in marriage is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy while 7 respondents representing 1% of the respondents did not. Finally, 483 respondents representing 99% of the total respondents agreed that discussion and openness with one's spouse is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy while 3 respondents representing 1% of the total respondents did not accept that discussion and openness with one's spouse is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy.

For all the items under investigation, it can be seen that majority of the respondents accepted that talking about everything with one's spouse is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy, confiding in

one's spouse in everything is an effective strategy for resolving marital conflict, keeping the communication channel open to guarantee free flow of information with one's spouse is effective as a strategy for resolving marital conflict, sharing information freely with one's spouse is an effective marital conflict resolution strategy, keeping the channel of communication open with one's spouse to avoid speculation and suspicion in marriage is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy, and discussion and openness with one's spouse is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy. Furthermore, from the overall mean values, it can be seen that 481 respondents representing 99% of the respondents were of the view that communication is effective as a marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria. Hence, majority of the marriage counsellors agreed that communication is an effective strategy for resolving marital conflict among married people in the South-East Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

In this study, it was found that communication in marriage as marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in South-East Geopolitical Zone had a high, positive and significant

influence on marriage stability. It was also found that marriage counsellors confirmed that communication in marriage as marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in South-East Geopolitical Zone was effective. The finding that communication in marriage as marital conflict resolution strategy among married people in South-East Geopolitical Zone had a high positive influence on marital stability is in agreement with the finding of Agbo (2016). Agbo (2016) found that communication gap between couples was among the largest contributors to marital instability. The finding that communication in marriage had a significant influence on marital stability can be explained from the fact that communication in marriage helps in information flow between couples and would-be couples. It creates an atmosphere which allows couples to express emotions, differences, love and admiration for each other. Through communication, speculation and suspicions are eliminated from the marriage for enduring peace and stability in the family and larger society.

Conclusion

Marital conflict is an ill wind that blows no one any good. In the homes where it occurs, the consequences are dire. It brings about unprecedented hostility, antagonism and psychological trauma. It can result to

fight, physical abuse and litigation. It can also result to destruction of property, waste of resources, separation, divorce or even loss of lives. Children nurtured in homes replete with marital conflicts are most often poorly trained and are most likely to exhibit violent behaviours and other conduct disorders. Thus, they become nuisance to their families and the larger society and will be unable to contribute meaningfully to the development of themselves and the society. Hence, keeping communication channels open for married people will guarantee enduring peace in the family and development in the society at large in the Southeast Geopolitical Zone of Nigeria.

Recommendation

Marital conflict in the homes is perhaps inevitable. It behooves on all couples to make concerted efforts to forestall, manage or resolve it. The best option is to nip it in bud so that it does not widen and spiral out of control. The couples who are the primary victims of marital conflict should not give room to it. They must make effort to resolve it themselves using communication. They should always communicate their intentions to each other. They should avoid keeping secrets in order not to give room to speculation and suspicion and the attendant counter-reaction for peace to reign at home and in

the society. They should talk over all matters heart to heart with a view to forgiving each other. Until spouses communicate actively to each other and are frank about what they say, peace in the home and society will remain a fleeting illusion or mirage.

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