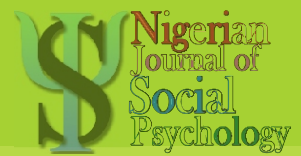


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Marital Expectations, Marital Infidelity and Neuroticism as Predictors of Marital Conflict: Case Study of Igbo Spouses in Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Marital conflict, conceptualized in this study as the ongoing lack of peace and satisfaction in a marital union which threatens marital stability, has become quite prevalent in modern communities. The frequent incidences of spousal battery, spousal sexual abuse, domestic violence, long term separation and in some cases outright divorce are worrisome indicators of the endemic challenge marital conflict poses in most Igbo communities. In this study, marital expectations, marital infidelity (self and spouse), and neuroticism were examined as predictors. Randomized cluster sampling was used to select 525 male and female spouses from the State. The study utilized the cross-sectional survey design and stepwise multiple regression for data analyses. Findings showed that though marital infidelity by spouse was below average and spouse's marital expectations were being fulfilled; marital expectations followed by marital infidelity-spouse proved to be significant predictors of marital conflict. Marital conflict reduced as marital expectations got fulfilled and increased as the level of marital infidelity by spouse increased. Spouses also reported an increased level of neuroticism, with males being more neurotic than females. Neuroticism was found to be the least significant predictor of marital conflict compared to marital expectations and marital infidelity – spouse. Recommendations to spouses and marriage counsellors regards especially the need to manage the neurotic tendencies of male spouses, couple counselling should explore would-be partners expectations and help them learn other coping mechanisms in marriage instead of marital infidelity.

Keywords: Case study, Employment, Igbo, Marital Conflict, Expectations, Marital infidelity, Neuroticism,

Spouses

Introduction

Marriage in Nigeria and most African societies involves more than the spouses at the different stages of the marital union; be it spouse selection, celebration of marital rites, marital expectations or the establishment of marital do's and don'ts. Hence, marriage union in Nigeria especially among the people is a sacred alliance that involves both the living and dead relatives of the spouses. In it, individuals are expected to work together in a hierarchical fashion (with the man being on top and the woman under) to achieve progress and consequent happiness. The reign of peace in such marriages is taken for granted, as the

woman is expected to always be subservient to the husband in all conditions; the woman's personality, ambitions and other characteristics notwithstanding. According to Norona et al. (2018) traditionally, marital relationship across many cultures is considered a lifelong union. Despite these notions, research findings still suggest that marital conflict is a common place event in marriages (Aina, 2004; Ibeh, Obidoa, & Uzoechina, 2013; Tenuche, 2004; Uwaoma, Osita-Njoku, & Madukwe, 2011) though conflict affects marriages differentially depending on whether the spouses are satisfied or dissatisfied with their relationship(cite)

Marital conflict also described as marital disharmony is a natural expectation in marriages, since a marriage is union between two persons of differing personality, attitude, social, economic, religious, familial and at times cultural backgrounds. Ibeh, Obidoa and Uzoechina (2013) described marital disharmony as a strain in marriage interaction between a couple who are living together. However, beyond a strain, conflict arises when there is an unresolved disagreement (Uwaoma & Madukwe, 2014) between couple. Marital conflict to an extent indicates that one of the spouse's is concerned about the relationship. In this cases, marital conflict does necessarily threaten the life of the marriage instead it reflects the emotional state of the couple, show that they care enough about their relationship to fight and that at least that they have a relationship (Esere, Yahaya, Ogunsanmi & Oniye, 2008; Ibeh, Obidoa & Uzoechina, 2013). This understanding of marital conflict as a symbol of normal marriage is common among these people and extreme negative outcomes like divorce and separation are unacceptable and seen as taboos or evil. It is therefore a welcome practice for a couple to remain together in a conflictual union with the hope that the relationship will get better as the years go by. Previous studies have identified many factors that contribute directly or indirectly to marital conflict, such factors like sexual misconduct by wives, flirtation by male couples and husband's inability to fulfil their domestic responsibility (Aderinto, 2004; Aina, 2004; & Tenuche, 2004) have been found to be major causes of marital conflict. Also, age at marriage, educational levels of couples, fertility status and income, are identified as having direct bearing on marital disharmony (Onwuasoanya, 2006) however, the direction of this bearing was not clarified. Awok (2003) and Oyedepo (2001) identified marital expectation as the main determinant of marital disharmony.

Marriage in this context is also considered as a vehicle by which family lineage is propagated through child bearing and rearing. Historically, not having children in a marital union was considered "a curse" by the people. However, in recent years, with extensive exposure to western knowledge and the need for depopulation, accompanied by social and health related concerns like family planning, sexual health, men's role in child bearing, economic and social hardships, adoption and foster parenting; a seeming paradigm shift has begun. Now, it is expected that people have better understanding of childlessness and factors that lead to it. However, singular cases of marital dissolution, polygamy, etc. resulting from delayed or no childbearing still occur. Childlessness is therefore investigated here as an aspect of marital expectation, alongside sexual interest, open communication, freedom to keep friends, continuing education, work, etc.

In line with the Social Exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959) which explains how people weigh the potential benefits and risks of social relationships. Marriage contracts among the people are usually weighed not just by the spouses but also by their families on the bases of what each stand to gain from the union. Historically, marriage is a form of transaction that aims to better the lot of all concerned. The people seek for physically strong persons of childbearing age and of good moral standing; conditions that are presumed to ensure fruitfulness of the marital union as well as marital fidelity especially of the spouse. On the other hand, the family of the bride looks out for a suitor who can provide for and protect their

child as well as have enough to assist the in-laws in times of need. Historically, love as a matter of emotional involvement is not central to their marriage contracts. With on-going globalization, technological breakthroughs, educational advancement, gender equality, emancipation and empowerment amongst others, the desires and conditions of marriage have changed systematically for the people. Now, beauty and intelligence are sought after in would-be marriage partners who could also work, earn and help in running family affairs. There is still a great need for care and wealth in terms of money and other material possessions, but unlike their ancestors, love and sexual attraction are paramount to the decision of who to marry among modern people.

Other prominent (popular) expectations in marriages are sexual satisfaction, improved social standing, economic support for in-laws, marital fidelity and social acceptance. Marital expectations in this study measured pre-marital desires and hopes of spouses, their educational achievement, income, occupation, communication and companionship with partner, responsibility for household chores, sharing financial responsibility, child bearing, amount of time spent with spouse in private and amount of disagreements. Ogwuche et al. (2024) listed infidelity as part of marital expectations in which a spouse expects sexual exclusivity. Onah (2020) explained that infidelity is a breach of trust, manifesting as unreliability and the act of cheating on a committed partner, despite an agreement of exclusivity.

Consequently, marital infidelity was singled out and considered as a source of conflict because of its cultural and religious significance among the people. Marital infidelity either as extra-marital sex or emotional infidelity is considered culturally as a misnomer, an immoral and unacceptable behaviour especially when the other-spouse is involved. As such, in several communities there exist ancestral curses that supposedly punish people who indulge in these behaviours or their innocent spouses; as well as, accompanying cultural rituals that must be performed either to cleanse the culprit or pacify the land in general. In some communities with extreme cultural punishments, the other-spouse would die if they have sexual intercourse with an unfaithful spouse. In more tolerant communities or cultures of the State, marital infidelity seems to be a major complaint among spouses facing some level of marital conflict. In many instances, marital infidelity seems to be more likely where there is marital instability than where there is marital cohesion (Previti & Amato, 2004). In other words, there is no clear causal relationship between marital infidelity and marital stability. In a different study, Altgelt *et al.* (2018) in a pooled longitudinal study involving 227 newlywed couples assess who is sexually faithful? Own and partner personality traits as predictors of infidelity. The authors reported that intimate partners with high (versus low) neuroticism were more likely to engage in marital infidelity. Movasagh *et al.*, (2023) in a descriptive study on structural modelling of the relationship between personality dimensions with a tendency toward marital infidelity: the mediating effect of religious beliefs; also found that neuroticism directly and indirectly affected the tendency toward marital infidelity.

However, marital infidelity has been severally linked to marital conflict or disharmony. In a study by Ibeh, Obidoa and Uzoechina (2013) conducted in Enugu State of Nigeria on marital disharmony; causes and resolution strategies with two hundred couples. The researchers reported infertility, lack of trust, sexual deprivation, early marriage, finance, communication gap, infidelity, poor academic exposure and unmet expectations in this order as causes of marital disharmony. According to their finding, infidelity was ranked higher (7th) than unmet marital expectations ranked (10th). Meanwhile, in a 17years longitudinal study by Previti & Amato (2004) titled “is infidelity a cause or a consequence of poor marital quality” at Pennsylvania State University with 1,475 married persons using telephone interview.

Descriptive design and descriptive statistics were used for data analysis. The result revealed that extra-marital sex lowers subsequent marital happiness, increases subsequent divorce proneness and increases odds of divorce. Therefore, marital infidelity is a cause of marital unhappiness. However, with the expansion of the hospitality industry in the State, the Eastern Heartland, marital infidelity is notably on the rise and the people are gradually becoming even more tolerant and expectant of spouses indulging in extramarital sex or related acts.

Statement of the Problem

Recently, complaints and incidents of behaviours indicative of marital conflict (e.g., fights, battery, rape, police arrests, community welfare courts, and family meetings) are more frequent in the State than in the past years. This increase could be attributed to many factors including poverty, unemployment and poor marital relationship. The explosive increase in the number of hotels, motels, restaurants and other entertainment facilities in major towns of the state seem to have contributed to obvious gap observed among couples in the State. Complaints of lack of care and support from spouses and lack of quality time spent with spouse are common place among spouses attending counselling or those hospitalized. The increasing negative impact of these incidents on family health, family relationships, child rearing practices, and marital union itself made it necessary to investigate and ascertain the genuine factors that could be contributing to marital conflict among spouses in the State. This study is therefore deemed necessary at this historical time to assess respondents' marital expectation, marital infidelity and neuroticism personality trait as basic predictors of marital conflict.

Hypotheses

1. Marital expectation would significantly predict marital conflict
2. Marital infidelity-Spouse would significantly predict marital conflict
3. Marital infidelity-Self would significantly predict marital conflict
4. Neuroticism would significantly predict marital conflict

Method

Study Population

“The geographical scope of the study is removed to enable masked peer review”. Participants were drawn from 5, 5 and 4 local government areas of each respective zone using clustered random, quota and purposive sampling technique. Clustered random sampling was used to select the different local governments studied while quota and purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study. The study involved 525 spouses, 150 (28.57%) males and 375 (71.43%) females, other demographic information is stated in Table I below.

Table I: Distribution of Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Freq. (n =525)	(%)
Gender		
Male	150	28.57
Female	375	71.43
Employment Status		
Unemployed	105	20.00
Self- employed	154	29.33
Employed	266	50.67
Educational Status Before Marriage		
None	21	4.00
Primary	25	4.76
Secondary	196	37.33
Tertiary	254	48.38
Post-tertiary	29	5.53
Educational Status After Marriage		
None	9	1.71
Primary	16	3.05
Secondary	135	25.71
Tertiary	285	54.29
Post-tertiary	80	15.24

Instruments

Four instruments were used for the study: *Marital conflict questionnaire*, *marital infidelity scale*, *marital expectation questionnaire* and *Big Five Inventory (BFI)- Neuroticism subscale*.

Marital conflict questionnaire was developed from the marital disagreement measure, originally developed by Choi and Marks (2008) to rate the frequency of marital disagreement on a 6-point scale. The scale consists of 7 items that measure issues that are potential sources of conflict. Respondents were asked to indicate using the 6-point scale, how any of the 7 items had affected their marriage in the past six months. Some of the issues assessed are household tasks or chores, money matters, childbearing and sex. The reliability is Cronbach alpha .80 and validity (divergent) $r = -.16$, $p > .05$ with a norm of 14.83. Scores above the norm indicate evident marital conflict while scores below the norm indicate little or no marital conflict.

Marital infidelity scale was developed by Russell, Baker and McNulty (2013), to assess whether couples had a romantic affair, or their partners had been unfaithful in the past six months. Four items were used to assess the fidelity/infidelity of the spouses as well as the fidelity/infidelity of their partners on a scale of 0 to 100. The reliability is Cronbach alpha .89(spouse) and .88(self). The validity (convergent) $r = .31$, $p = .03$ (spouse) and validity (divergent) $r = .10$, $p > .05$ (self and spouse) and the norms are 26.86 (spouse) and 12.50 (self).

Scores above the norms indicate infidelity (self/spouse) while scores below the norm indicate fidelity (self/spouse).

The Big Five Inventory (BFI) scale was developed by John, Donahue and Kentle (1991), and later adapted for the use of professionals in Nigeria. The 44-item inventory assesses personality from a five-dimensional perspective: Extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness. However, only items 10-17 that measure neuroticism were used in this study. For neuroticism, the reliability is Cronbach alpha .74 and convergent validity $r = .301$, $p = .03$ and the norm is 11.90.

Marital Expectations Questionnaire (MEQ) was developed from Marital Comparison Level Index (MCLI), originally developed by Sabatelli (1984) and Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) originally developed by Spanier (1976). MCLI assesses the degree to which the outcomes derived from various aspects of marriage measure up to one's expectations. This scale is based on the social exchange perspectives of Thibaut and Kelley (1959), with a focus on comparative processes. The MCLI contains 32 items that examine various personal and social resources available to married individuals, evaluations of their lifestyles, and rewards from interactions with their spouses. The DAS is a self-report instrument which yields a composite score representing the degree of adjustment reported in marriage and similar dyads. It estimates the extent of agreement or disagreement of spouses with their partners on several common marital issues such as finances, religion, household tasks, sexual relations, etc. For Marital Expectations Questionnaire, the reliability is Cronbach alpha .96 and discriminant Validity $r = .31$, $p = .02$ when correlated with marital infidelity (Spouse) and the norm is 9.08. scores higher than the norm indicate that the respondent's experience is above their expectation and better than they expected, while lower scores indicate that respondents' experience are below their expectation and their expectations are unmet.

Procedure

This study was approved by the Departmental Ethical Board. The study involved only couples who have been married for at least two years and willing to participate. The population was clustered into three senatorial zones and random sampling was used to select five local governments from each of the zones. Quota sampling was used to make sure that the drawn sample is representative across location and gender. Purposive sampling helped the researchers ensure that only couples who have been married for at least two years participated in the study. The researchers explained the purpose of the study to participants, they informed them of the confidentiality of all information they provide, and they were assured of anonymity. Participants who agreed to respond willingly to all the questionnaires were given a written informed consent to sign, after which the questionnaires were distributed to them. Six hundred questionnaires were shared. The questionnaires were collected after fifteen minutes. Participants were thanked for their cooperation. The process of distribution and collection of questionnaires across the zones lasted for three weeks. 525 correctly filled questionnaires were used for data analysis.

Design and Statistics

The design employed for this study is cross sectional survey design. The design is suitable for selecting respondents from a large population and across different localities, age, gender, employment and educational status. Stepwise multiple linear regression was used for data analysis. The reason is that the study investigated different predictor variables (marital

expectations, marital infidelity, and neuroticism) in relation to the criterion variable (marital conflict).

Results

Table II: Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Examining ME, MI-Spouse and Neuroticism as Predictors of Marital Conflict

Variables	B	SE B	β	t
Marital Expectation	-.05	.01	-.23	-5.08**
Marital Infidelity-Spouse	.03	.01	.22	4.94**
Neuroticism	.23	.06	.17	3.86**

The result in step 1, marital expectation accounted for a significant amount of variance in marital conflict ($R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 457) = 25.75$, $p < .001$). Respondents scores on marital expectation ranged from -91 to 98 with a mean of 16.46 (Std. Dev. = 34.14). Step 1 of the regression indicated that marital expectation was a significant predictor of marital conflict ($t = -5.08$, $p < .001$). Hence, the more respondents' marital expectations are met, the lesser their marital conflict. Therefore, the first hypothesis that marital expectation would predict marital conflict was accepted.

In the second step, marital infidelity-spouse accounted for a significant amount of variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .10$, $F(1, 456) = 24.35$, $p < .001$). Again, respondents score on Marital Infidelity-Spouse ranged from 0 to 350 with a mean of 19.36 (Std. Dev. = 53.36). The addition of Marital Infidelity-Spouse in step 2 added to the prediction of Marital Conflict ($t = 4.94$, $p < .001$). Hence, the higher the marital infidelity by spouse, the higher the marital conflict experienced. Therefore, the second hypothesis that marital infidelity-spouse will predict marital conflict was accepted.

In step 3, neuroticism accounted for a significant amount of variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .13$, $F(1, 455) = 14.87$, $p < .001$). Finally, respondents score on neuroticism ranged from 0 to 40 with a mean of 12.44 (Std. Dev. = 5.27). The addition of neuroticism in step 3 added to the prediction of Marital Conflict ($t = 3.86$, $p < .001$). Hence, as neuroticism increased, marital conflict experienced by respondents also increased. Therefore, the third hypothesis that neuroticism will predict marital conflict was accepted.

Discussion

In this study, marital expectation, marital infidelity spouse and neuroticism as a personality trait were found to be basic determinants of marital conflict among spouses in the State. Marital expectation emerged as a significant predictor of marital conflict. This finding is in line with that of Ibeh, Obidoa and Uzoechina (2013) in which unmet expectations was ranked the 10th cause of marital disharmony. This finding shows that the people get into marriages with varying expectations which they presume would be met within the marriage relationship. The negative relationship between marital expectation and marital conflict as shown in this study clearly points to a seeming psychosocial climate in which lesser marital conflict is experienced when marital expectations are adequately met or at least compares favourably with the spouse's expectations before marriage.

Marital infidelity-spouse emerged the second strong predictor of marital conflict. This finding also agrees with Ibeh, Obidoa and Uzoechina (2013) in which infidelity was ranked 7th cause of marital disharmony, Previti and Amato (2004) finding that extra marital sex lowers subsequent marital happiness and increases odds of divorce. This finding confirms the increasing rate of marital conflict as depicted by complaints and reports of battery, divorce, wife rape, etc. broadcasted on local television channels and newspapers in the State. With the increasing establishment of entertainment centres (like hotels, restaurants, night clubs, nkwobi joints, etc.) and consequent promiscuity in the state, individuals (both males and females) tend to spend more time and money with people other than their spouses. This behaviour has a direct negative effect on marital relationship variables like open communication, trust, financial involvement, responsibility for household chores, sexual interest and work, thereby leading to marital conflict.

The last predictor of marital conflict in this study is neuroticism. Igbo, Awopetu and Ekoja (2015) found that neuroticism was not a significant factor in choosing a conflict resolution strategy among spouses in Makurdi, Nigeria. Neuroticism is a personality trait that makes individuals prone to feeling anxious, depressed or tense over mild stressors. These people are hypersensitive and as such over reacts to issues like keeping late nights, flirting, and lack of financial support from the spouse. Their lack of emotional stability is a key reason for their continual involvement in marital conflict. Finally, the study showed that the three factors jointly predict marital conflict. This finding is not surprising.

Conclusion

The study concludes that marital expectation, marital infidelity-spouse and neuroticism independently and jointly predicted marital conflict, but marital infidelity-self did not predict marital conflict.

Recommendations

1. In marital counselling for Spouses, counsellors must gather detailed information about pre-marital expectations, current fulfilment of the expectations within the marital relationship and by the spouses, and clients' feelings about the unmet expectations.
2. Psychologists, psychotherapists, counsellors and other experts dealing with marital issues must consider and assess personality of the spouses. Complaints from a spouse with neuroticism personality trait must be treated with utmost sensitivity and helping the client achieve or develop emotional stability should be one of the therapeutic goals.
3. Socio-cultural and environmental policies that can help married persons maintain good marital relationship must be promulgated and enacted by the different strata of government (Federal, State and Local government areas), to help curtail the degree of marital infidelity among spouses. Policies that can ensure that a man spends nights in a hotel/motel with only the lawfully wedded wife are needed in the State and Nigeria in general.
4. Pre-marital counselling by churches and other social organs must provide adequate information relating to the need to have only realistic expectation of a spouse or a marriage relationship as well as to acquire flexibility necessary for individuals to adjust or cope effectively when expectations are unmet.
5. Finally, premarital, couple, and even family counselling should always incorporate personality assessment and therapy during partner selection and marriage to help reduce subsequent marital conflict due to individual differences.

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Indexing

