

Couples Communication and Marital Conflict among Married Civil Servants in Ebonyi State

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Abstract

This study determines couples communication and marital conflict among married civil servants in Ebonyi State. Two research questions and one hypothesis guided the study. The study adopted cross-sectional survey research design with 1665 married civil servants in Ebonyi State (male, 968, female, 697) as the population of the study while the sample was 167 (male, 97, female, 70) representing 10% of the population in the study. Multistage sampling technique was adopted in the selection of the sample. A structured questionnaire which had two inventories was used to collect data namely: Personal Report of Spouse Communication Apprehension Scale (PRSCAS) and Self-Report Conflict Scale (SRCS). The instruments had a reliability coefficient of $r = 0.92$ and 0.72 respectively. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer research questions while stepwise multiple regression statistics was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. The results showed that married civil servants in Ebonyi State had low level of couple's communication and high level of marital conflict. There was a significant positive relationship between couples communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.276$ and the relationship was low, as couples communication explains only 7% of the variation. Therefore, the study concluded that there was low relationship between couples communication and marital conflict. The study recommended among others that Government, Non-governmental organization and health educators should mount enlightenment programmes on effective couple's communication and other factors that can reduce marital conflict especially on the formation stage in marriage.

Keywords: Couples Communication, Marital Conflict, Married Civil Servants

Introduction

Many promising marriages have fallen apart, which some positive factors such as couple's communication, marital intimacy among others would have strengthened the relationships. Communication came from a Latin word "communis" meaning to share. Communication can be described as a social process that uses signs, symbols, languages and other means to bring about inter-exchange of thought and meaning between and among individuals and groups for better understanding and relationships (Ogili, 2005). It is a complex process of creating meaning in the context of an interpersonal relationship which can be verbal and non-verbal (Barnlund, 2016). Verbal communication means a language expression, whereas non-verbal communication uses body language such as rolling of one's eyes, sighing, blinking of one's eyes and crying (Gottman, 2004). Communication is a tool for inter-personal relationship which involves sharing of ideas and information towards reaching an understandable agreement (Diringer, 2017). Communication is essential for two persons to feel closeness and to maintain that closeness over time. It is fundamental to human interaction and intimate couple relationships.

Couples communication is the means through which couples conveys information for the purpose of creating a shared understanding (Rymes, 2012). It is like a life-giving river, when husband and wife cannot communicate, a huge dam is built stopping the flow of water. This causes everything around them to suffer and slowly die. It involves careful listening, being able to empathize with the person you are listening to and then responding in a constructive and non-defensive manner. It also involves communicating your own thoughts and feelings in a way that is not critical or accusatory, so that partner can truly hear and understand what the other partner is saying instead of becoming angry or defensive. In this study, couples communication is the mean through which couples pass on information to one another in order to accomplish and coordinate their common goals and

interests. This is because responsibilities, needs and other marital obligations cannot be achieved without communication. Couples communication could be assertive (intrusive), passive and aggressive (Čudina-Obradović and Obradović, 2005). Assertive communication is open, straightforward, which is characterized by expression of thoughts, attitudes and feelings related to the subject of debate. Assertive individuals have high self-esteem and positive thoughts for themselves. Passive communication is typical for individuals who are afraid or unwilling to openly express their opinions, which complicates the communication. Aggressive communication is the type where the partner wants to insult or humiliate his/her partner, who also can react aggressively, which often breaks the partnership and deepens the conflicts and misunderstandings. For instance, Harold (2010) noted that couples communication is the glue that holds the relationship among married couples together but failures to communicate make couples feel lonely and isolated. In such a situation, such couples tend to withdraw from social activities and are emotionally vulnerable. It has contributed immensely in the divorce rate in countries like USA, Europe, South-Africa and Nigeria (Harold, 2010). Many couples are unable to reach a level of understanding and therefore issues are left unresolved and tension deepens, leading to lack of understanding and respect. Therefore, couples communication is very essential in establishing a marriage and without it, it is nearly impossible to resolve conflicts or grow a partnership (Esere, Yusuf and Omotosho, 2011).

Sholfer and Shoben (2016) reported that marital relationships experience crises and conflicts that sometimes result in divorce, separation, broken homes, violence against women or men, child neglect and several other devastating effects of intra-marital conflicts. But through open and direct communication, spouses can freely express their opinions and views on the existing conflict, discuss whether and to what extent the proposed solution is suitable for both spouses or seek other creative acceptable solutions. Marriages has crumble because of lack of communication and was ranked as number one problem among couples and lead to more complicated problems, like fighting, nagging, shouting and stalemate (Hecker and Wetchler, 2003). Onyechi (2003) affirmed that these occur because of communication gap and usually result to marital conflict. Marital conflicts occur as a result of disagreements between spouses in the process of cooperation, interaction and everyday communication (Straus, 2005; Wilmot and Hocker, 2007). It also occurs when the needs and desires of spouses diverge and thus incompatible (Ewart, 2013). The dynamics of the conflict initially affects the formation of conflict situation that reflects on both spouses to have conflicting tendencies toward an object. Marital conflict in this study are different kinds of negative behaviours exhibited in marital relationships by married civil servants in Ebonyi State which may lead to disagreements, fight, assault, violent behaviors, etc. Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold and Shelton (2003) classified marital conflict into constructive and destructive. Constructive is when couples handle conflict in positive ways by displaying behaviour such as verbal and physical affection, problem solving and support. This type of conflict helps to preserve both couples and children's security by increasing their confidence that any difficulties will be managed in a way that maintains family harmony. It aids couples and children to develop problem solving, coping and conflict resolution abilities (Grych and Fincham, 1990). However, when marital conflicts are hostile, angry and contain conflict tactics such as physical aggression, verbal aggression, threat and personal insult, it is destructive. Buehler (2007) opined that it makes couples and children more vulnerable in developing adjustment problems such as anxiety, depression and behavioural problems due to the feelings of anger and lack of control which increases their risk for internalizing disorders.

Crohan (1996) noted that marital conflict whether destructive or constructive provided it is conflict has traumatic effects when the mutual hostility is not resolved, the effect is disharmony and lack of peace in marriage. It has led to divorce, separation, violence against wife and sometimes children gang up with their mother against their father, desertion, negligence, malicious beating, child abuse, abscondment, assault, disobedience and several other features in martial relationship. When the home is in turmoil, there can never be peace between spouses and progress in that family. Flood (2011) affirmed that these conflicts have negative effects both in the family and society such as psychological health which include decline in mental health, social dysfunction, low self-esteem, misbehaviour in children and emotional health for children and negative thoughts among the couples (Bramleh & Mosher 2002, Rogers, 2004).

Grych and Fincham (2001) found that couples communication and marital conflict are associated with poorer health and with specific illnesses such as cancer, cardiac disease and chronic pain. Perhaps, this is because of hostile behaviours during conflict which are related to alterations in immunological, endocrine, and cardiovascular functioning. Timothy, Bery and Cynthia (2009) found low level of couples communication and high level of marital conflict among couples studied, that as longer as couples are from different background and using assertive, passive and aggressive communication, conflict must occur. Therefore, there is positive significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict. Harper and Sandberg (2016) conducted study on couples communication and marital conflict among married couples in USA and found that married couples in USA had low level of couples communication and high marital conflict. The study found positive significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict at $r= 0.231$. Similarly, Donnellan, Conger and

Bryant (2017) found low positive significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict among married couples in Malaysia. The relationship was significant at 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). The study also found that married couples in Malaysia had low level of couples communication and high marital conflict.

Orbuch, Veroff and Hassan (2002) reported that low level of couples communication and high marital conflict is related to high rates of divorce among married couples especially in Nigeria. The authors found low significant relationship between couple communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.291$. Bokwala (2006) found significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.271$ and that the negative outcomes include physical problems, chronic problems and functional limitations. Longitudinal study by Booth (2005) also demonstrated that couples communication and marital conflict is associated with declines in self-rated health over time. Levenson and Robert (2009) study indicated that there was relationship between couples communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.269$ among Ghana couples and that it was significant at 0.05. Birditt (2010) found significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.371$. Burleson and Denton (2007) equally indicated that there was relationship between couple's communication and marital conflict, that in marriage conflict is inevitable, provided couples cannot avoid using assertive, passive and aggressive communication. The case was difference by Zuo (2000) who found no significant relationship between couples communication and marital communication, that there are other factors like lack of children, finance that could be a predictor of marital conflict and Ohics, Buehlamn and Gottman (2006) which found no significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict.

Statement of the Problems

The present-day Nigerian society is actually witnessing serious marital instability among couples. While some marriages have been completely dissolved, some are on the brink of total collapse, incessant cases of disharmony, violence and breaking of marital vows in marriages (Amadi and Amadi, 2014). Most devastating is the increase rate of psychological divorce where couples living together under the same house are separated in all activities and responsibilities such as sexual activities and family up-keeping which has effect on the physical, mental and emotional health of couples and their children (Abekhale, 2010). Grych and Fincham, (2017) reviewed that marital conflict has been found to be associated with poorer health among couples in USA and with specific illnesses such as cancer, cardiac disease and chronic pain. Perhaps, this is because of hostile behaviours during conflict which are related to alterations in immunological, endocrine, and cardiovascular functioning. Adeyemi (2017) asserts that the increase rate of juvenile delinquency and lack of peace in Nigeria today is as result of marital conflict.

In Ebonyi State the researchers observed that there were increase rate of divorce, lack of intimacy, weak emotional bonding, ineffective problem-solving skill, unforgiveness, slander, aggression and of course external influences signalling the existing critical issues that lie beneath failed marriages among couples which persuasions, dialogue, tolerance, co-operation and mutual understanding can smoothly handles well but to no avail. Therefore, the general purpose of this study was to determine level of couples communication, marital conflict and relationship between couples communication and marital conflict among married civil Servants in Ebonyi State.

Methods

This study adopted cross-sectional survey research design. The study setting was Government Ministries in Ebonyi State, Abakaliki. A total of 1665 married civil servants (Male 968, Female 697) was the population for the study (Ebonyi State Civil Service Commission, 2016) and a sample 167 (Male 97, female 70) representing 10% of the population participated in the study. This sample was adjudged representative of the population based on Nwana's (2007) rule of thumb, which stipulated that when a population is a few thousand, 10% sample should be used. In selection of the participant, the study adopted multi-stage sampling technique.

A structured questionnaire which had two inventories was used to collect data. The first inventory was an adopted 13-item standardized instrument titled: Personal Report of Spouse Communication Apprehension Scale (PRSCAS) developed by Powers and Hutchinson (1979) and the second one was also an adopted 9-item standardized instrument titled: Self-Report Conflict Scale (SRCBS) developed by Crohan (1996). The entire instrument consisted of 22 items meant to elicit information on the degree to which the respondents possessed the attributes of the variables under study. The questionnaire contains three sections A, B and C. Section A contain five items (1-5) on demographic data of the respondents. Section B contained 13 items in which items 1-13 measures couples' communication. The respondents were required to indicate on a 4-point scale of strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD) on their level of agreement or otherwise to the variables under study.

Section C contained 9 items in which items 14-22 measured marital conflict. The respondents were also required to indicate on a 4-point scale of very true (VT), true (T), untrue (UT) and not at all time (NA) on their

level of agreement or otherwise to the variables under study. It was validated by three experts in the Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki. Data collected from married civil servants in Enugu State were used to establish the reliability of the instrument. The Personal Report of Spouse Communication Apprehension Scale had a reliability coefficient of 0.92 using Cronbach r computation while Self-Report Conflict Scale had 0.72 reliability coefficient using Cronbach. The reliability coefficient was considered high enough for the study based on Ogbazi and Okpala's (1994) suggestion of 0.60 for good instruments.

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the administrative head of each unit in the Ministries prior to data collection. A consent note with the explanation for the research purpose, method of responses and assurance of the anonymity was attached with the questionnaire. The researchers administered the questionnaire with the help of research assistants in the Ministries. Copies of the questionnaire administered on each day were collected from the participant immediately on completion. This method yields 99.8% per cent return rate for the questionnaire. The completed copies of questionnaire were coded and analyzed using mean, standard deviation and stepwise multiple regression statistic. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions and a criterion mean of 2.50 was set for the study and any mean above 2.50 was adjudged high couple's communication while below 2.50 considered low couple's communication. On the other hand, mean scores of 2.50 and above were considered high marital conflict while below 2.50 was interpreted as low marital. This is because the less frequent the married civil servants experience disagreement in marriage, the less their marital conflict could be (Thompson and Werner, 2007). Thereafter, Pallant (2011) interpretation of the value of 'r' was adopted. In the interpretation, a value of 0.10-0.29 was considered "low" relationship, 0.30-0.49 "moderate relationship" 0.50-0.99 "high" relationship and 1.0 perfect relationship. A plus (+) or (-) sign indicates whether the correlation is positive or negative. Stepwise multiple regression statistic was employed to test the hypothesis. The hypothesis was tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance.

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Level of Couples Communication among Married Civil Servants in Ebonyi State. N = 165

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
1	I look forward to express my opinion to spouse on controversial topics.	2.44	1.05	L
2	I am comfortable in developing in-depth conversations with my spouse.	2.47	1.29	L
3	I look forward to discussing with my spouse those aspects of our relationship most important to me.	2.26	1.13	L
4	I don't hesitate to tell my spouse exactly how I feel.	2.29	1.10	L
5	I usually come right out and tell my spouse exactly what I say.	2.49	0.69	L
6	I never hesitate to tell my spouse my needs.	2.39	1.05	L
7	I look forward to telling my spouse my opinion on a subject.	2.46	1.29	L
8	I feel that I am an open communicator.	2.43	1.27	L
9	During periods of conflict, I always let my spouse do the talking.	2.41	1.29	L
10	I look forward to evening talks with my spouse.	2.47	1.29	L
11	I am hesitant to develop a deep conversation with my spouse.	3.32	1.28	H
12	My thoughts become confused and tumbled with my spouse.	2.21	1.22	L
13	I am hesitant to develop casual conversations with my spouse.	2.21	1.13	L
	Grand Mean	2.45	1.25	L

Table 1 shows that all the items except item 11 obtained below mean scores of 2.50 and above criterion mean set for this study. The grand mean of $\bar{X} = 2.45 \pm 1.25$ was also below 2.50 and above criterion mean set for the study, suggesting that married civil servants in Ebonyi State had low couples communication.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Level of Marital Conflict among Married Civil Servants in Ebonyi State. N = 165

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Decision
14	I yelled and shouted at my spouse.	2.83	1.11	H
15	I insult my spouse or called him or her names.	2.80	1.12	H
16	I brought up things that happened long ago.	2.58	1.14	H
17	I had to have last word.	2.81	1.10	H
18	I calmly discussed the situation.	2.56	1.10	H

19	I listened to my spouse's point of view.	2.48	1.12	L
20	I tried hard to find out what my spouse was feeling.	2.60	1.08	H
21	I tried to say nice things.	2.53	1.07	H
22	I tried to make my spouse laugh.	2.52	1.13	H
	Grand Mean	2.63	0.65	H

H = High

L = Low

Table 2 shows that all the items (except item 19) obtained mean scores of 2.50 and above with grand mean of 2.63 ± 0.65 . This indicates that the respondents had high marital conflicts in Ebonyi State.

Table 3: Relationship between Couples Communication and Marital Conflict

Variables	R	R ²	B	F-cal	DF	P-value
Couples Communication						
	0.276	0.076	0.302	13.407	1	0.000
Marital Conflict						

Significant at $P < 0.05$

Table 3 shows that stepwise regression on the relationship between couples communication and marital conflict was a low positive relationship ($r = 0.276$) and this relationship was significant ($F\text{-cal} = 13.407$; $P = 0.000$). This implies that a low communication level corresponds to high marital conflict. The value of $\beta = 0.302$ implies that couples communication contributes 30.2% to the regression model. The value of $R^2 = 0.076$ implies that the variables accounted for 7.6% variance in the regression model. This suggests that there might be some other factors that can explain this variation but couples communication explains only 7% in the marital conflict of married civil servants in Ebonyi State.

Discussion

Data in Table 1 revealed that married civil servants in Ebonyi State had low level of couples communication $\bar{X} = 2.45 \pm 1.25$. This finding agreed with Harper and Sandberg (2016) who found that married couples in USA had low level of couples communication. Result in Table 2 indicated that married civil servants in Ebonyi State had high level of marital conflict $\bar{X} = 2.63 \pm 0.65$. This finding is in line with Donnellan, Conger & Bryant (2017) whose study found that married couples in Malaysia had high level of marital conflict. Orbuch, Veroff and Hassan (2002) whose study also found that married couples in Nigeria had low level of couples communication and high marital conflict agreed with this finding. This might be the reason why Adeyemi (2017) asserted that the increase rate of juvenile delinquency and lack of peace in Nigeria today is as a result of low level of couples communication which effective couples communication is a panacea and even Orbuch, Veroff and Hassan (2002) reported that the low level of couples communication has related to high rates of divorce among married couples especially in Nigeria. Longitudinal study by Booth (2005) also demonstrated that couples communication and marital conflict is associated with declines in self-rated health over time.

Examining the relationship between couples communication and marital conflict among married civil servants in Ebonyi State, result in Table 3 indicated low positive relationship between couples communication and marital conflict among married civil servants in Ebonyi State ($r = 0.276$). The F-cal of 13.407 was significant at $p = 0.000$. The finding agreed with the position of Harper and Sandberg (2016) who found low positive relationship between couples communication and marital conflict among married couples in USA at $r = 0.231$. Similarly, Donnellan, Conger and Bryant (2017) which found low positive relationship between couples communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.231$ and the relationship was significant at 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) supported the finding in this study. Orbuch, Veroff and Hassan (2002) who found low positive significant relationship between couple communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.291$ is in line with the finding of this study. Levenson and Robert (2009) study agreed with the finding in this study that there was significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.269$ among Ghana couples and that it was significant at 0.05. Birditt (2010) found significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict at $r = 0.271$ supported the finding in this study. The reason for this relationship was also attributed to Burleson and Denton (2007) which indicated that there was significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict, because conflict in marriage is inevitable, provided couples cannot avoid using assertive, passive and aggressive communication. Zuo (2000) who found no significant relationship between couples communication and marital communication, that there are other factors like lack of children, finance that could be a predictor of marital conflict

and Ohics, Buehlamn and Gottman (2006) which found no significant relationship between couples communication and marital conflict disagreed with the finding in this study.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Married civil servants in Ebonyi State had low level of couples communication and high level of marital conflict. However, couple communication significantly explains less than 10% of the variation in marital conflict among married civil servants in Ebonyi State. The paper has established relationship between couples communication and marital conflict. However, the study established that the more there is low communication, the higher level of marital conflict among married civil servants in Ebonyi State, which explains that couple communication might have contributed just a little to marital conflict. Other variables outside the variable of interest might have explain the bulk of marital conflict among the study population. Therefore, the paper recommended that Government, Non-governmental organization and health educators should mount enlightenment programmes on effective couples communication and other factors that can reduce marital conflict especially on the formation stage in marriage, regular workshops, seminars and conferences should be organized by stakeholders like religious bodies and government to availed couples and prospective couples acquire requisite skills and habit culture for successful marital life and family and healthy living with special reference to counselling for marital life should be emphasized in the curriculum especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

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