

Effects of Communication and Conflict Management Skills in Enhancing the Interpersonal Relationships of Seventh-day Adventist Couples in Lagos, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study through a pretest-posttest, control group experimental design with a 3x2x2 factorial matrix examines the effects of communication and conflict management skills in enhancing the interpersonal relationships of Seventh-day Adventist couples in Lagos, Nigeria. Simple random sampling technique was used to select three parishes of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Lagos. The participants were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Participants in the two treatment groups were exposed to eight weeks of communication and conflict management skills training. Two instruments were used for data collation; thus, Interpersonal Relationship Scale (IRS) and Introversion-Extroversion Indicator Scale. Data were analysed using Analysis of Covariance. The study observes a significant main effect of treatment on couples interpersonal relationship. Likewise, there was no significant main effect of personality on the interpersonal relationship among couples. Therefore, counselling/psychological intervention programmes should be put in place to help married couple in conflict to self-rediscover their objective of getting married at the first instance and improve on their interpersonal relationship competence as to adjust to the demands of marriage. This would help them develop the potentials to establish and sustain good marital interpersonal relationship.

Keywords: *Communication, Conflict Management, Counselling, Couple, Marriage, Seventh-Day Adventist Church.*

INTRODUCTION

The attempt to adjust to the frustrating economic, political, social, cultural and religious challenges of this 21st century by couples has made lot of homes to experience a distressed and agonising relationship. This development has grave implications in a number of ways on the peace, safety and development of the larger society. Successful marriage is a highly valued goal for majority of Nigerian couples. In fact, most couples project having a happy marital relationship as one of their most important objectives, considering the fact that marriage is a lifelong commitment

that should only be ended by death. However, despite the desire for a successful and blissful relationship by couples, the attempt to adjust to the frustrating economic, political, social, cultural and religious challenges of this 21st century by couples has made lot of homes to experience a distressed and agonising relationship. Therefore, it is observed that some couples are overwhelmed with their desire to make ends meet at the detriment of establishing a more dynamic, stable and enterprising family relationship. In congruence, Animasahun and Fatile (2011) contend that the fragility of marital bond is a notable feature of the contemporary world. It spares no continent and is present at every level of society. It makes society fragile and even jeopardizes the education task and the trust that sustains a home.

All too often it leads to numerous separations as well as divorce which most times is considered the only way out of marital crisis. This development has grave implications in a number of ways on the peace, safety and development of the larger society. This is premised against the backdrop of the fact that the family is the bedrock of the society. Thus, if couples live together in an understandable manner devoid of rancour and acrimony, the larger society benefits positively. However, as observed in contemporary Nigerian society, most couples are bombarded with hectic and scurrying schedules minimizing the time allotted for family relationship. Hence, more often than not, couples become breadwinners to unstoppable demands for family's commodities and satisfaction even to the point of liquidating the equality of experienced family relationship. Therefore, conflicts and misunderstanding breed instantly, possibly due to poor dynamism in couple's method of interpersonal relationship thus creating a shaky, distressed and unpleasant family environment.

In support of this point of view, Rosand, Slinning, Eberhard-Gran, Roysamb and Tambs (2011) contend that for many adults, marriage constitutes their most central and enduring social relationship and has been linked to greater life satisfaction, low rates of depression, and a reduced risk of all-cause mortality. However, poor relationship quality may compromise both physical and mental well-being. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms of the interpersonal context of psychological distress among couples remains a vital area of scientific research (Rosand, Slinning, Eberhard-Gran, Roysamb and Tambs, 2011).

Consequently, interpersonal or interactive models of marital conflict, family systems models of conflict and models of emotional contagion all suggest that the social context and the partner relationship play a critical role in the creation, transmission, and maintenance of a successful marital union (Rosand *et al.*, 2011). This implies that Communication is a central skill in strong marital relationships. Good communication has a technical aspect (learning to express oneself clearly and to listen to one's spouse), as well as an emotional aspect (showing empathy and respect for other points of view). Material under this heading includes skills for identifying and controlling negative interaction styles, for clear and empathetic

communication, and for structured approaches to problem-solving (Stanley 2007). Thus, when couples participate together in joint leisure it produces high levels of interaction. These types of activities are conducive to attain optimal communication and alternative role patterning. It has been found that couples that share leisure time together in joint activities tend to be much more satisfied with their marriages. Spousal understanding and communication increases with greater amounts of shared leisure time together (Stanley 2007).

Therefore, it could be said that the need for positive and pragmatic interpersonal relationship to fostering peaceful co-existence in all ramifications among couples cannot be overemphasised considering the fact that it is an integral stimulus for human survival. In support of this assertion, Davidson (2012) posits that enhancing, building and maintaining good interpersonal relationship is a distinctive aspect of human association. Furthermore, Davidson (2012) contends that positive interpersonal relationship skill could enable an individual to relate and react in an organised manner to people and situations in a specific context. This implies that adequate and appropriately utilised interpersonal skills are critical to ensuring the development and sustenance of positive interpersonal relationships among couples in Nigeria.

In congruence, Maniaci and Reis (2010) found that the appropriate use of good interpersonal skills could enhance the development of intimate relationships among couples. Furthermore, the utilisation of interpersonal relationship skills among couples either verbal or non-verbal could help couples not only appreciate their differences but also understand their problems and promote a communication flow that will be positively reinforcing to enable them overcome their marital challenges. Thus, substantial evidence supports the salient role of positive interpersonal relationship among couples in predicting adjustment and well-being in children (Junttila, Vauras and Laakkonen, 2007).

The home is the nucleus of the society and the comfort of the home is dependent on the dynamism of the interpersonal relationships that exist among couples. Observably, many problems escalate when there is poor interpersonal relationship among couples. Hence, poor communication skills can cause irrevocable damage to relationships; affecting productivity, satisfaction, performance, morale, trust, respect, self-confidence, and even physical health. Thus, ineffective communication is a common problem complaint of couples who are having difficulties and is also associated with an increased risk of divorce and marital separation.

Based on the information gotten from primary source by the researcher through interview with pastors of Seventh-day Adventists Church in Lagos State, the church recorded statistical information reveal that marital discord and challenges as a result of poor interpersonal relationship abound. The statistics from the Pastors who participated in the study indicate that incidence of spouses living in separation rose from eight in 2008 to sixteen in 2009 and to 39 in 2010. Number of cases of

husbands taking another wife stood at fourteen in 2008 down to six in 2009 but rose to 24 in 2010. Cases of wife living husband for another man rose from four in 2008 to six in 2009 and to twelve in 2010. Number of problematic marriages handled by Pastors rose from sixty eight in 2008 to eighty seven in 2009 and one hundred and forty in 2010. This shows that marital challenges among Seventh-day Adventist Church couples are on the increase.

There is need therefore to enhance the interpersonal relationship among couples in the Seventh-day Adventist Church generally, considering the fact that the background of some couples in marriage today has a serious negative impact on their family and society at large. Hence, marital distress, conflict, family uncertainty among couples could threaten family and societal values. Therefore, most couples are said to be living in distressed marital relationship. The consequences of this phenomenon is far reaching with it negative impact on national development in all ramifications. This is premised on the ground that family members may become maladjusted members of the larger society and unable to contribute positively to the economical, technological, social and political development of the Nigerian Nation. Though in most situations, efforts have been made by scholars, churches, professional organisations, etc. to curb this menace. Yet, the incidence of marital conflict and disharmony appears endemic as the stabilising of personality role of couples and the family wanes at alarming rates.

Thus, scholars, teachers, churches are at a loss on the options available for identifying the causes of this situation in their attempts to proffer solutions. Therefore, in view of this context, this study through an experimental research design examines the effect of communication and conflict management skills in enhancing the interpersonal relationships of Seventh-Day Adventist couples in Lagos, Nigeria. This study is anchored on Social Exchange Theory by (Thibault and Kelley 1959). The Communication Theory of Social Exchange is a theory based on the exchange of rewards and costs to quantify the values of outcomes from different situations for an individual. People strive to minimize costs and maximize rewards and then base the likeliness of developing a relationship with someone on the perceived possible outcomes as practically experienced in marital union. When these outcomes are perceived to be greater, couples then to disclose more and develop a closer relationship with each other.

Thus, social exchange theory is based on a central premise: that the exchange of social and material resources is a fundamental form of human interaction. With roots in earlier theories developed in cultural anthropology, neoclassical economics, and psychology, the school of thought on social exchange developed with focus on how interaction patterns are shaped by power relationships between individuals, and the resulting efforts to achieve balance in exchange relations. Social exchange theory proposes that social behaviour is the result of an exchange process. The purpose of this exchange is to maximize benefits and minimize costs. According to this theory, people weigh the potential benefits and risks of social relationships.

When the risks outweigh the rewards, people will terminate or abandon that relationship. This could possibly explain the express occurrence of issues of divorce. This is a humanistic theory because it has intuitive credibility, it makes sense and is relative to actual communication practice. It has a systematic approach and is timely. There are multiple truths. It also has heuristic value because it is easily applicable to situations. The viability of social exchange rests on the assumption that human beings recognize each other's life situations, notice each other's needs, and in some ways are likely to engage in reciprocity - a condition in which a response is correlated to the worth of the original message. In other words, humans act with other humans in full recognition that their acts will be noticed and in some way reciprocated (that is, they will receive a return on their communicative investment).

Hypotheses

- H₀1. There is no significant main effect of treatment on the interpersonal relationship among the couples.
- H₀2. There is no significant main effect of educational qualification on the interpersonal relationship among the couples.
- H₀3. There is no significant main effect of personality on the interpersonal relationship among the couples.
- H₀4. There is no significant interaction effect of treatment, educational qualification and personality on the interpersonal relationship among the couples.

METHOD

A pretest, posttest, control group quasi experimental design of 3x2x2 factorial matrix was used for this study. The pre-test, post-test control group design was used in the study because the design has been recognized for its ability to establish causes, effects and relationships due to intervention. It also shows the potential for controlling all threats to validity so that a cause and effective relationship may be established. The psychological treatment is denoted by alphabet A, as thus: Communication Skills (A1), Conflict Management Skills (A2) and the Control Group (A3) constituting the row of the treatment design. The column denotes the moderating variable (Personality Factors) varying at two levels represented by B where B1 represents (Extroversion) and B2 represents (Introversion). Also, C1 represents (high) and C2 represents (low) respectively depicting levels of educational qualification. This is highlighted below on table 1

Treatment	Personality				Total
	High Educational Qualification		Low Educational Qualification		
	High E/IN	Low E/IN	High E/IN	Low E/IN	
A1 Communication	A1 B1n=8	A1 C1n=4	A1 B2n=5	A1 C2n=3	20
A2 Conflict Management	A2 B1n=9	A2 C1n=2	A2 B2n=4	A2 C2n=5	20
A3 Control Group	A3 B1n=14	A3 C1n=8	A3 B2n=10	A3 C2n=8	40
Total	31	14	19	16	80

Key: Personality = (E/IN) Extroversion/Introversion

The population of this study consists of all married couples in Seven Day Adventist Church in Lagos State Nigeria. The samples for this study consist of eighty couples who are members of Seven Day Adventist Church in Lagos State Nigeria. Simple random sampling technique was used for selecting the sample for this study. Seventh - day Adventist Church, Maryland and Seventh - day Adventist Church, Ogba Lagos which were used for training. Seventh - Day Adventist Church, Ikorodu Lagos were used as the control group. Interpersonal Relationship Scale by Kratzke, (1976) was used to measure couples interpersonal relationship adjustment. The 120 item scale was designed for use in marital and other dyadic relationships. The scale has a reliability coefficient of .84.

Introversion-Extroversion Indicator by BrownSword (1987) was used to measure couples personality dimension. The instrument is a 50 item scale designed to elicit information on a participant's personality trait. The scale is a 5-point likert scale with response ranging from 1, strongly disagree to 5, and strongly agree. Items 1-25 are characteristics of introversion. If one agrees with most of these characteristics, it is likely that one is an introvert. Items 26-50 are characteristics of extroversion which measures Extroversion personality trait. The instrument has a reliability coefficient of .78. Permission was obtained from the church authority to conduct this study. The instruments were administered to participants on individual bases and each of them were encouraged to respond to the items on the instruments without consulting any other person so that it will reflect their innermost feelings on the items measured by the instrument. Data generated in this study were analyzed using the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). ANCOVA was adopted to analyze the post-test scores of participants on their level of interpersonal relationship training using the pre-test scores as covariates to ascertain if the post-experimental differences are statistically significant. The summaries of the analysis are presented on a table.

Treatment Package

Experimental Group One: Communication Skill

Session One: General orientation and administration of instrument to obtain pre-test scores.

Session Two: What is Communication in Marriage?

Session Three: How to improve communication in marriage

Session Four: Listening Skill

Session Five: Empathy

Session Six: Anger Management

Session Seven: Expressing Positive Feelings without Inhibition

Session eight: Revision of all activities in the previous session and administration of instrument for post treatment measures.

Experimental Group Two: Conflict management skills

Session One: General orientation and administration of instrument to obtain pre-test scores.

Session Two: Conflict in Marriage

Session Three: How to manage conflict in marriage

Session Four: Listening Skill

Session Five: Empathy

Session Six: Anger Management

Session Seven: Expressing Positive Feelings without Inhibition

Session eight: Revision of all activities in the previous session and administration of instrument for post treatment measures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented on table 2 show that there was significant main effect of treatments on the couples interpersonal relationship. Premised on this, the null hypothesis that there will be no significant main effect of treatment on interpersonal relationship among couples is rejected. It is therefore concluded that there was significant main effect of treatment on the couple's interpersonal relationship. The result of the analysis as presented on table 2 indicates that there was no significant main effect of education in the interpersonal relationship among couples in the post-test scores of high and low educated couples exposed to treatments. The null hypothesis which states that there is no significant main effect of educational qualification on the interpersonal relationship among couples is hereby accepted.

The result of the analysis as presented on table 2 indicates that there was no significant main effect of personality on the interpersonal relationship among couples based on post-test scores of introvert and extrovert participants exposed to treatment group. Thus, the null hypothesis that there is no significant main effect of personality on the interpersonal relationship among couples is accepted. Table 2 also reveals the acceptance of the null hypothesis that there is no significant interaction effect of treatment, educational qualification and personality on the interpersonal relationship among couples.

The result of the findings reveal that there was significant main effect of treatment in the posttest interpersonal relationship scores of couples in the experimental and control groups. This indicates that the treatment programme was effective in improving the interpersonal relationship competence of the couples that participated in the treatment programme. The post test scores on interpersonal relationship of participants in the experimental groups showed that the treatment gain was effective. However, the poor interpersonal relationship competence expressed by participants in the control group could be aligned to the fact that they were not exposed to any treatment package. The outcome of this result means that

if couples that are experiencing communication challenges and conflict in their marriage are exposed to intervention as this, they could develop basic interpersonal relationship skills that will help fortify the love, harmony and intimacy of their marriage. Therefore, if this is achieved, distressed couples entangled on conflict would be able to resolve their conflict(s) and experience marital satisfaction through positive interpersonal relationship. Thus, the effectiveness of the treatment could be explained in terms of the effectiveness of each of the training programmes in enhancing interpersonal relationship competence of couples experiencing marital conflict. The result therefore highlights the fact that marital conflict could be resolved and managed effectively through the utilization of good interpersonal relationship skill(s). In support of this point of view, Rosand, Slinning, Eberhard-Gran, Roysamb and Tambs (2011) contend that for many adults, marriage constitutes their most central and enduring social relationship and has been linked to greater life satisfaction, low rates of depression, and a reduced risk of all-cause mortality. However, poor relationship quality may compromise both physical and mental well-being.

Therefore, understanding the mechanisms of the interpersonal context of psychological distress among couples remains a vital area of scientific research (Rosand, et al., 2011). The result of the study also reveals that there was no significant main effect of educational qualification in the posttest interpersonal relationship scores of couples that participated in the intervention. This implies that the issue of educational qualification did not influence the interpersonal relationship scores of participants. This could further be explained on the context of the couples desire to make their marriage work and based on this point of view, either they are highly educated or not appears secondary.

Thus, the primary concerns are how best they can manage their marital differences and build a solid family foundation through which they will derive marital satisfaction. In line with this context, the level of educational qualification is inconsequential. Furthermore, what engineered this result is their desire to sustain their marriage and attain marital satisfaction. Therefore, their desire to have a successful marriage made them to improve on their interpersonal relationship skills under mining their levels of educational qualifications. In congruence, Maniaci and Reis (2010) found that the appropriate use of good interpersonal skills could enhance the development of intimate relationships among couples. The utilisation of interpersonal relationship skills among couples either verbal or non-verbal could help couples to not only appreciate their differences but also understand their problems and promote a communication flow that will be positively reinforcing to enable them overcome their marital challenges. Furthermore, the result reveals that there was no significant main effect of personality on the interpersonal relationship among couples based on post-test scores of introvert and extrovert participants exposed to treatment. The reason for this development could be that as married couples, either they are introvert or extrovert; they all desire to have a successful

and promising marriage worthy of societal emulation and appreciation. Therefore, this natural human desire possibly made the couples that participated to make good use of the opportunity the intervention programme availed them to turn a new leaf and embrace harmony instead of discord. Therefore, the couples took time to develop their communication and interpersonal relationship skills that would help them successfully manage their marital challenges. Thus, communication and interpersonal relationship skills are central skills in strong marital relationships. Good communication and interpersonal relationship has technical aspect (learning to express oneself clearly and to listen to one's spouse), as well as an emotional aspect (showing empathy and respect for other points of view). Therefore, when couples participate together in joint leisure it produces high levels of interaction. These types of activities are conducive to attaining optimal communication and alternative role patterning. It has been found that couples that share leisure time together in joint activities tend to be much more satisfied with their marriages.

Spousal understanding and communication increases with greater amounts of shared leisure time together (Stanley 2007). However, the result of the study reveals that there was no significant interaction effect of treatment, educational qualification and personality on the interpersonal relationship among couples. The reason for this development could be aligned to the fact that possibly, the content of the treatment programme made couples realized that marriage is a lifelong commitment that can only be made fruitful through concerted effort, discipline, compromise and willingness of couples involved. This is consistent with Animasahun and Fatile (2011) contention of the fact that the fragility of marital bond is a notable feature of the contemporary world.

Therefore, since they realized that conflict could lead to separation, divorce, and discord and unhappy home which none of them pray it happen. This made them to apply their six thinking hat and adjust to attain marital satisfaction by improving their communication and interpersonal relationship skills. The study has revealed the fact that couples experiencing frustrating marital situation could be helped to overcome their challenges. Therefore churches should endeavour to seek the services of professional counseling psychologist to attend to the needs of their members on time before their situation gets worst. The study will enable pastors to be aware of the marital challenges of their church members experiencing marital conflict and distress. Thus, pastors will appreciate the fact that their members are not immune from the experience of marital crisis and as such know how best to help they adjust to the reality of marriage.

Table 2: Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) of Pre-post Test Interactive Effects of Interpersonal Relationship Scores of Participants in the Treatment Groups, Personality and Educational Qualification

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	8392.421 ^a	12	699.368	10.474	.000
Intercept	2368.368	1	2368.368	35.469	.000
Pretest	138.886	1	138.886	2.080	.154
Trtgroup	3063.221	2	1531.610	22.937	.000
Personality	3.537	1	3.537	.053	.819
Educqual	148.870	1	148.870	2.229	.140
trtgroup * personality	146.892	2	73.446	1.100	.339
trtgroup * educqual	402.120	2	201.060	3.011	.056
personality * educqual	20.546	1	20.546	.308	.581
trtgroup * personality * educqual	141.392	2	70.696	1.059	.353
Error	4340.296	65	66.774		
Total	521902.000	78			
Corrected Total	12732.718	77			

a. R Squared = .659 (Adjusted R Squared = .596)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Communication and conflict management skills were effective in enhancing interpersonal relationship among Seventh - day Adventist couples. Therefore, it could be applied to resolve couples interpersonal relationship challenges as a measure to attain marital satisfaction. The family, society and significant others should take time to give appropriate support to couples experiencing marital conflict and disaffection as to help them overcome their challenges and adjust well to the reality of marriage. Counselling/psychological intervention programmes should be put in place to help married couple in conflict to self-rediscover their objective of getting married at the first instance and improve on their interpersonal relationship competence as to adjust to the demands of marriage. This would help them develop the potentials to establish and sustain good marital interpersonal relationship. The church should ensure that functional counselling services are made available for their members as this would help realize their potentials.

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