



Effectiveness of Marital Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Fostering Marriage Stability among Couples in Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of marital conflict resolution mechanisms in enhancing marital stability among couples in Lagos State, Nigeria. Given the increasing global rates of marital discord and the unique socio-cultural context of Lagos State, it is essential to understand how conflict resolution strategies can contribute to the longevity of marriages. The study population included all couples in Lagos State, with the sample specifically drawn from couples in the Oriade Local Development Area. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, and a stratified random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 96 married couples. Data was collected using a self-constructed questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings indicated that marital conflicts experienced by individuals were manageable through the use of conflict resolution mechanisms. Validating conflict resolution strategies are the most strongly endorsed by respondents, indicating that these strategies are commonly and effectively used by couples in Lagos State; avoidant conflict resolution strategies are used but with less consensus among couples, reflecting a more varied approach to managing conflicts by avoidance; volatile conflict resolution strategies are present but are not as strongly endorsed as validating strategies, suggesting that while emotional expression is a part of conflict resolution, it is not the dominant method; and the influence of education levels and marriage types on marital stability is acknowledged by respondents, with a general agreement that these factors play a role in how conflicts are managed and resolved in marriages. The study recommended the establishment of marital conflict resolution centres in all Local Government Areas across Lagos State.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Marriage, Marital Stability, Mechanism, Couples

Introduction

Marriage, as a fundamental social institution, plays a pivotal role in shaping the fabric of societies globally. The stability of marriages is crucial not only for the well-being of individual couples but also for the broader social and economic landscape. Nigeria, with its diverse cultural landscape, faces unique challenges in maintaining marital stability, and Lagos State stands as a microcosm of this complexity. Marital conflicts are an inevitable aspect of any relationship, yet the manner in which couples navigate and resolve these conflicts significantly influences the overall stability of the marriage. Marital conflicts in Nigeria are often influenced by a combination of cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors. Nigeria has experienced significant social transformations, impacting traditional family structures and dynamics (Oyewole, 2021). Lagos State, being a melting pot of cultures and traditions, presents a unique context where couples navigate these changes while seeking stability in their marriages. Marriage stability is not only a personal triumph for individual couples but also contributes to broader societal cohesion and development. Numerous studies emphasize the positive effects of stable marriages on mental health, child development, and economic well-being (Huntington et al., 2022). It is imperative to understanding the factors that contribute to marital stability is, therefore, essential for promoting individual and societal welfare.

Marriage, as a social institution, is a complex and dynamic entity influenced by various factors, including cultural, social, economic, and individual dynamics. In the context of Lagos State, Nigeria, understanding the effectiveness of marital conflict resolution mechanisms is essential to address the unique challenges that couples face within this diverse and rapidly evolving society. Lagos State, as the economic and cultural hub of Nigeria, is characterized by a rich tapestry of traditions and values. Cultural factors, including extended family networks, religious beliefs, and

societal expectations, play a significant role in shaping marital relationships (Bau, & Fernández, 2023). These cultural dynamics can both facilitate and hinder effective conflict resolution within marriages.

Nigeria, undergoing rapid urbanization and economic changes, experiences shifts in traditional family structures and roles. Economic stressors, unemployment, and financial instability can contribute to marital conflicts (Lee et al., 2023). Exploring the interplay between socioeconomic factors and conflict resolution mechanisms is crucial for understanding marital stability. It was indicated that couples employ various conflict resolution strategies, ranging from communication skills to seeking external support. The prevalence and effectiveness of these mechanisms are vital for tailoring interventions that align with the needs of couples in Lagos State (Donohue, 2023).

Low et al. (2019) described marital conflict resolution mechanisms as the various methods spouses use to resolve their conflicts. These methods include avoidant, validating, and volatile approaches. These three mechanisms help couples regulate their interactions and maintain more stable and fulfilling relationships. According to Gottman and Gottman (2015), these regulated mechanisms differ based on how much partners try to influence each other through persuasion and dialogue, as well as the timing of these attempts. Avoidant couples tend to minimize conflict by agreeing to disagree. Validating couples focus on resolving conflicts by ensuring that each person feels understood and their perspectives are acknowledged. In contrast, volatile couples are more passionate and energetic, embracing lively debates and disagreements without hesitation. **Avoidant Conflict Resolution Mechanism:** The avoidant conflict resolution mechanism involves a tendency to withdraw from conflicts or avoid addressing issues directly. Individuals using this mechanism may minimize the importance of disagreements, refrain from expressing their feelings openly, or create emotional distance during conflicts to maintain a semblance of peace (Paquette et al., 2020).

Validating Conflict Resolution Mechanism: Validating conflict resolution emphasizes open communication, active listening, and acknowledging the feelings and perspectives of both partners. Couples employing this mechanism seek to understand each other's viewpoints, validate emotions, and find common ground. This approach fosters mutual respect and a collaborative problem-solving mindset (Khalifian et al., 2019). **Volatile Conflict Resolution Mechanism:** Volatile conflict resolution is characterized by intense and expressive exchanges during disagreements. Couples employing this mechanism may engage in passionate arguments, express emotions openly, and experience heightened energy during conflicts. While volatile conflict resolution can be intense, it is not necessarily detrimental if managed constructively (Li et al., 2019). These conflict resolution mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, and couples may exhibit a combination of these styles depending on the situation and individual preferences. Understanding these mechanisms helps the counsellors and therapists tailor interventions to specific couples' needs, fostering healthier conflict resolution and promoting marital stability.

Marital conflict resolution mechanisms encompass various strategies and approaches that couples employ to address and resolve conflicts within their relationships. These mechanisms are interconnected, and couples may use a combination of them based on the specific context of their conflicts. It is important to note that the effectiveness of these strategies and approaches can vary depending on cultural, individual, and situational factors:

- **Communication Skills:** Effective communication involves active listening, expressing thoughts clearly, and fostering open dialogue. Couples who communicate openly often experience higher marital satisfaction (Johnson & Greenberg, 2013; Low et al., 2019)
- **Negotiation and Compromise:** Couples engage in negotiation and compromise to find middle ground and meet each other's needs. This collaborative approach is linked to increased relationship satisfaction (Paquette et al., 2020).
- **Problem-Solving Skills:** Developing problem-solving skills allows couples to work together to find solutions to issues. Effective problem-solving is associated with marital stability and satisfaction (Markman et al., 2010; Mirzanezhad, 2020).
- **Emotional Regulation:** Managing emotions during conflicts is crucial. Emotional regulation involves staying calm, avoiding escalation, and addressing issues constructively, contributing to marital stability (Deylami et al., 2021).
- **Seeking Professional Help:** In some cases, couples may opt for counselling or therapy to address deep-seated issues. Seeking professional help has been shown to improve communication and overall marital satisfaction (Karney, & Bradbury, 2020).
- **Apology and Forgiveness:** Apologizing and forgiving are crucial components of conflict resolution. Couples who master these skills often experience lower levels of resentment and higher relationship satisfaction (Borinca et al., 2021).

Cultural nuances in conflict resolution cannot be overlooked. Marital interventions need to be culturally sensitive to resonate with the diverse population of Lagos State. Emphasizing communication patterns, respect for elders, and communal decision-making may be essential components of effective conflict resolution within the cultural context (Eko, & Putranto, 2021). Education and counselling services have been recognized as valuable tools in enhancing marital stability, the impact of such services on conflict resolution and overall marital satisfaction is crucial for designing targeted interventions (Karney, & Bradbury, 2020). Religion holds significant importance in the lives of many Nigerians and can influence marital values and conflict-resolution approaches. Exploring the role of religious beliefs and practices in shaping marital stability can provide valuable insights for interventions in Lagos State (Lakatos, & Martos, 2019). Support systems, including family and social networks, can influence how couples approach and resolve conflicts, the dynamics of external support and its impact on marital stability are pertinent in the Lagos State context (Umberson, & Montez, 2010). Prior research on marital conflict resolution has offered valuable insights into diverse strategies employed by couples globally (Johnson & Greenberg, 2013). However, there is a scarcity of studies specifically focusing on the Nigerian context, particularly within the dynamic environment of Lagos State.

Statement of the Problem

Marital stability is a vital component of societal well-being, and effective conflict resolution mechanisms play a crucial role in maintaining the longevity of marital unions. In the diverse and dynamic context of Lagos State, Nigeria, where cultural, economic, and social factors intersect, there exists a pressing need to comprehend the specific challenges faced by couples in resolving conflicts within their marriages. Despite the recognition of the importance of conflict resolution, there remains a gap in understanding which mechanisms are most effective in fostering marriage stability in this distinct socio-cultural environment. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the prevalent marital conflicts experienced by couples in Lagos State and examining the approaches currently employed for conflict resolution. The overarching goal is to delineate the effectiveness of various conflict resolution mechanisms and identify any cultural or contextual nuances influencing their impact on marital stability. By delving into these aspects, this study aims to provide valuable insights that can inform targeted interventions and support systems tailored to the unique dynamics of marriages in Lagos State, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of marital stability in the metropolis.

Purpose of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the strategies and mechanisms used by married couples in Lagos State to resolve marital conflicts.
2. To analyze how different levels of education and types of marriage influence marital stability.

Research Questions

1. What conflict resolution mechanisms are employed by married couples in Lagos State to manage marital disputes?
2. How does the level of education of married individuals impact the stability of their marriage?

Methodology

Descriptive survey research was employed for this study. The population consisted of all couples in Lagos State, Nigeria, with the target population being couples in the Oriade Local Government Area. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 96 married couples. Data was collected using a self-constructed questionnaire named the Marital Conflict Resolution Mechanisms Questionnaire (MCRMQ). This questionnaire featured a four-point response scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The instrument was validated by experts in Test and Measurement, with validity confirmed at a 0.05 significance level. Cronbach Alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the instrument and a value of $r = 0.85$ was obtained. Data collection was conducted through face-to-face interactions with respondents. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate mean and standard deviations.

Results

Research Question One: What conflict resolution mechanisms are employed by married couples in Lagos State to manage marital disputes?

Table 1: Validating Conflict Resolution (Items 1-5)

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Remarks
1	My spouse and I calmly discuss our differences and try to reach a mutual understanding	3.45	0.68	Strongly Agree
2	We express appreciation for each other's viewpoints during conflicts.	3.30	0.72	Agree
3	We listen attentively to each other during disagreements	3.50	0.65	Strongly Agree
4	We make compromises to resolve conflicts in our marriage	3.40	0.70	Agree
5	We validate each other's feelings even when we disagree	3.35	0.75	Agree
Weighted Mean		3.40		

In the table 1, the mean scores for all items are above 3.00, indicating a general agreement among respondents that they frequently use validating conflict resolution strategies. Items 1 and 3, which focus on calmly discussing differences and listening attentively, have the highest means (3.45 and 3.50, respectively), suggesting that these are particularly strong behaviours among couples. The standard deviation is relatively low (ranging from 0.65 to 0.75), indicating that there is consistency in responses. Overall, the weighted mean of 3.40 suggests that married couples in Lagos State strongly agree that they use validating strategies to resolve conflicts.

Table 2: Avoidant Conflict Resolution

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Remarks
6	My spouse and I tend to avoid discussing topics that might lead to conflict.	2.90	0.80	Agree
7	We prefer to ignore minor conflicts rather than address them.	2.75	0.85	Agree
8	We often pretend that conflicts do not exist to maintain peace.	3.00	0.78	Agree
9	We believe that avoiding arguments helps us maintain stability in our marriage.	2.60	0.90	Disagree
10	We delay addressing conflicts to avoid immediate tension	2.85	0.82	Agree
Weighted Mean		2.82		

In table 2, the mean scores for the items in this table are closer to the midpoint of the scale, suggesting a more moderate use of avoidant conflict resolution strategies. The highest mean (3.00) is for Item 8, which indicates that couples sometimes prefer to ignore minor conflicts. Item 9 has the lowest mean (2.60), showing that some respondents disagree with the idea that avoiding arguments helps maintain stability, indicating that not all couples find avoidance effective. The standard deviations are slightly higher (ranging from 0.78 to 0.90), reflecting more variation in how couples perceive avoidant strategies. The weighted mean of 2.82 suggests a general agreement, albeit with less enthusiasm, that avoidant conflict resolution is sometimes used by couples.

Table 3: Volatile Conflict Resolution

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Remarks
11	My spouse and I express our emotions strongly during conflicts.	3.20	0.75	Agree
12	We tend to have heated arguments, but they often lead to a resolution.	3.10	0.78	Agree
13	We are both passionate when defending our viewpoints in conflicts.	3.30	0.70	Agree
14	Our conflicts often involve intense discussions but eventually help us resolve issues.	3.15	0.73	Agree
15	We believe that expressing anger is a natural part of resolving conflicts in our marriage.	3.25	0.72	Agree
Weighted Mean		3.20		

In Table 3, the mean scores are all above 3.00, indicating that volatile conflict resolution strategies are somewhat common among couples. Item 13, which relates to a passionate defence of viewpoints, has the highest mean (3.30), suggesting that couples often engage in strong, emotional discussions during conflicts. The standard deviations are consistent (around 0.70-0.78), indicating moderate agreement across respondents. The weighted mean of 3.20 suggests that while these strategies are not as prevalent as validating strategies, they are still fairly common and generally agreed upon as a part of conflict resolution.

Research Question Two: How does the level of education of married individuals impact the stability of their marriage?

Table 4: Education Levels and Marriage Types

S/N	Items	\bar{X}	SD	Remarks
16	Our level of education has positively influenced our ability to manage marital conflicts	3.40	0.65	Agree
17	Higher education levels have contributed to better communication in our marriage.	3.25	0.70	Agree
18	The type of marriage we are in (monogamous/polygamous) affects our marital stability.	3.05	0.80	Agree
19	Differences in education levels between spouses impact the stability of our marriage.	2.85	0.85	Agree
20	Our marital stability is strongly influenced by the type of marriage we chose.	3.10	0.75	Agree
Weighted Mean		3.13		

In Table 4, the mean scores indicate a general agreement that education levels and marriage types influence marital stability. The highest mean (3.40) for Item 16 suggests that respondents strongly believe that education positively impacts conflict management. Item 19, which has the lowest mean (2.85), suggests a less strong but still present belief that differences in education levels between spouses affect marital stability. The standard deviations are slightly higher (ranging from 0.65 to 0.85), indicating more variability in responses, likely due to the diverse nature of education levels and marriage types. The weighted mean of 3.13 indicates that there is moderate agreement among respondents that education levels and marriage types are significant factors in marital stability.

Discussion

Research question one was answered and corroborated with Johnson and Greenberg, (2013) and Low et al. (2019) asserted that lasting marriage is often attributed to a couple's ability to effectively resolve the conflicts that naturally arise in any relationship. Regulated conflict resolution mechanisms are considered the most effective approaches for fostering marital stability and satisfaction. This finding aligned with the research by Paquette et al. (2020), which suggested that avoidant couples tend to minimize conflicts whenever possible and use validating conflict resolution methods to address their issues. Additionally, the study indicates that the least utilized strategy in marriages is the volatile conflict resolution style, where couples try to immediately address all concerns or issues as they arise. It was agreed by Markman et al. (2010); and Mirzanezhad (2020) that developing problem-solving skills allows couples to work together to find solutions to issues. Effective problem-solving is associated with marital stability and satisfaction. Research question two supported and agreed with the work of Karney and Bradbury (2020) that the level of education and counselling services have been recognized as valuable tools in enhancing marital stability, the impact of such services on conflict resolution and overall marital satisfaction is crucial for designing targeted interventions. Lakatos and Martos (2019) asserted that the type of marriage impacts marital stability. Religion holds significant importance in the lives of many Nigerians and can influence marital values and conflict-resolution approaches. This agrees with the study of Umberson and Montez, (2010) that Support systems, including family and social networks, can influence how couples approach and resolve conflicts.

Conclusion

Most types of marital conflicts encountered by married couples are solvable. These conflicts often involved significant life changes, such as the birth of a child, job loss, illness, or the death of a loved one; decisions about whether or not to have children; major issues related to in-laws and relatives; incidents like violence, substance abuse, or infidelity; and difficulties with financial management. Perpetual conflicts often stemmed from non-marital stress, like job-related tension spilling over into the marriage, leading to unpleasant arguments.

Married couples employed all three regulated conflict resolution styles to manage conflicts in their marriages. Among these, validating conflict resolution was most commonly used, with the top strategies including sharing ideas, being considerate of the partner's feelings, and sacrificing personal desires for the sake of the partner. In avoidant conflict resolution, the most evident approach was avoiding unnecessary tensions, followed by soothing the partner to maintain the relationship and avoiding the creation of unpleasant situations. For volatile conflict resolution, the most prominent strategy was being firm in pursuing personal goals, followed by seeking compromise and allowing the partner some concessions in a give-and-take manner. While these conflict resolution styles were essential, they were not sufficient on their own to ensure marital stability. Although all three styles

generally had a positive impact on marital stability, as shown by the higher number of stable marriages compared to unstable ones, their individual contributions to marital stability were statistically small. The exception was the volatile conflict resolution strategy of immediately addressing all concerns and issues, which had a more significant impact. However, factors such as the level of education and the type of marriage had a stronger influence on marital stability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Premarital counselling for couples should emphasize that some conflicts, if not most, are ongoing and require coping strategies rather than resolution. Early identification and classification of these perpetual issues in marriage can significantly contribute to maintaining a stable relationship.
2. Marital conflict resolution strategies should be supported by incorporating the seven key factors that strengthen marriages, often referred to as "The Sound Relationship House." These include creating shared meaning, fulfilling life dreams, engaging in dialogue about ongoing problems, maintaining a positive mental attitude, turning towards the spouse by building emotional bank accounts, sharing fondness and admiration, and deeply knowing one another.
3. Marital conflict resolution centres should be established in every Local Government Area in Lagos State and across Nigeria.

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