

ROLE OF COUNSELLORS IN MARITAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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Abstract

Marital conflict is a critical matter in many families across the world and specifically in Nigeria. Many families have crumbled and some couples live as if they are strangers in their own home because of persistent and unresolved conflicts. If the situation continues like that without it being effectively managed, the effect could be very devastating to the couple's emotional well-being and mental health; which may also be extended to their children. This paper is intended to give an insight into the concept of marital conflict and the role of counselling in its resolution

Keywords: counsellors, conflict, marital conflict, resolution

Introduction

Marriage is a duration of life union between male and female. It is the oldest institution that has ever existed (Afu & Nteh, 2020). The increasing rate of divorce in the society today justifies the fact that there are conflicts in marital homes (Olaitan, 2023). In the intricate dynamics of human interaction, conflict is both inevitable and natural. Whether it arises in families, workplaces, or interpersonal relationships, conflict can significantly and negatively affect one's mental health and well-being if not managed effectively. It is the poor management of conflicts among couples that has led to the high rate of divorce and separated homes in our society today leading to high percentage of single mothers with its precarious effects on the children. Marriage and the family system are threatened because disharmony sets in when husband and wife disagree on certain goals to achieve resulting to conflicts and confusion between them unless they come to terms on the goal to pursue. Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable in every close relationship including marital relationship. This view is supported by Josiah and Nteh (2022) who posits that in every marriage, degree of conflict is actually necessary to keep the marriage dynamic, rather than static. Marital separation now comes in various forms, accompanied with their own myriad set of problems as individual families have their own particular conflict situations as no two marriages are the same because not all marriages fail for the same one reason, nor is there usually one main reason for the breaking down of marriages. Some marriages are peaceful and relatively

problem-free. However, crises overwhelm many others as findings have revealed that marital conflicts did exist, (Tolorunleke, 2024). There is a myriad of marital problems. They may arise from the premarital stage, to the day of the wedding and subsequent events that follow as the marriage proceeds (Akinade, 2017). As a matter of fact, marriage has been clearly seen as a centre of all human endeavors in recognition of its influence on almost all of human activities. On this note, instabilities and disharmonious experiences in marital life will not only affect the principal agents of marriage (the couple) as it also affects other parts it serves including the children and the larger society. Animasahun (2023) stressed that conflict has a way of adding undesirable outcome on the spouses. The lingering result of marital conflict usually end up in separation and finally the total collapse ‘divorce’ which may be interpreted as liberation but has been viewed by counsellors as a traumatic psychologically difficult condition; as the marriage worsens, sincere, constant and instant moves should be made to remedy it, considering its undesirable consequences on the entire family and the society at large. It is therefore very pertinent that marital conflicts are well resolved among couples so that families could be preserved and children’s mental health protected. This is why the thrust of this article is to explore various causes of marital conflict and various strategies for effective resolution. In this context, the role of counselling in marital conflict resolution has gained prominence, offering techniques and strategies to navigate disputes constructively. This article explores how counselling helps in conflict resolution, especially among married couples.

The concept of Conflict

Conflict is a disagreement or clash between opposing ideas, interests, or forces. Some scholars view conflict as a source of innovation, creativity and development in organization (Ojika, 2024). Reuben (2022) suggested that conflicts are vital for modern organizations as well as inter-personal relationships; they are not only essential to the growth, change and evolution of living systems, but are as well as system’s primary defense against stagnation, detachment, entropy and eventual extinction. Similarly, Aula (2021) argued that conflict is an important force in bringing out the difference among agent’s opinions, logics and worldviews which in turn leads to more creative and novel outcomes. Furthermore, conflict can be both constructive and destructive.

Constructive conflict, which is also known as functional conflict is said to occur when an individual (like husband or wife) has or exhibits respect for other individuals friendly and palatable alongside reproachful and challenging viewpoints, ideas, beliefs, and assumptions, even when such viewpoints stir division or disagreement among the personnel in the organizations, systems, families or groups (Adeyemi & Ademila, 2015). In addition, the tenets of functional or constructive conflict are considered useful for the family as it makes the family dynamic as couples learn from each other.

Destructive conflict (otherwise dysfunctional conflict) on the other hand is thought to increase dissatisfaction and decrease the affective wellbeing of the parties involved. In view of this, it is discouraged in families due to its propensity to damage the attainment of harmonious

working relationship among couples and other members of the family. Obviously, conflict is a part of human consciousness in all aspects of life. One cannot avoid conflict whether at home, on the road at the workplace or in organizations.

Marital Conflict

Marital conflict is a phenomenon that destabilizes the couple and disrupt their joy. Animashaun (2023) asserts that it is a profound social problem, sapping couples' energy, compromising their physical and mental health. Marital conflict most times does not end with quarrels and fights; it often leads to separation or divorce if not resolved well and on time. Marital conflict is not just a difference of opinion; rather, it is a series of events that have been poorly handled that have deeply damaged the marriage relationship. Marriage issues have escalated to such an extent that stubbornness, pride, anger, hurt and bitterness prevent effective marriage communication. Almost all serious marital discord is rooted in the selfishness of one or both parties. Saving a marriage means rejecting selfishness, abandoning ego, forgiving hurt, and letting go of bitterness. Marriage is a relationship where trust is built over time as committed couples put their own interests aside for the well-being of their partner and develop the skills to keep the relationship positive and open.

Conflict Resolution Strategies

Conflict resolution according to Umana (2019) involves implementation of strategies to limit the negative aspects of conflicts and increase the positive aspects of conflict. The aim of conflict management is to enhance peaceful coexistence; it is not concerned with eliminating all conflicts or avoiding conflict entirely. Rahim (2021) says that conflict resolution strategy is conceptualized as the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution. He added that committed group members attempt to resolve group conflicts by actively communicating information about their conflicting motives or ideologies to each other (e.g., intentions; reasons for holding certain beliefs) and by engaging in collective negotiation. The following are some conflict resolution strategies according to Umana (2019):

Accommodating Strategy: The accommodating strategy essentially entails giving the opposing side what it wants. The use of accommodation often occurs when one of the parties wishes to keep the peace or perceives the issue as minor. Accommodating or harmonizing, is viewed as the peacekeeper mode as it focuses more on preserving relationships than on achieving a personal goal or result. However, in a dispute this creates a lose/win relationship where the accommodating party may make a choice to acquiesce to the needs of the other, sometimes out of kindness and sometimes to avoid conflict or stress. "Giving in" and letting the other person "take" is the result when this choice is made. While this may be seen as a weak or non-productive position there are situations when this approach is preferable and will gain more for a person than by taking a strong position. It can be both a productive and unproductive strategy in the give and take process (Ibeh, Obidoa & Okere, 2018). Accommodating involves minimizing or suppressing

real or perceived differences while focusing on the other's views of the situation. According to Momanyi and Juma (2016), a person using accommodating style of conflict resolution tends to be co-operative but assertive. They agree to the wishes of others, smoothing over or overlooking differences to maintain harmony. Accommodation results in a lose-win solution and a good relationship between parties are created. This relationship is created when people appeal for co-operation and try to reduce tension and stress by offering reassurance and support for the other person's views.

Avoiding Strategy: The avoidance strategy seeks to put off conflict indefinitely. By delaying or ignoring the conflict, the avoider hopes the problem resolves itself without a confrontation. Those who actively avoid conflict frequently have low esteem or hold a position of low power. In some circumstances, avoidance strategy can serve as a profitable conflict management strategy.

Collaborating Strategy: Collaboration works by integrating ideas set out by multiple people. The object is to find a creative solution acceptable to everyone. Collaboration, though useful, calls for a significant time commitment not appropriate to all conflicts, (Umana, 2019).

Compromising Strategy: Conflict resolution is a vital aspect of maintaining harmony and efficiency in various domains, from personal relationships to international diplomacy. Among the myriad strategies employed, the compromise strategy stands out as a pragmatic method that seeks a middle ground between conflicting parties. The compromising strategy typically calls for both sides of a conflict to give up elements of their position in order to establish an acceptable, if not agreeable, solution. This approach involves each party making concessions to reach a mutually acceptable solution, emphasizing flexibility and mutual benefit (Cheta-Maclean, 2023). The essence of compromise lies in its ability to integrate diverse perspectives and needs into a balanced resolution. It is predicated on the principle of give-and-take, where each party relinquishes certain demands to achieve a workable solution (Ololube, 2024). This strategy is particularly effective in scenarios where couples have competing interests but no party holds a decisive advantage or is willing to accept a win-lose outcome. One significant advantage of the compromise strategy is its capacity to foster cooperation and preserve relationships. Unlike adversarial approaches that may exacerbate hostilities, compromise promotes a spirit of collaboration and respect. According to Ololube (2024), compromise allows parties to address their core interests while maintaining a level of goodwill. This is crucial in ongoing relationships, as it helps to build trust and prevent future conflicts. However, compromise is not without its limitations. It may sometimes result in suboptimal solutions where neither party's needs are fully met, potentially leading to dissatisfaction or future grievances (Cheta-Maclean & Tobins, 2023). This is particularly relevant in high-stakes conflicts where the stakes are too high for the parties to accept less-than-ideal outcomes. In such cases, compromise may be seen as a temporary fix rather than a comprehensive solution. Despite these limitations, the compromise strategy remains a valuable tool in conflict resolution. Its effectiveness often depends on the willingness of the parties involved to engage in honest dialogue and demonstrate flexibility. In summary, the

compromise strategy is a practical approach to conflict resolution that emphasizes flexibility, cooperation, and mutual concession. While it may not always provide a perfect solution, it facilitates the resolution of conflicts by integrating diverse perspectives and preserving relationships. As Ololube (2024) asserted, compromise, when approached with a spirit of goodwill and open communication, can effectively address conflicts and lead to sustainable resolutions.

Competing Strategy: Competing strategy is characterized by a win-lose orientation where one party seeks to prevail at the expense of the other. This approach, while often perceived as aggressive, can be effective in specific contexts where decisive action is needed. The competing strategy also referred to as a competing or forcing approach, involves one party asserting its position with the goal of achieving its objectives regardless of the other party's interests (Ololube, 2024). It is commonly used in situations where the stakes are high, and a quick resolution is necessary. This strategy can be particularly effective in emergencies or when a firm stance is required to uphold important principles or ensure compliance with rules and regulations (Cheta-Maclean, 2023). One of the primary strengths of the competing strategy is its ability to achieve immediate and clear results. In scenarios where there is no room for compromise or where a firm decision is required. However, the competing strategy also has its drawbacks. Its win-lose nature can lead to heightened tensions and damage relationships, particularly if the approach is perceived as unfair or overly aggressive. The adversarial nature of this strategy can exacerbate conflict and lead to long-term resentment or retaliation (Ololube, 2024). Furthermore, it may not be suitable in collaborative environments where maintaining positive relationships is crucial for ongoing cooperation and success. The effectiveness of the competing strategy often depends on the context and the nature of the conflict. In situations where power dynamics favor one party, or where the resolution of the conflict is critical to achieving strategic objectives, competing may be the most appropriate approach. For instance, in high-stakes negotiations where the parties have fundamentally opposing goals, a competing strategy may ensure that one party's interests are fully protected (Cheta-Maclean & Tobins, 2023). According to Onyekwere (2024), the competing strategy is a method of conflict resolution that focuses on achieving one's own objectives at the expense of the other party. While it can be effective in certain situations requiring decisive action or when quick results are needed, it also carries the risk of damaging relationships and exacerbating conflict.

Literature Review on the Causes of Marital Conflicts

Marriage as earlier said, is the oldest institution in which a man and a woman live their lives together. It is a union that brings people from different background, personalities, walk of life, ethnic group and educational exposure. These differences give room for conflict among couples. Moji, Ijoyah and Ijoyah (2015) specifically mentioned that the differences among individuals make conflict inevitable. Conflict is therefore not avoidable between couples because as couples

express their needs and desires to each other it might lead to disagreement. Ohiseghame (2021) sees conflict as an inevitable process in marital relationship and at the core of conflict in marriage is opposing needs and interest of couples. Most couples who visit counselling centres emphasize that their major problem is conflict (Boostanipoor & Zaker, 2016). Marital conflict occurs when a husband and wife struggle or have a clash as a result of the pursuit of different goals or needs (Agboola, 2018). Ohiseghame (2021) stated that what usually precedes conflict is when a partner perceives that the other has frustrated some of his or her concerns. Navindia, (2024) opined that when people get into marriage, it is with the intention of “till death do us part” but circumstances such as dispute over money, expectations, sexual intimacy, children as well as dealing with in-laws create conditions for conflict and this may have negative consequence on the quality of the relationship when conflicts are not properly managed.

Consequently, a number of issues can result into conflict between couples. Afu and Nteh (2020) stated that families are faced with lots of conflict-inducing challenges like the dwindling financial capacity thrown up by socioeconomic factors like poverty, unemployment and pressure from family and friends. Tolorunke, (2024) discovered from her study in Ijumu that marital conflict was as a result of socio-economic issues, lack of partners ability to fulfil each other’s sexual needs and inability to meet basic needs of the family. Papp, Cummings and Goeke-Morey (2021) discovered that conflicts over money were more likely to be a continuous source of conflict. Amadi and Amadi (2014) in their work itemized the following as the causes of marital conflict: social incompatibility of spouses, sexual incompatibility, extreme sexual orientation, extramarital affairs, dealing with relations and in-laws, lack of respect for each other, dishonesty and moral decadence, negligent behaviour of spouses, poor communication and unwholesome social behavior. These authors stated that about 80% of their respondent agreed that sex was a major source of conflict and that the problem is that one spouse is not getting enough sex or not satisfied because couples have different sexual desires. Particularly, Dilon (2015), suggest that initiation of sex by husband and rejection of this gesture could be a source of conflict. Afu and Nteh (2020) found from their study that upbringing of children, childlessness, lack of financial stability and differences in religions were factors causing conflict between spouses in Benue. However, the results from the research by Asadi, Sadegh, Taghdisi, Zamani-Alavijeh, Shojaeizadeh and Khoshdel (2016) showed that when husbands in their sample were in unfavourable conditions they use derogatory words on their wives especially wives who request for a better life. Hence these authors found out that the use of negative words is a source of conflict. This is also consistent with the findings of Dilon (2015) who found out that negative communication, which is characterized by aggression and contention increased couples’ dissatisfaction and is as well a predictor of divorce.

Apart from these, Asadi et. al (2016) also found that different opinions and perception about issues, was a potential source of marital conflict. Pap et al (2019) found out from their study that one of the topics mostly discussed that causes marital conflict is issues about children. Obelenienè

and Gabševičienė (2015) emphatically stated that children's education is one of the most pervasive sources of spousal conflict. These authors found out from their study that major causes of conflict among spouses were disparity in opinion, interests, lack of material needs, immaturity of spouses, and lack of good communication, respect and attention. It is therefore pertinent to note that the causes of marital conflict include but not limited to: money, expectations, sexual intimacy, children up-bringing, extended family interference, extramarital affairs, lack of respect, religious beliefs, communication breakdowns, gender roles and derogatory words.

Counsellors' Roles in Marital Conflict Resolution

A counselor is defined as a professional, skilled in the act of assisting individuals to set and achieve feasible goals to cope with problems of living, and to grow by a process of identifying and mobilizing their personal and environmental resources Ekennia (2018). Counsellors in this regard are educators with perfected skills, knowledge and personality which distinguish them from the rest of the population.

Counsellors play a pivotal role in resolving marital conflicts by serving as neutral third parties who facilitate safe and open communication among couples. Their influence is vital, especially in high-stress situations where emotions can run high. They help couples identify the root causes of their conflicts, guiding clients through a structured process that includes assessment, goal setting, and exploring various conflict resolution techniques. Counselling sessions typically begin with an emphasis on active listening. This technique ensures that all parties feel heard and understood, creating an environment conducive for resolution. By employing skills such as empathy and negotiation, counsellors empower clients to express their feelings and perspectives clearly. This approach fosters mutual understanding, which is often the first step toward resolving marital conflicts.

Counselling Techniques in Marital Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution counselling employs various techniques that facilitate effective communication and understanding among the couples involved and according to Navindia, (2024), they are as follows:

1. **Mindfulness:** this technique or method helps couples maintain calmness during disputes, allowing them to approach conflicts with a clearer mind. It encourages participants to pause and reflect, reducing emotional reactivity and fostering a more constructive dialogue.
2. **Active listening:** this involves fully concentrating on what the other party is saying, showing respect and building trust. Key components include non-interruption and reflective listening, where the counselor paraphrases or summarizes what has been said. This practice ensures all parties feel heard and understood, which is vital for resolving issues amicably.
3. **The 'win-win waltz' model:** this is a structured approach used in conflict resolution therapy. This model encourages spouses to express their initial positions and then explore the

underlying concerns that fuel the conflict. This collaborative framework helps in creating a mutually agreed-upon resolution plan, fostering an environment where understanding and compromise are prioritized.

4. **Assertive Communication and 'I' Statements:** In practice, using assertive communication and 'I' statements plays a critical role in reducing defensiveness and promoting dialogue. By focusing on the issue at hand and steering clear of personal blame, spouses can work towards a resolution that respects each other's needs. These methods collectively enhance communication, develop emotional awareness, and encourage profound understanding, all of which are crucial for resolving marital conflicts effectively.

The overarching goal of conflict resolution counselling is not just to settle disputes but to strengthen relationships and enhance emotional well-being. Ultimately, these interactions contribute to personal growth and improved communication skills, laying the groundwork for healthier interactions in the future.

How Counselling Techniques Help in Conflict Resolution

Counselling techniques play a crucial role in conflict resolution by enhancing communication and promoting understanding between disputing individuals. One of the essential skills counsellors teach is focusing on the issue at hand rather than making it personal. This shift helps maintain a respectful dialogue, reducing the likelihood of escalation during discussions. Techniques such as reflective listening, where individuals paraphrase or summarize what they hear, ensure that participants feel heard and understood. This fosters a constructive exchange and builds empathy, a foundational element for resolving conflicts. In addition, utilizing "I" statements allows individuals to express their thoughts and feelings without placing blame, which further diminishes defensiveness. Counsellors also stress the importance of timing during discussions. Engaging in conversations when individuals are calm instead of in high-stress situations leads to more fruitful interactions. Establishing ground rules for dialogue creates a safe environment for addressing conflicts without interruptions or harsh critiques. Additionally, understanding personal dynamics, potentially with psychological instruments, can help illuminate underlying issues that may contribute to conflicts. These techniques do not only enhance the effectiveness of conflict resolution efforts but also contribute to developing stronger and more resilient relationships among individuals involved in disputes. The impact of these counselling techniques extends beyond immediate conflict resolution. By promoting effective communication and emotional regulation, participants can resolve their disputes peacefully and learn valuable skills for the future. With a focus on understanding and collaboration, these strategies help create an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Consistent application of these techniques leads to enhanced problem-solving abilities and improved interpersonal dynamics, ultimately reducing stress and fostering personal growth. In environments where conflict is inevitable, such as workplaces and families, these skills become crucial for maintaining healthy relationships and enhancing overall emotional well-being.

Conclusion

All relationships including marriages hit speed bumps at one time or the other. Sometimes arguments over small things just keep creeping in, and it feels like one is stuck in a loop. These aren't just isolated incidents or quirks we need to brush off; they're recurring relationship conflicts that often stem from misunderstandings or unmet needs. They can wear down the strongest bonds, leaving the couples involved feeling frustrated and disconnected.

Professional help offers a path to navigate these rough patches, and this is where counselling comes in. Counselling provides tools to understand each other better and improve communication. It's about finding ways to address the ongoing issues without letting them spiral into larger problems. With guidance from a counsellor, couples can discover new ways to connect and build a stronger partnership over time. Counselling plays an integral role in marital conflict resolution by equipping couples with the tools and skills necessary to navigate disputes effectively. Through techniques such as active listening, empathy building, and structured communication, counsellors help individuals and groups manage conflicts in ways that strengthen relationships and enhance emotional well-being. These approaches not only promote understanding and cooperation but are also pivotal in preventing conflicts from escalating into more serious disputes. It is therefore recommended that spouses having conflicts should seek the services of a counsellor who would use some effective strategies and techniques to help them resolve their conflict amicably so as to avoid divorce and its resultant effects.

Suggestions

In this context, the following are recommended for couples to avoid future marital conflicts:

- ◆ Couples should endeavour to foster open communication. Having a communication without a biased mind may help the couple communicate effectively without finding faults.
- ◆ While having a conversation, they should encourage active listening instead of talking much which may lead to heated arguments. Active listening aids one to understand one's partner's viewpoint by listening without interrupting.
- ◆ Couples should try as much as possible to regulate their emotions such as taking constructive timeouts to avoid escalations.
- ◆ Couples should expunge the passion and desire to win all arguments because one may win an argument but lose the heart of one's partner.

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