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# CONFLICT AMONG COUPLES IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*The study investigated the effectiveness of marital counselling in resolving conflict among couples in Abia State. Quasi-experimental design was adopted for the study. The sample was 100 spouses. 50 spouses consisting of 25 males and 25 females were assigned to experimental group (treatment) while 50 spouses consisting of 25 males and 25 females were assigned to the control group. Conflict Resolution Questionnaire (CRQ) was used to elicit responses from the respondents. The instrument was trial tested using 20 couples and the results analyzed using Cronbach Alpha Coefficient which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.79. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation to answer the research question, while Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. The findings of the study revealed that marital counselling had significant effect on couples' conflict resolution. The study recommended that: Spouses should be encouraged to exercise patience to avoid conflict, given that conflicts in marriage are inevitable, but they can be minimized through tolerance and accommodative spirit.*

**Keywords:** Couples, Resolving Conflict, Marital Counselling

*Effectiveness of Marital Counselling in Resolving Conflict Among Couples in Abia State, Nigeria* **251**

## Introduction

In every family, conflict is inevitable. Conflict resolution refers to the ability of couple to tolerate each other when they differ in their opinions. Despite the disagreement in their opinions, they are expected to be patient and accommodate one another for their common good. Many families today hardly manage marital conflicts. This has caused some setback probably as a result of lack of marital counselling. Marital counselling is expected to help the troubled couples to resolve their conflicts amicably. Gottman (2020) posited that no matter how hard two people try to love and please each other, they might fail. Their failure can lead to hurting their relationship. The only ultimate relief for hurt is the soothing salve of forgiveness. This can be done or achieved through marital counselling. Partners with fewer areas of difference and incompatibility may have more successful relationships. Most people would answer true, but this is at least a partial misconception. All couples have areas of difference and incompatibility to greater and lesser degrees. (Baucom, Shoham, Mueseer, Daiuto & Stickle, 2023).

Everyone knows that opposite attracts which simply means that people are often drawn to those who are different from them. Differences can be very interesting and stimulating in one's partner. People seek partners who can complement their style with some of their strengths. The socially active partner brings something valuable to a relationship with the partner whose interests are more domestic and vice versa. Bradbury, Rogge and Lawrence (2021) are of the opinion that differences are not so conflictual in the early stages of relationships. So, couples do not pay that much attention to them. Couples focus on similarities, as they are absorbed in getting to know each other. They may be very excited and enthralled by some of their differences as well as their commonalities. As relationships progress, similarities become more familiar and less novel. When the couple moves into practical relationship tasks like advancing their careers, starting and raising a family, and managing finances become more apparent and prominent. Sex, finances and chores are the most common focal areas of conflict, although more important differences often lie elsewhere. Bradbury et al. (2021) further informed that couples with more differences have different styles of marriage than couples that are more similar in outlook. But they can be just as happy or even happier. Couples who have a successful 'volatile' relationship style can tolerate more areas of difference. Their conflicts just seem to offer more opportunity to kiss and make up. At the other end of the spectrum are successful 'avoidant' couples. They know what areas to steer clear off with their partner and accept this arrangement. But avoidance only works well when differences are not too critical and there are large areas of common ground. What is important is not so much the degree or type of difference. It is how couples manage their areas of difference and incompatibility and whether their relationship style is appropriate for the degree and type of differences and similarities that they have. It is especially important that they take advantage of their areas of similarity to maintain a positive emotional tone. Couples must avoid becoming stuck in trying to convert their partners to adopt their view point (Finchman, & Beach, 2024).

If couples allow differences to disrupt the sense of mutuality in a relationship, it may lead to

disinvestments or lives that are too separate, that is big trouble. When couples split up, they often

attribute it to overwhelming incompatibility. They become overwhelmed by their differences, not just because they have them, but because they never learned to manage them constructively. Many couples are blindsided by their differences as their relationship advances beyond the more exclusively romantic early stages, because they never systematically explored their expectations and differences and adopted strategies to accommodate them. Couples who understand, prepare and plan for their areas of incompatibility are less disconcerted and generally fare better. They may have more realistic expectations and know what they are signing on for.

In the long run, the challenge of difference will be an impetus to growth in both partners. Learning to support and validate yourself independently will help you to manage more successfully to your relationship's areas of difference and incompatibility, especially when these lead to conflict. Of course, we all rely on our partner for emotional support. It is one of the best things about being in a relationship. The time we need support the most is when we are in conflict with our partner. And when one can't get support from them. This can magnify the distress: not only ones in a stressful conflict, but one is also deprived of principal sources of support. No wonder one can feel so disappointed and angry when these conflicts arise. This deprivation is typically more acute for men, since they often rely more exclusively on their partner for their emotional support system. Women's support systems tend to be more diverse. If couples know about this dynamic and expect it, they will be better equipped to turn it into an opportunity for growth (Fincham & Beach, 2024).

Budbury et al (2021) further expressed that partners who are less well prepared to support themselves may turn the conflict into a fight or may give in to avoid one. It's very important to the success of a marriage relationship that partners learn to adequately support and validate themselves, so they can deal productively with conflict with their partner without putting aside their own vital needs and interests. Every couple needs a sense of security and a mature perspective to understand themselves well enough to know when to compromise with the partner and when they have to stand their ground. Personal strength and a strong, non-defensive sense of identity help one to tolerate their anxiety while the partner goes through this same process.

The demands of a long-term, committed marriage relationship guide people toward developing these qualities. Few people bring this personal strength to their new marriage fully formed, and it doesn't happen overnight. This is one of the reasons why many marriages go through and brought patch early on while the partners are growing and developing their self-support and self-validation. Marital counselling, according to Rush, Barry, Hertel and Swain (2022), helps couples to understand their areas of similarity and difference, which are to be expected in every relationship. More importantly, it teaches strategy and skill options for managing these in accord with different relationship styles and helps couples to protect the mutuality and positive emotional tone of their relationship. It also guides couples in building a marriage that supports and thrives on their individual strengths and identities.

between the most 'compatible' partners: neatness versus messiness, caution and thrift versus expansiveness and risk-taking, promptness versus tardiness, more versus less sociability, different career demands. It is not very surprising that conflict and control can be one of the most puzzling and difficult aspects of relationship facing many couples. Since all couples-even those who have been happily married for years-have five to seven areas of irresolvable differences, how couples handle and decide whose approach will prevail is critical to marriage success. Managing control issues is one of the principal challenges of married life. Skill-based programmes such as marital counselling can help most couples to understand and control issues and to develop new communications and conflict resolution strategies that can enable them to take a healthy, intentional and constructive approach to conflict. Failure to take a positive, proactive approach to conflict and control can result in all kinds of problems: Frequent conflicts will negatively drive up relationships or conflict may be avoided through compliance or disengagement by one or both partners, depriving the relationship of essential mutuality. Each can put a relationship at a risk over the long run (Bradbury et al, 2021).

This second problem contributes to the most common destructive pattern in male-female relationships: the pursue withdraw syndrome, where one partner (usually the woman) keeps approaching the other about an important need or problem, while the other becomes overloaded and withdraws or superficially complies. The pursuing partner may become more frustrated, which may lead her to increase the pressure, while the withdrawer becomes more overwhelmed by it, and may resort to fight or to escape. Both partners feel caught in a terrible web that just keeps replaying.

Thornton (2022) added that when problems are chronic and entrenched, things may seem to follow the same repeating scripts, which may cause serious trouble. Partners who enter marriage with a need may have their own way on most decisions and, especially those who need to have their partner's agreement on most things, can be heading for trouble in their marriage. Partners who manage conflict always by avoiding or giving-in, are also putting their relationship at risk. When control is a problem, it's usually because one or both partners have difficulty finding the middle ground. In most cases, these tendencies may result from early upbringing of the partner. Parents need to learn to stand up for their needs in a relationship, which means learning to tolerate their own feelings about their partner's reactions. A certain amount of self-support and self-validation is required. Of course, it is when one disagrees that one cannot expect validation to come from his or her partner. So if one doesn't have an alternate source of support, one is more likely to give in too early. A chronic need to be in control and have one's way on most things is often related to underlying insecurities that sometimes have origins deep in one's early childhood experiences. Likewise, always giving in can reflect a different response to similar issues. Paradoxically, for the control oriented person learning to give up some control can be the key to getting more of what we want and need in relationships. If one has difficulty modifying chronic complaints or controlling behaviour, one may find individual counselling helpful in exploring and

resolving underlying insecurities.

Sometimes, one or both partners need to learn to tolerate differences that cannot be resolved easily. This means putting such differences aside for a time, once efforts to arrive at a compromise have been exhausted. Couples cannot always agree on every issue (Orbuch, 2022). It is noted that over the years, instability in families has been on the increase among many families leading to couples either staying apart or outrightly seeking divorce. For many of these cases, such instability may be salvaged if marital counselling services are readily available. The problem may be traced to numerous factors such as control over money, ignorance over sexual relationship, giving birth to only female children, childlessness, polygamy, single parenting, poor communication among others, these factors may lead many families into conflict and make such families to live in sorrow, loneliness, calamity, chaos, anxiety among others which is not healthy for such families, the church and the larger society. Orubo (2022) reported that the people felt the trend is ugly and does damage to the social structure and part of the major problems that threaten the stability and growth of the nation. The society has witnessed a great increase in the rate of separation, divorce, marital dissatisfaction and loss of affection between couples. For instance, in Abia State, Abu (2022) reported that from 2018-2024, 1,243 marriages were dissolved, while 7,264 cases were recorded from 2018-2022 at the Upper Area Court 1 in Umuahia, Abia State. This is why the issue of unstable family has been a thing of concern among families in Abia State. The researcher anticipates that integrating rational emotive behaviour therapy in the treatment plan may enhance academic self-confidence among the students thereby aid in improving academic self-efficacy among in-school adolescent in the study area irrespective of gender. However, the researchers are not aware of any study on effectiveness of counselling in resolving marital conflict in the study area. In the present study, the researcher intends to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of marital counselling in resolving conflict among couples in Abia 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 Abia 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 strategy 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 Abia 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

## **Purpose of the Study**

### **Specifically the objectives of the study was to:**

- ◆ determine the difference in the mean ratings of experimental and control groups on conflict resolution by couples in Abia State.

## **Research Question**

One research question was raised and answered.

- ◆ What is the difference in the mean ratings of experimental and control groups on conflict resolution by couples?

## **Hypothesis**

One hypothesis was formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant difference in mean ratings of couples' conflict resolution between experimental and control groups.

## **Research Method**

The research design adopted for this study was quasi-experimental design based on non-randomized control group, pre-test post-test design also known as nonequivalent control group design. The researchers employed the pre-test and post-test approach because the strategy usually attempts to answer cause-and-effect questions about the relationship between two variables, and the strategy does not produce ambiguous explanations (Ali, 2006).

The population of the study comprised 500,000 (500,000) spouses who are members of Roman Catholic Church in Umuahia and Aba, Abia State. (Catholic Records and Statistics 2024). A sample of one hundred (100) spouses comprising 50 males and 50 females were sampled for the study. One hundred (100) spouses were used for the study because it was difficult to get spouses, even though more spouses were invited and requested to participate in the study as required. Purposive sampling technique through intact group was used to select the respondents who were willing to participate in the training. This type of sampling allows the researcher to state the characteristics or conditions satisfied by subjects for inclusion in the study. These characteristics or conditions were such that the purpose of the study could be accomplished.

Specifically, 50 spouses consisting of 25 males and 25 females were assigned to experimental group (treatment), while 50 spouses consisting of 25 males and 25 females were assigned to the control group (not exposed to treatment). The researchers constructed the instrument titled Conflict Resolution Questionnaire (CRQ). The questionnaire was 30 item instrument divided into two sections. Section A contained personal data of the respondents, while Section B contained effect of marital counselling on conflict resolution. The CRQ was presented on a four-point rating scale type of Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE) and Very Low Extent (VLE) weighing 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively.

*Effectiveness of Marital Counselling in Resolving Conflict Among Couples in Abia State, Nigeria* **256**

The initial draft of CRQ accompanied with the purpose of the study, research question and hypothesis was subjected to face and content validation by three research experts in experts in Guidance and Counselling. The experts examined the items and established the suitability, language construction, coverage, clarity, and relevance of the instrument. The experts' comments,

suggestion and corrections were effected to produce the final draft of the instrument. The reliability estimate of CRQ was established through split half method (Cronbach alpha method). The scores obtained were arranged even and odd members for analysis using Cronbach alpha statistics which yielded a reliability index of 0.79 indicating the usability of the instrument for the present study.

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistical tools of mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. In answering the research questions, the study considered the mean ratings of control and experimental groups on each of the indices of the study to determine the difference in the mean ratings. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypothesis. This was to justify that it removed the effect of intervening variables or stabilize independent variables to the point that their effects cannot be unduly influenced by intervening variables (unwanted variables). It also takes care of lack of equivalence in mean scores of pretest of both experimental and control groups in all the indices of the study.

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) is based on some assumptions, which include the following: Homogeneity of variance, mutual exclusiveness and independence of observation which may in other words be termed as random selection and homogeneity of regression or similarity of slope of the regression lines for each experimental group. Where the observed value was less than the significant (P) value (0.05) the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of the directional alternative hypothesis at 0.05 level of significant and the vice versa.

A description of the marital counselling skills and a methodological outline of the session activities for the group were briefly stated below:

### **Marital Counselling Skills (MCS)**

**Session One:** Initial Counselling Establishment Issues: This session commenced with initial counselling establishment issue of rapport building. The issues of confidentiality, roles and other responsibilities of the counsellor and clients, need to remain in therapy, need to provide essential information required for progress in therapy among others were discussed.

**Session Two:** Goal Setting: This session commenced with motivational activities which were followed with review of their tasks and assignments. The subjects were guided to set goals of general and specific nature.

**Session Three:** Active Listening: This session started with motivational matters followed by the review of the previous sessions' activities; assignments and tasks as well as reinforcing them for their efforts. Adequate feedbacks were provided. It was reviewed and discussed by the researcher and subjects. Subject demonstrating genuine attention to each partner. Using verbal and non-verbal cues

(nodding, eye contact, summarizing). Ensuring each person feels heard and understood.

**Session Four:** Empathy: This therapy session commenced with the motivational issues with the subjects. This was followed by a review on the activities of last session. The tasks and assignment given to the subjects in the last session were reviewed and discussed by the researcher and

subjects. Understanding and validating each partner's emotions without judgment. Reflecting feelings: It sounds like you felt ignored when that happened. Adequate feedback was provided.

**Session Five:** Feedback: This session commenced with verification of their progress report followed with review of their tasks and assignments given to them in the last session such as listening, observation and requesting.

**Session Six:** Rehearsal of Marital Counselling Skills: The session started with the motivational issues of subjects. It was followed by receiving of assignments of previous sessions as well as reinforcements of the efforts of the subjects.

The results obtained are presented as shown:

**Research Question:** What is the difference in the mean ratings of experimental and control groups on conflict resolution by couples?

## Results

**Table 1:** *The Mean Ratings of Experimental and Control Groups on Conflict Resolution by Couples*

| Source of Variation            | Experimental and control groups | Mean         | Std. Deviation | N  |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|----------------|----|
| Conflict resolution by Couples | Experimental group              | 2.4000       | .58414         | 50 |
|                                | Control group                   | 2.3240       | .47102         | 50 |
|                                | <b>Difference</b>               | <b>0.076</b> |                |    |
| Post conflict Resolution       | Experimental group              | 3.5040       | .48190         | 50 |
|                                | Control group                   | 2.8080       | .63111         | 50 |
|                                | <b>Difference</b>               | <b>0.696</b> |                |    |

Table 1 indicated that before the commencement of the treatment, both groups have similar mean on conflict resolution by couples (2.40 & 2.32) with little difference of 0.076. After treatment, experimental group had mean on conflict resolution as 3.50 with standard deviation of .48 while the control group had 2.81 with standard deviation of .63. The mean difference of 0.696 is in favour of the experimental group. This implied that marital counselling was effective on conflict resolution by couples.

**Hypothesis:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of conflict resolution between experimental and control groups.

**Table 2:** *Dependent Variable: Post conflict resolution*

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean | F | Sig |
|--------|-------------------------|----|------|---|-----|
|--------|-------------------------|----|------|---|-----|

|                      |          |     | Squares |         |      |
|----------------------|----------|-----|---------|---------|------|
| Corrected Model      | 12.171a  | 2   | 6.085   | 19.143  | .000 |
| Intercept            | 50.279   | 1   | 50.279  | 158.162 | .000 |
| Pre-conflict resolve | .060     | 1   | .060    | .190    | .664 |
| Group                | 12.171   | 1   | 12.171  | 38.285  | .000 |
| Error                | 30.836   | 97  | .318    |         |      |
| Total                | 1039.040 | 100 |         |         |      |
| Corrected            | 43.006   | 99  |         |         |      |

*R Squared = .283 (Adjusted R Squared = .268)*

Table 2 indicated that  $F = 38.285$ ,  $df = 1$  and  $p = .000$ . With  $p < 0.05$ , the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of conflict resolution between experimental and control groups by couples was rejected. This implied that the difference in the mean rating scores between the experimental group and control group of couples' conflict resolution was significant. The couples in experimental group who were exposed to marital counselling principles obtained high mean scores than the couples in control group who were not exposed to marital counselling principles. This showed that marital counselling had significant effect on conflict resolution by couples.

### Discussion of Findings

The finding of this study is discussed in line with the research question and hypothesis of the study. The study indicated that marital counselling has significant effect on couples conflict resolution in Abia State. This finding corroborates with Tartakovsku (2022) and Lin (2024) that marital counselling helped couples to handle conflicts with the spirit of tolerance thereby resulting to their good mental health. It also revealed that conflict resolution is an important predictor of marital relationship and satisfaction. The reason for this finding could be that the spouses in the experimental group value and utilize the principles gotten from marital counselling such as tolerance, accommodative spirit, knowing and adjusting to differences, pursuing other person for reconciliation, forgiveness and resolution. The spouses were exposed to marital counselling principles or model such as calling partners' attention to discuss together, finding out the actual demand or need, giving necessary attention to partner, assuring partner of true love and answering partners respectfully in public, were sufficient indications of marital counselling models that usually enhance the attitude of conflict resolution among spouses.

### Conclusion

It has been observed in the study area that families have suffered some degrees of conflict resolution. But the present study has established the fact that marital counselling model is

effective in improving conflict resolution in Abia State. It implied that lack of marital counselling is related to family problem in the study area.

### **Recommendation**

Based on the finding of this study, a recommendation is proposed, thus: that spouses should be helped to imbibe the virtue of patience given that conflicts in marriage are inevitable but can be minimized through tolerance and accommodative spirit.

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