

MARITAL CONFLICTS AS CORRELATE OF SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ABIA STATE

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between marital conflicts and social adjustment among senior secondary school students in Abia State, focusing on gender differences, using a correlation survey design and collecting data of 878 students from 8783, through Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ) and Social Adjustment Questionnaire (SAQ). The Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ) and Social Adjustment Questionnaire (SAQ) were validated by experts and tested for reliability, yielding stability coefficients of 0.742 and 0.841, and internal consistency coefficients of 0.676 and 0.773, respectively. Pearson's correlation and linear regression analysis were used for data analysis. The findings showed among others that there is a high positive correlation between marital conflict and social adjustment of senior secondary school students. It equally showed that there was no significant relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment. The study therefore concluded that marital conflicts to a very high extent correlate with the social adjustment of senior secondary school students in Abia State. Based on the findings and conclusion, the study recommended among others that Government and school proprietors should employ and have at least a Psychologist or a school Counsellor to help the students to resolve their social adjustment challenges.

Keywords: Conflict, Marital Conflicts, Social, Adjustment, Senior secondary school students, Gender.

Introduction

Conflict, being a struggle and a clash of interest, opinion or even principles, will always be found among individuals in the society. Its basis may vary from personal, racial, to class, political and societal (Straze, 2025). According to Nicholson (2019), conflict arises when individuals or entities pursue actions that are incompatible with one another, driven by conflicting desires, needs or obligations. This conflict often stems from a disagreement that escalates into active attempts to harm or undermine each other, characterized by hostile or damaging behaviour.

Conflict could manifest in various forms; interpersonal, intergroup and intragroup conflict. Hughes (2017) opines that interpersonal conflict involves social associations, connections, or affiliations between two or more people. Intergroup conflict is between two or more groups, often arising from competition, differing goals, or power struggles. This type of conflict can occur in various settings, including workplaces, organizations and even among secondary school students. Then, intragroup conflict is the disagreements or disputes within a group, where members may have differing opinions or perspectives. Wahlig (2019) maintains that Intragroup conflict is when two or more members of the same team fight against each other. A typical example of intragroup conflict is marital conflict.

Marital conflicts could arise from various issues, including verbal and physical abusiveness, personal characteristics and behaviours, perceived inequality in family responsibilities, differences in opinions and values, unfulfilled expectations and power struggles. For Dibia and Ovute (2013), conflicts in marriages and family are defined as disagreements between marital partners over values, beliefs, goals, norms, and behaviors. Tolorunleke (2014), sees marital conflicts as the state of tension or stress between marital partners as they try to carry out their marital roles. When two people decide to live together as husband and wife, they bring different expectations, hopes, and experiences. Given the complexities of human relationships, it's natural for differences to arise. Marital conflict could have significant effects on family members, particularly children. According to research, witnessing parental conflicts can increase stress levels in children, potentially affecting their academic performance (Hurlock, 2021). Marital conflict arises from a lack of understanding between couples, leading to heated quarrels, violence, separation, or divorce (Margolin, 2017). Ross (2017), defines marital conflict as a source of stress for both partners, potentially leading to severe consequences.

Marital conflict is a complex issue that arises from series of poorly handled events, leading to deep-seated damage in the relationship between husband and wife. In the context of this study, it could be viewed as the ongoing tension or stress that exists between spouses as they navigate the challenges of married life. The study carried out by (Davies, 2014; Zhou & Buehler, 2017) reveals that exposure to marital conflicts can significantly impact children's adjustment, particularly in terms of social adjustments.

The word “social” comes from the Latin word “socius,” which means “friend” or “ally.” This Latin root is also related to the word “sociare,” which means “to associate” or “to unite.” The word “social” has evolved over time to encompass a broad range of meanings related to human interaction, relationships and society. Adjustment is from the word “adjutare” meaning “to bring together” or “to fix.” In the opinion of Straze (2025), adjustment is the condition of a person who is able to adapt to changes in the physical, occupational and social environment. In other words, adjustment refers to the behavioural process of balancing conflicting needs, or needs challenged by obstacles in the environment. It is the process of adapting or modifying something to fit a new situation or requirement (Egyankosh, 2023),

Social adjustment involves adapting to societal norms, expectations, and demands, enabling individuals to live and work harmoniously with others and form satisfying relationships. (Vandenbos, 2015). For those who focus their research on children, Cunningham (2022) sees social adjustment as a broad construct that measures the variety of degrees for which children get along with their peers; degree to which they engage in adaptive, competent social behaviour and the extent to which they inhibit aversive incompetent behaviour. Additionally, social adjustment could be seen as the degree to which one realizes his goals that are approved by the society and it can be estimated in terms of emotional, social, familiar and relational outcomes.

In the opinion of Campbell Psychiatric Dictionary (2019), social adjustment is the adaptation of an individual to his immediate environment. As members of society, we form opinions about others while also being subject to their judgments and perceptions about us, influencing our relationships and self-perception. Secondary school students, like all individuals, desire acceptance and recognition within their social circles, particularly in school, to feel valued, included, and appreciated. Conforming to societal norms to get along with others can be challenging due to the unique personality and characteristics of each individual. Secondary school students also struggle to balance adhering to school norms and regulations with expressing their unique individuality, making adjustment a challenging task. Teachers aim to instil social adjustment skills in students, helping them adapt to school norms, build positive relationships and manage their emotions effectively. Sequel to this, Egyankosh (2013) asserts that social adjustment is a psychological process of adapting to new standards and values, evident when a student effectively copes with school expectations and builds positive relationships with peers. Social adjustment is the continual effort made by an individual to cope with standards, values and needs of a society in order to be accepted (Kuldipkumar, 2019).

Furthermore, research has shown that conflicts between husband and wife negatively affect the social adjustment of senior secondary school students. Dibia and Ajoku (2020) posited that the inability of an adolescent to cope and make adequate adjustment to the new environment as a result of insurgency and marital conflicts often result in maladjustment and delinquent behaviours. Trudys (2016) opines that many symptoms of students’ social maladjustment may be readily observable by watching them in action. Behavioural problems such as delinquent tendencies (theft, truancy, vandalism, smoking, sexual offences, bullying) and personal

unhappiness were fundamentally due to frustration as a result of marital breakdown in the home. Signs of poor social adjustment could include facial expressions of unhappiness, restlessness, hyperactivity, nervous habits like nail biting, daydreaming, truancy, and self-consciousness, indicating potential difficulties in coping with one's environment (Trudys, 2016). A child who feels rejected may become withdrawn or, if they find a friend, become intensely jealous and possessive, wanting their friend's affection all to themselves. Children who experience uncertain emotional responses from their parents often struggle to form genuine attachments and give affection, due to uncertainty about reciprocation. Edem (2021) notes that students from broken homes often exhibit behavioural issues and struggle to adjust to their environment due to the impact of marital breakdown and conflicts. Additionally, some senior secondary school students, struggling to cope with their environment, may turn to substance abuse, including alcohol (beer, wine, rum, whiskey) and hallucinogens (like Indian hemp), as a way to escape their difficulties.

Senior Secondary School Students in Nigeria are those who are typically in their final three years of secondary school, usually around ages 13-19, and are preparing for their final exams, university, college or vocational training, exploring future career options and making informed decisions (Manuel, 2022). They are those students undergoing secondary education. Secondary education according to the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014) as stipulated in National Policy of Education is the type of education students receive after primary education and before the tertiary education.

Research outside Nigeria suggests marital conflicts may disproportionately affect girls more than boys, highlighting the importance of considering gender as a moderating factor. According to Perina (2022), gender is a social construct referring to the characteristics, norms, and roles associated with femininity and masculinity, which can influence how individuals experience and respond to situations like marital conflicts. Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics, norms, behaviours, and roles associated with being male or female, shaping identities and relationships (Straze, 2025). The World Health Organization (2021) notes that gender inequality exposes women and girls to high levels of violence, harmful practices, and social adjustment issues, while also influencing boys and men to engage in risky behaviours and violence. In their social adjustment, girls often face greater barriers than boys in adjusting to their immediate school environment.

Several studies have been conducted on marital conflicts and social adjustment among secondary school students. For instance, Ahmed (2022) carried a study on Student's Social Adjustment and its Relationship to Social Adaptation, at Nazirt region, in the University of Jordan and reported a significant correlation was found between social adjustment and social adaptation. Warda, Abed, Wahab and Shattla (2022) did a study on marital conflicts among parents and its effect on their adolescents' behaviours and found out that there was a highly statistically significant positive correlation between total marital conflict score and total

behavioural score. The study concluded that there was a significant relationship between parents' marital conflict and their adolescents' behaviour. Also, Fani and Fani (2022) carried out a research on The relationship of Parents' marital conflicts with students' life satisfaction and moral judgment development in Qumasi, Iran and the result from the regression analyses indicated a negative and significant relationship of marital conflict with pupils' life satisfaction and moral judgment development.

Statement of the Problem

Senior secondary school students are expected to demonstrate good social adjustment acquired from their parents, reflected in their behaviour, interactions, and decision-making, such as dressing modestly, communicating respectfully, building positive relationships, and avoiding unsafe activities like substance abuse, violence, and bullying. Unfortunately, there has been a public outcry over the rising rate of social maladjustment among secondary school students, particularly in Abia State. The frequency of condemnation surrounding adolescents' behavior is alarming, with issues like violence, kidnapping, murder, drug abuse, rape, and other social vices becoming increasingly prevalent. The prevalence of crime and social vices among secondary school adolescents indicates a lack of social adjustment, posing a significant threat to societal safety and security, as evidenced by rising insecurity, killings, and banditry.

Marital conflicts in homes can contribute to social maladjustment in children, as they may learn and exhibit problematic behaviors. Unresolved conflicts leading to broken homes can further exacerbate this issue, resulting in deep-rooted low social values. It is in line with the afore-mentioned observations that the researcher is motivated to find the extent marital conflicts correlate with social adjustment based on gender among senior secondary school students in Abia State. Previous studies, mostly conducted outside Nigeria or in other parts of the country, to the best of the researcher's knowledge have not adequately addressed social adjustment needs of secondary school students in Abia State. This knowledge gap motivated the researcher to investigate marital conflicts as correlate of social adjustment among senior secondary school students in Abia State, considering gender differences.

Purpose of the Study

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Find out the extent marital conflicts correlate with social adjustment of senior secondary school students in Abia State.
2. Ascertain the relative contributions of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

1. To what extent do marital conflicts correlate with social adjustment of senior secondary school students in Abia State?

2. To what extent does gender relatively contribute to the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

HO₁ There is no significant correlation between marital conflicts and social adjustment of senior secondary school students of Abia State.

HO₂ There is no significant relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlation survey research design. Two research questions and two null hypotheses were used for the study. Multi-stage sampling procedure was used to select the sample size of 878 students from the population of 8783 senior secondary II students in Abia State. Two instruments were used for data collection, namely: Marital Conflict Questionnaire (MCQ) and Social Adjustment Questionnaire (SAQ). The instruments were validated by three experts, two from Psychology and counselling and one from measurement and evaluation departments, all from Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the reliability of the instruments while Cronbach Alpha statistic was used to determine their internal consistency. These yielded 0.841, and 0.742 coefficients for the stability of SAQ, and MCQ respectively as well as 0.773 and 0.676 for internal consistencies of SAQ and MCQ respectively. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to answer the research questions while linear regression analysis was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

The results of the analyses were presented in Tables as follows.

Research Question 1

To what extent do marital conflicts correlate with social adjustment of senior secondary school students in Abia State?

Data for answering research question 1 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation matrix of relationship between marital conflicts and social adjustment

		Marital conflicts	Social adjustment
Marital conflicts	Pearson	1	.855
	Sig (2-tailed)		.012
	N	860	860
	R ²	(0.731) 73%	
Social adjustment	Pearson	.855	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	
	N	860	860

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), N = Number of respondents

The data in Table 1 shows a correlation R of .855 which is positive and within the coefficient limit or range of 0.80 and above indicating strong positive and a very high extent correlation. This result indicates that marital conflicts correlate with social adjustment of senior secondary school students to a very high extent. The coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.731 indicates that 73% of the variance observed in the social adjustment of senior secondary school students was attributed to marital conflicts.

Hypothesis

There is no significant correlation between the marital conflicts and social adjustment of senior secondary school students of Abia State.

Data for testing hypothesis is presented in Table 1

Table 1. Linear regression analysis of correlation between marital conflicts and social adjustment

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	P- value
Regression	2916.447	1	2916.447	938.066	.012
Residual	2670.630	859	3.109		
Total	4787.077	860			

Df = degree of freedom, F = F-calculated, Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Data in Table 1 shows a P-value of .012 which is less than the alpha value of .05. This means that the null hypothesis of no significant correlation was rejected and the alternated upheld. Therefore, there is a significant correlation between the marital conflicts and social adjustment of senior secondary school students of Abia State.

Research question 2

What is the relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and

students' social adjustment?

Data for answering research question 2 are presented in Table 2

Table 2: *Correlation matrix of the relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment*

Source		Male	Female	MCSSA
Male	Pearson correlation	1		.318
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.117*
	N	860		860
	R ²	(.101)		
		10.1%		
Female	Pearson correlation		1	.355
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.122
	N	860		860
	R ²	(.126)		
		12.6%		

*.Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), N = Number of respondents, MCSSA= Marital Conflicts Students, Social Adjustment

The data in Table 2 shows that a correlation R for male students' social adjustment as a result of marital conflicts is .318 which is positive and within the coefficient limit or range of 0.21-40 indicating strong positive and a low extent correlation. This indicates that the social adjustment of male students based on marital conflicts is to a low extent. The coefficient of determination (R²) of .101 indicates that only 10.1 percent of the variance observed in social adjustments of male students was accounted for by marital conflicts. In other words, marital conflicts predicted only 10.1 percent of the social adjustments of the male students. Table 2 also indicated a correlation coefficient (R) for female students' social adjustment as a result of marital conflicts is .355 which is positive and fall within the coefficient limit of $\pm 0.21-0.40$ low extent correlation. This indicates that the social adjustments of female students based on marital conflicts is to a low extent. The coefficient of determination (R²) .126 indicates that only 12.6 percent of the variance observed in social adjustments of female students was accounted for by marital conflicts. This means that marital conflicts predicted only 12.6 percent of the social adjustments of the female students. Therefore, marital conflicts predicted only 10.1% and 12.6% of the social adjustments of the male and female senior secondary schools respectively. In other words, the relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and social adjustment is to a low extent.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment.

Data for testing hypothesis 2 are presented in Table 2

Table 2: Linear regression analysis of the relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment

Model		Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F	P-value
1	Regression	1827.222	1	1827.222	908.614	.120 ^b
	Residual	1727.275	859	2.011		
	Total	3954.497	860			

df= degree of freedom, *F* = *F*-calculated, Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Data in Table 2 shows a P-value of .120 which is greater than the alpha value of .05. This means that the null hypothesis of no significant correlation was not rejected. Therefore, there is no significant relative contributions of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment.

Summary of Findings

The following findings of the study were based on the research questions and hypotheses:

1. Marital conflicts significantly to a very high extent correlate with social adjustment of senior secondary school students.
2. There was no significant relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' moral adjustment.

Discussion

Marital conflicts and social adjustment of senior secondary school students

The results in Table 1 revealed that marital conflicts significantly to a very high extent correlate with social adjustment of senior secondary school students. The results indicated that marital conflicts determine to a very large extent the social adjustment of adolescents of secondary school students. This however implies that students exposed to marital conflicts are likely to have challenges in social adjustment. The results supported Nelma (2016) who maintained that some of the major factors that affect social adjustment of adolescents include varied forms of marital conflicts such as broken homes and parental rejections. In the similar vein, Dibia and Ajoku (2020) added that social adjustment could be as a result of violence and attacks experienced by adolescents on daily basis. The result agreed with Dehkordi (2022) who conducted a study on social adjustment and marital conflicts in primary schools which showed among others that there was a significant relationship between primary school pupils' social adjustment and marital conflicts.

Gender, marital conflicts and social adjustment of senior secondary school students.

The results showed in Table 2 that there were no significant relative contributions of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment. This implies that the gender of the students did not contribute much on the relationship between their social adjustment and marital conflicts. In other words, the marital conflicts which the male and female

students are exposed to, relate to a low extent on how they adjust socially in the school. The result agreed with Davis (2014) who found from his earlier study on constructive and destructive marital conflicts, parenting and children's school and social adjustment that irrespective of the gender of the children, they adjust their behaviours socially. Similarly, the result agreed with Ohiseghame (2021) who in his study on causes and effect of marital conflicts among couples, found among others that the major causes of marital conflict is socio-cultural but is less gender-related. He argued that when there are marital conflicts among couples, every of the children's needs suffers irrespective of their gender.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis carried out and the results of the study it could be concluded that:

1. Marital conflicts significantly to a very high extent correlate with social adjustment of senior secondary school students.
2. There were no significant relative contributions of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' moral adjustment.

Counselling Implications

The findings of the study have some educational implications for Government, Educational Psychologists, Teachers, Parents, students as well as future researchers.

The result of the study showed that Marital conflicts significantly to a very high extent correlate with social adjustment of senior secondary school students. This result implies that some of the noticeable challenges of social adjustment faced by some students was due to issues of marital conflicts in their respective homes which the government can tackle by ensuring that each school should have at least a psychologist or counsellor to work on those set of students.

Since the result showed that there was no significant relative contribution of gender on the relationship between marital conflicts and students' social adjustment, it implies that every teacher is expected to have the skills to handle the issues of social adjustment of the students since they are expected to teach in the school or classes that have both male and female students with social adjustment challenges. Hence, students with social adjustment challenges should be treated equally despite their gender.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations were made.

1. Government and school proprietors should recruit and have at least a Psychologist or a school Counsellor to guide students identified to have social adjustment challenges.
2. Teacher training institutions should build in their curriculum contents some topics that will help to inculcate on the Would-be-teachers some skills to handle the social adjustment challenges of students irrespective of their gender.

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