



Religious affiliation, spirituality and communication as factors in marital harmony

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ABSTRACT

Harmony in marital relationship is central to the well being of married persons. Yet, studies investigating marital harmony are almost non-existent. This cross-sectional survey was designed to determine whether marital harmony would have relationship with religious affiliation, spirituality and communication. One hundred and sixty-eight (168) married persons were randomly drawn from among civil servants and non-civil servants at the Secretariat of a state in Southeast of Nigeria. Their age range was 24 – 60 ($M = 41.34$; $SD = 8.62$) years. The Spiritual Valence Scale was used to assess spirituality; Dyadic Communication Scale was used to measure communication, whereas the Marital Harmony Scale was used to measure marital harmony. It was found that spirituality and communication correlated positively with marital harmony. The results of a multiple regression analysis of the data showed that marital harmony was positively predicted by spirituality and communication. Highlighted were the pivotal roles of mature spirituality as well as communication in marital harmony

Marriage as an institution is as old as human beings. Marriage have been observed to be a crucial and fundamental human relationship because it provides primary structure for establishing a family and rearing of children (Target, 1980; Dada & Idowu, 2006; Tolorunleke, 2008). Researchers have observed that while marriage is a union of man and woman, emerging literatures in the present days indicate that marital harmony is not easily achieved especially in recent times (Owuamanam & Osankita, 2005; Dada & Idowu, 2006). Tolorunleke (2008) concluded that marriage should be an exciting and beautiful adventure where the relationship between husband and wife is intended to get better with every passing day or year. Researchers (e.g., Target, 1980) found that harmony in marital relationship is a complex process that has over the period been thought to be influenced by many factors including education, socio-economic status, love, commitment, marital communication, conflict, gender, length of marriage, the presence of children, sexual relationships and the division of labour among other factors. Marital harmony has for many become an instrument to measure the success and stability of a marriage and by extension, personal fulfillment and well-being. The ideal of marital harmony is so strong that many spouses deceive themselves about the extent to which their marriage meets their criterion for satisfaction (Fowers, 1998).

Literature have documented that greater investment in religion was related to less conflict and more commitment to marriage (e.g., Fowler, 2014; Allgood, Haris, Skogrand & Lee, 2009; Espinosa, 2008). They reported that religion is a powerful, positive force behind a healthy relationship and marriage. Other studies have established that valuing religion and regularly practicing it are associated with greater marital stability, higher levels of marital satisfaction, and an increased inclination to marry (e.g., Weaver, Samford, Morgan, Larson, Koenig & Flannelly, 2002). In another study, researchers (e.g., Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002) observed that religious attendance, and couple prayer has been found to decrease negativity, contempt and hostility as well as emotional reactivity toward one's partner. Similarly, Holeman (2003) reported that religious beliefs play crucial role in helping couples forgive each other following conflict.

Wilcox (2004) concluded that the more frequently husbands attended religious services, the happier their wives said they were with the level of affection and understanding they received. Some other studies have indicated that combination of religious practices is related to positive outcomes for the stability and quality of marriage (e.g., Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Blankenhorn, 1995). Scholars

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have strongly suggested that religion offers couples theologically grounded guidelines for methods to handle marital conflict when it erupts (e.g., Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). Even several studies have linked strong active religiousness to lesser rates of divorce among couples, because it displayed the internalization of behavioural norms that reduced marital conflict and because couples did not want to lose support from their religious communities by getting a divorce (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001; Amato & Rogers, 1997). The existing literature on religion is enormous but only a few studies have specifically measured the impact on marital issues (Brody, Stoneman, Flor & McCrary, 1994; Curtis & Ellison, 2002).

However, research finding also suggest that inasmuch as religion is very important to married couples, some studies have contrary view on the influence of religion on marriage. Studies have reported that religion can be a source of significant marital conflicts if couples are not united in religion's matter (e.g., Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Sherkat, 2004). Disparities in religious attendance patterns were consistently linked with more frequency of marital disagreements. Call and Heaton (1997) observed that the risk of marital dissolution was nearly three times greater when the wife regularly attended religious services, but husband never attended. However, researchers have discovered that the key factors for a long-term marriage strategy are similarity in religious orientation, religious faith and religious belief (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Marks, 2005; Robinson, 1994). Some researchers have viewed religion as one of the structured social relationships within African societal settings that shape local expression of power, privilege and exclusion (e.g. Regnerus & Salinas, 2006).

The second variable that is of interest to the present study is spirituality. According to Pargament (2007), spirituality is the search for the sacred and is connected to a concept of belief in a higher power greater than oneself as God. Puchalsky et al. (2009) defined Spirituality as the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the self, to others, to nature and to the Sacred. The Sacred refers to what is holy, divine, eternal, or meaningful. Spirituality is inward, personal and relational in connection to the divine (Immanuel & Nzenweaku, 2015). Being spiritual and having faith in God provide strength for

living and coping in the difficult ways of life (Wnuk, 2015).

Religiosity and spirituality tend to be used interchangeably. Several studies have examined the role of religiosity and spirituality in the lives of African Americans (Boykin & Ellison, 1995; Quander, 2000). Emblem (1992) noted that spirituality is the personal life principle that animates transcendent quality of relationship with God or god being, whereas religion is a system of organized beliefs and worship that a person practices. In other words, religion is often used to refer to a more formalized set of ideological commitments associated with a group (i.e., an organized system of beliefs, rituals, and cumulative traditions with a faith community), whereas spirituality is often used to refer to the personal, subjective side of religious experience (e.g., Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002; Worthington & Aten, 2009).

Researchers (David & Stafford, 2013; Ellison & Anderson, 2001) have shown that an acknowledgement of a Divine purpose in a marital relationship is associated with greater adjustment in such relationship. These studies have shown that couples who acknowledged a Divine purpose in their marriage were more likely to collaborate, to have greater marital adjustment, and to perceive more benefits from marriage (Ellison & Anderson, 2001; David & Stafford, 2013). These same couples also testified that they were less likely to use aggressions or to come to a stalemate in their disagreement. Studies (Koenig, Larson & Larson, 2001; Plante & Thoresen, 2007; Richard & Bergin, 2005) revealed that those who are engaged and are active with spiritual matters tend to be healthier, happier, have better habits, and more social support than those who are not. Similarly, studies have revealed that spirituality tends to give a greater respect to family and marriage values, which reduces divorce, while those who go through a divorce might find less excitement in spiritual matters (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985). Various studies indicate that religious couples are more likely to enjoy stable and happy marriages. They are less likely to experience conflict and violence, or to divorce, perhaps because religion offers couples theologically grounded guidelines on how to handle marital conflicts when they arise (Webbo, Kihara, & Karume, 2017)

Spirituality appears to serve as a buffer for life stressors that are more acute for couples, such as economic deprivation, structural racism, and oppression (Bean, Perry, & Bedell, 2002; Boyd-

Franklin, 2003; Franklin, 2004). Researchers have observed that spirituality has been an important part of an individual experience, and its corporate manifestation through religion provides one of the new institutions some couples have access to and trust (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; McAdoo, 1991; Hackney & Sander, 2003). Married men who reported high levels of spirituality also reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than their less spiritual counterparts. Not only that, their wives also reported higher levels of satisfaction within the relationship (Lichter & Carmalt, 2008; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007) further observed that lower levels of negative marital interactions are found in the relationships of men who regularly attend religious services. For women, it appears that benefits may only be seen when both they and their partners attended. Studies (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Robinson, 1993) found that spirituality may influence positive affect regarding coping with life stressors. Studies focusing directly on marital harmony is lacking in literature. This research contributes data in this regard. Studies have indicated that engaging in religious practices was reported to be eliciting qualities such as perseverance, forgiveness and humility which in turn assisted couples in keeping their marriages stable and thus resulting in marital satisfaction (Webbo, Kihara & Karume, 2017). They also stated that specific attributes related to religiosity like individual and partner prayer, reading the Bible, church attendance, impacted on couples and their spouses lives positively and in turn their experiences in marriage. Sharmila (2017) indicated that there is a significant relationship between marital adjustment and spiritual intelligence.

Another variable of interest to the present study is communication. Communication refers to the interpersonal, transactional symbolic process by which marriage partners achieve and maintain understanding of each other (Montgomery, 1981). More so, marital communication is the exchange of feelings and meanings as husbands and wives try to understand one another and to see their problems and differences from both a man's and woman's point of view (Bienvenu, 1969). Communication is not limited to words, it occurs through listening, silences, facial expressions and gestures. Gottam (1994) applied the balance theory of marriage on couples' communication. The researcher explained that when couples communicate, there are five times as many positive interactions between them (for example, listening, validating the other person, using soft words, expressing appreciation, affirmation, physical

affection, compliments, etc.) as there are negative (for example, raising one's voice, stating a complaint, or expressing one's anger). By contrast, among couples on the path towards divorce, this ratio is just under one to one. For every negative interaction, there is less than one positive interaction. Studies (e.g., Travis & Travis, 1975) concluded that one way to improve the quality of one's communication is to increase the amount of positive behaviours in one's relationship and to decrease the number of negatives.

Researchers have observed that behaviours that affect marital stability were self disclosure (e.g., Noller, 1982), being sensitive to each other's feeling (e.g., Navran, 1967), listening and responding (e.g., Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 1975), confirmation (e.g., Fisher & Sparkle, 1978; Montgomery, 1981), and expressing respect and esteem (e.g., Vincent, Wiess, & Bircher, 1975; Boyd & Roach, 1977). Self disclosures have been defined as a process of communication by which one person reveals information about himself or herself to another. The information can be descriptive or evaluative and can include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, goals, failures, dislikes and favorites (Emmi & Kokkonem, 2007).

Ability to discuss problems effectively has been identified as the best indicators of overall marital satisfaction. Snyder (1979) observed that communication skills are important not only because they provide the means for solving problems and differences but make an increased level of intimacy possible. In a similar note, Bolte (1975) observed that the communication system of the couple is a vital force determining much of their happiness together. Navran (1967) concluded that any attempt at improving marital relationships must start with working on the communication between husband and wife. Moreover, happiness and fulfillment that spring from a harmonious marriage had been identified to play a crucial role in couple's lives, because these affect their physical and psychological health (Sinha & Murkerjee, 1989). Other studies (e.g; Fowers & Blaine, 2001; Onyeizugbo, 2001; Travis & Travis, 1975) found that the best ways to foster a well-adjusted marital relationship is to provide couples with training in communication skills which will help them resolve future marital conflicts.

A review of the literature reveals a high correlation between communication and conflict resolution skills of spouses, marital adjustment and a divorce rates (e.g., Sanders, Halford & Behrens,

1998; Lawrence & Bradbury, 1999; Rogge & Bradbury, 1999; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler & Stuart, 1998). Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1990) reported that communication is a “god”, term in our society because it is viewed as a panacea for ailing human relationships. Furthermore, communication has moved from the periphery to centre stage as the sine-qua-non of family life. Communication is viewed to be central to family life, because the expectations for personal relationships have changed slowly but inexorably in this century. Gottman (1994) concluded that what counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible spouses are, but how spouses deal with incompatibility. Most communication have been found to consists of talk, of conversation; couples have to learn how to talk openly and constructively, sharing more and more of themselves as time goes by (Vijayalakshmi, 1997). Communication can be non-verbal in which partners try to communicate feelings or thoughts without using words. Vijayalakshrn (1997) concluded that sometimes, the non-verbal messages conflict with one another, leading to confusion in and between the spouses. Studies have indicated that communication does in some cases foreshadow later judgments of relationship satisfaction and that higher levels of initial satisfaction can eventuate into unions that are more interpersonally harmonious (Lavner, Karney & Bradbury, 2016).

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate whether marital harmony will have relationship with religious affiliation, spirituality and communication. This study focused on Nigerian samples. The Present study contributes to the literature on marital harmony by using a Nigerian sample drawn from Civil Service setting. It was expected that religious affiliation, spirituality, and communication will be significantly related to marital harmony.

Method

Participants

Participants were 168 married persons selected randomly across occupations (civil servants = 150; others = 18), ethnicity (Igbo = 159; others = 9), religious affiliations (Catholic = 100; Protestants = 68), and education (lower/no degree = 77; higher/Bachelor’s degree and above = 91) at Awka, Anambra State capital. They were aged between 24-60 years ($M = 41.34$; $SD = 8.62$). The participants were selected using cluster sampling method. The researchers selected the State Secretariat for the study because of

its unique setting for the cluster of married persons of diverse religious faith, educational background, ethnicity and occupations.

Instruments

Three measures were employed for data collation. They are as follows: the Spiritual Valence Scale, the Dyadic Communication Assessment Scale, and the Marital Harmony Scale.

Spiritual Valence Scale (SVS)

The Spiritual Valence Scale (SVS) was developed by Immanuel (2014). The SVS has 12 items. It measures a person’s spirituality. It assesses one’s personal convictions, closeness to the Divine, commitment, dedication, ability to influence spiritual outcomes, and connectedness to the Divine. Examples of items in the SVS include: “I worship the Almighty God in spirit and truth”; “I have a personal relationship with God”. The SVS has five (5) response options - Absolutely False (1) to Absolutely True (5). High scores suggest deep as well as healthy and mature spiritual conviction and commitment. The SVS has Cronbach’s alpha of .87, and one factor structure. The reliable and valid spiritual valence scale was used to assess spirituality in this work.

Dyadic Communication Assessment Scale (DCAS)

The 16-item DCAS was developed by Onyeizugbo (2005) to assess the quality of communication among dyads – married persons as well as partners who are involved in close relationships. It can be used to assess the quality (effective vs. non-effective) of communication in dyads, with the view to facilitating self understanding and psychological intervention in distressed relationships. The DCAS has five response options ranging from Rarely (1) to Always (5). Items that suggest ineffective communication are reverse scored. Higher scores suggest higher dyadic communication in the relationship. The DCAS has the following psychometric properties: $\alpha = .90$; and split half reliability = .89. The DCAS was subjected to exploratory factor analysis (Maximum likelihood; oblique rotation), giving rise to three factors, namely: Factor 1 is Responsive Communication ($\alpha = .82$). Factor 2 is blocked communication ($\alpha = .74$). Factor 3 is self-disclosure ($\alpha = .74$). The DCAS has concurrent validity of .55 ($p < .001$) with the Assertive Behaviour Assessment Scale (Onyeizugbo, 2008). The full scale was used for data collection in this study.

Marital Harmony Scale (MHS)

The Marital Harmony Scale (MHS) was developed by Immanuel (2017). It has 19 items. It measures the extent of agreement, concord, and harmony in marital relationship. It has five response options ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Examples of items in the scale are “We agree on issues”, “There is harmony”, “We forgive each other easily”. Cronbach’s $\alpha = .97$; split-half reliability = .96. Exploratory Factor analysis revealed one factor. The higher the score, the higher the marital harmony.

Procedure

The instruments were administered individually to one hundred and eighty (180) married persons who indicated interest to participate in the study with the help of two research assistants. They responded to the study scales in their respective offices. The participants were encouraged to complete the scales. Those who volunteered to participate were given the materials to fill. The completed scales were collected before the close of work. One hundred and sixty-eight copies of the questionnaires were properly completed and scored, and therefore used for analysis.

Design/ statistics

The study employed a cross-sectional design. One-way analysis of variance was used to analyze

data on religious affiliation. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were performed on the data on spirituality and communication as they relate to marital harmony.

Results

Results of the hierarchical multiple regression for the test of the hypotheses is shown in Table 2. Spirituality was added in the Step 1 of the regression analysis. It significantly and positively predicted marital harmony, $\beta = .34$, $t = 4.72$, $p < .000$. This is as expected – spirituality has significant relationship with marital harmony. The unstandardized regression coefficient (B) showed that for each one unit increase in spirituality, marital harmony increases by .47 units. The contribution of spirituality in explaining the variance in marital harmony was 19% ($R^2 = .19$), and the model was significant, $F(1, 166) = 22.31$, $p < .000$.

In step 2, communication was added in the regression model. It significantly and positively predicted marital harmony, $\beta = .35$, $t = 4.87$, $p < .000$. This is also as expected - communication has significant relationship with marital harmony. The unstandardized regression coefficient (B) showed that for each one unit increase in communication, marital harmony increases by .37 units. The contribution of communication in explaining the variance in marital harmony was 37% ($R^2 = .23$), and the model was significant, $F(1, 165) = 24.56$, $p < .000$.

Table 1: One-way ANOVA for the role of religious affiliation on marital harmony

MHS	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	83.247	1	83.247	.419	.518
Within Groups	32962.658	166	198.570		
Total	33045.905	167			

Table 1 shows that there was no significant difference in marital harmony between Catholics and Protestants.

Pearson’s correlation results indicated that spirituality and communication correlated positively with marital harmony ($r = .34$, $p < .01$; $r = .43$, $p < .001$).

Table 2: Regression result for spirituality and communication predicting marital harmony

Predictors	Step 1			Step 2		
	B	β	t	B	β	t
SVS	.47	.34	4.72**	.32	.23	3.25*
DCAS				.37	.35	4.87**
R^2	.19			.23		
ΔR^2	.11			.22		
F	22.31(1, 166)**			24.56 (2, 165)**		
ΔF	22.31(1,166)**			23.76 (1, 165)**		

* $p < .001$; ** $p < .000$; ΔR^2 = Change in R^2 ; ΔF = Change in F ; B = Unstandardized regression coefficient; β = Standardised regression coefficient.

Discussion

It was found in this study that religious affiliation did not have a significant relationship with marital harmony. The result obtained in this study is contrary to the findings of the previous studies (Fowler, 2014; Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Larson & Goltz, 1989; Mahoney et al, 2001) that religious affiliation is positively correlated with harmony in marital relationship. Religion had been identified as a powerful, positive force behind a healthy relationship and marriage (e.g., Fowler, 2014), but this study did not confirm the previous findings. The finding of this study suggests that religious affiliation/denomination is not significant in marital harmony. Where one goes to worship may not matter as far as marital harmony is concerned. This is important because religion/religiosity focuses on external issues, rules, rituals, and social appropriateness of one's behaviour. To this extent, religious affiliation may not be totally different from belongingness to social clubs and other associations where one socializes with others and obtains social support. Marriage is a serious encounter that requires conviction and commitment so that partners can co-exist in harmony.

Further, it was found that spirituality was a significant positive predictor of marital harmony. This result is consistent with previous findings that there is a strong positive relationship between spirituality and reduced marital conflict, and the view that spirituality tends to anchor family and marriage values (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Bean, Perry, & Bedell, 2002; Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Franklin, 2004). Spirituality deals with a person's relationship with the Divine. It comes from within. As Immanuel and Nzenweaku (2015) observed, "spirituality is about personal conviction" (p.57). It takes conviction and personal commitment to achieve any worthwhile endeavor. Marriage is a serious business that requires commitment, and it takes deep spiritual conviction to maintain marital harmony. Many previous studies tended to lump religiosity and spirituality together, but this study separated them to verify the relative contribution of each. The positive effects recorded in many previous studies may be accounted for by spirituality.

Furthermore, it was found that communication was also a significant positive predictor of marital harmony. It has been established that communication skills are important not only because they provide the means for solving problems and differences (Snyder, 1979), the communication system of a couple is

a vital force determining much of their happiness together (Bolte, 1975). This result conforms with self disclosure theory of communication by which one person reveals information about himself or herself to another person. The information can be descriptive or evaluative and can include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, goals, failures, successes, fears and dreams as well as ones likes, dislikes and favorites (Emmi & Kokkonem, 2007), which enables the partner to understand the other's experiences.

The results indicated that the best way to foster a well-adjusted marital relationship is to provide couples with training in communication skills, which will help them resolve future marital conflicts (Fowers & Blaine, 2001; Onyeizugbo, 2001; Travis & Travis, 1975). This result also exposed the reason that Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1990) reported that communication is a "god" term in our society because it is viewed as a panacea for ailing human relationships. Effective communication is vital to the health of every human relationship. One can assert without fear of contradiction that underneath many disharmonious marriages is ineffective communication pattern. When communication between couples is effective, issues are brought to the open, there is clarification where there is ambiguity, and there is a general atmosphere of trust – all of which mesh well with concord of marital relationship.

The current study failed to find a significant difference between groups – Catholics and Protestants in marital harmony. However, it found a very significant relationship between spirituality and marital harmony. The implication is that in this clime where church attendance is very high, and inter-religious as well as inter-denominational squabbles is rife, people should be educated on the difference between religion and spirituality, with the view to strengthening mature spiritual awareness. African people can benefit from ample training in this domain. This is because African under-development is connected to immature spirituality. That is why forces of destruction – poverty, ethnic clashes, political instability, greed, corruption, bloodshed, ritual murder, wife/husband murder, and the like – are having a field day on the continent. However, sound spirituality will go a long way to entrench in the heart, mind and spirit of the people the sacredness of human life, and the integrity of the whole of creation. This will engender harmony, not only in the marriage domain, but also in every sphere of life.

Communication and marital harmony are highly co-related. Establishing marital relationships need serious thought. Many people in Africa marry by accident. Some contract marriages in a hurry because the female partner is pregnant in the course of courtship. Some marry for economic gains. Some marry because they feel that their mates are married, and their time is running out. Some mentally unstable people have spouses secured for them because the family wants to perpetuate their "name" or lineage. All these breed poverty, and attendant discord in families and society. Therefore, communication training is highly recommended for intending couples. Couples, who are sensitive to the needs and aspirations of their partners and hold their partners in esteem, will experience harmony in their marital relationship.

Although the present study focused mainly on religious affiliation, spirituality and communication, but the demographic data such as education, income, ethnicity, occupation, and personality, may correlate with marital harmony. The researchers studied only married persons at Awka. This may limit the extent of the generalization of the findings. This study opens up possibilities for further studies. Future researchers may endeavor to consider other factors that may be relevant in marital harmony and extend the study to a larger population and other geopolitical zones in Nigeria and collaborate with marriage scientists across the world on the construct, marital harmony. This is necessary because empirical data on marital harmony is grossly lacking in literature across the globe. The current research work is a major contribution to literature in marriage research.

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