Resolving Conflicts in Marriages: A Counsellor's Viewpoint

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Abstract

Marital conflict is an abrasion in the progress, development and unity of any nation because a peaceful home creates a peaceful society. Conversely, an unstable home, riddled with conflicts, translates into the society to create a crisis-riddled and unstable society. This paper therefore examines the theory of marital conflict resolution. It identifies causes of conflicts and its effects on couples. The paper highlights behavioural contracting as a marital conflict resolution technique, concluding with some empirical review backups.

Introduction

Marriage has been described as a legal union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. It is a relationship in which two adults of the opposite sex make emotional and legal commitment to live together. Marriage involves the coming together of a man and woman to raise a family, and to meet the satisfaction of security and of an enduring affection and companionship (Omari, 1989).

Marriage as a social institution is cherished and highly approved in every culture of the world population (Henslin, 1980). It is usually contracted amidst joy, happiness and merry making for the couple, family members and friends. Marriage, being a social institution, fosters the coming together of two totally different individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds to form a family. Probably because of these differences, the marriage institution is see to breed more conflicts than most other social institutions. (Alhassan, 1988).

Marital conflict, according to Sotonade (1998), is an ill-wind that blows no one any good. This is because, when there is conflict in the home, the consequences are great for the couples themselves, the children of the marriage and to the society at large. Juvenile delinquency, armed robbery, hooliganism, drop-outism, alcoholism etc, are all consequences of marital conflicts. As a result of the role the family unit plays in the overall development of the society, the problem of marital conflicts calls for urgent attention because when the home, which forms the cradle of the society, is settled, the society itself is at peace (Esere & Idowu, 2000).

The need for peaceful coexistence both in the home and in the society at large cannot be over-stressed. Peace is related to most social objectives like development, justice, progress, freedom, security, fairness and equity. Peace affects practically every aspect of social existence, at different levels, starting from the home front to the global relationship (Best, 2000). Peace exists in the home when the parties involved can manage conflict constructively. This may be possible when a number of conflict resolution skills are acquired and mastered.

This paper through a theoretical perspective presents an overview of marital conflict, its causes and its effects on couples and their marital life. Thereafter, the paper examines marital conflict resolution techniques, employing behaviour contracting as a strategy.

Marital conflict - Its meaning

Conflict, according to Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary, simply means disagreements, quarrel. Martial conflict is an indication that the spouse cares enough about the relationship to fight. As long as conflict exists, the two parties at least have a relationship no
matter how bad it may be. The conflict may lead them to hurt each other or to forgive and forget, but the conflict shows that something about the relationship is stiff important to the people involved. When the people allow complete indifference or apathy, the relationship is dead (Omotosh, 1994).

According to Eisenman (1980), conflict, frustration and misunderstanding for all marriages are essential for growth. Conflict, Eisenman (1980), argues necessitates the continual negotiation and re-negotiation of values, beliefs and goals. Supporting this view, Alhassan (1986) asserted that marriage involves conflicts. No two people can live together for years without clashing unless one of them has decided to give in, always. In spite of this condition, the conflict still exists underneath, even though the dominant partner may be unaware of it. However, white we can expect conflict, we should also expect to manage it for a peaceful co-existence. How we respond to a conflict and how we go about reducing it and repairing the resulting damage to the relationship go a long way in restoring bad relationship thereby creating an atmosphere for peace and tranquility in the home and in the society as well.

### Causes of marital conflict

Before we can manage or resolve conflict, there is the need to identify and understand its causes. Among the causes of marital conflicts are:

- **Individual Differences:** Individual differences are sources of marital conflict. In marital relationship, the spouses are different in many ways and each of them has a unique combination of personality and character traits. Individual differences do not necessarily lead to conflict, but they provide the potential for conflict and increase the possibility that conflict will occur. According to Edward (1987), one should take into account that in a marital relationship two separate personalities are interacting and as such two relatively heterogenous values and need systems confront each other and are present. Research has shown that the greater the discrepancy between individual background characteristics, the less stability the marriage is likely to have (Falk, 1975). In other words, spouses who are similar are less likely to have conflicts than those who are deferent from each other.

- **Emotional Closeness:** This could be another source of conflict. Any close relationship has the potential to develop strong feelings that are both positive and negative. Feelings of affection and friendship contribute to the well-being of a family and the happiness of its members. Feelings of misunderstanding, frustration, competition and anger can sour relationships (Ijagbulu, 1989). Spouses are more likely to feel both love and frustration more strongly with each other than with a casual acquaintance, since they interact more frequently and their relationship touches every facet of their lives (Omotosh, 1994).

- **Expectations and norms:** These are also a source of conflict. Sometimes they are enacted into law, but more often they are simply communicated from person to person and sanctioned informally. People carry these norms in their minds and apply them to themselves and to others constantly. Example “Wives should cook, husbands should provide for the family etc”. According to Duke and England (1983), the expectations of others especially those who are close to us, have a powerful impact on our lives. To them, disagreement about norms or nonconformity to group held expectations is one of the greatest sources of conflict in interpersonal relationships. For instance, if a young man grows in an environment or a group, that teaches the norm of male aggressiveness and independence and then marries a young woman who learned a different expectation such as male responsibility and quiet leadership, both may feel that the other person is not living up to his/her expectations. Thus, incompatible sex roles, routines of married life, being over-loaded with heavy and impossible expectations are seen as causes of conflict in a family set-up (Henslin, 1980).

- **Irrational thinking:** According to Ellis (1988), unrealistic and illogical ideas create disruptive feelings. Crazy ideas create conflicts and dysfunctional behaviour, especially in an interpersonal relationship such as the marriage relationship. The following are some typical errors in thinking,
All-or-nothing concepts: Either you love me unconditionally or you don’t really love. Either you help me or there is no more hope. Either I get accepted in my in-laws family or my life is over. Absolute statements: My spouse should keep promises. My spouse must be nice to me. He/she ought to love me dearly for all I have done for him/her. I should be rigid. When couples fail to sharpen their discriminations and to avoid these errors in thinking, they will allow the heart of the faulty assumption to remain untouched and unaltered In this case the seed for full-blown marital conflict is sown.

Effects of Conflict on Couples

Marital conflict or disharmony has been classified as forming one of the eight most pressing pervasive social problems of this generation (Azrin, Naster & Jones, 1973). Our National dailies and media houses are replete with news about couples undergoing marital conflicts. An example is the case of a husband who poured concentrated acid on his wife to "check" her infidelity (NTA Newline Programme of 1998). Again, many incidences of how couples fight, disagree over minute issues, insult each other to the extent of filing for divorce abound everywhere (Adegoke & Esere, 1998). Conflicts and hostilities create 'scars' on the partners. The verbal scars, according to Sotonade (1998), are like arrows, which not only pierce and tear the heart but also cause permanent scars after all have been said and done. Verbal scars can some in the form of very strong wounding statement like:
- Your immoral youthful life has made you children
- Our inability to have a child is totally all your fault.
- Your sperm is too watery, do you think you can even impregnate a goat?
- You are the cause of my downfall, you witch.
- I was warned not to marry you, you are a good-for-nothing husband.

In the case of physical scar, the damage done may, be permanent. For instance, physical scar may be manifested in the form of: bruise marks on the body; sprains on the limbs; swellings/bumps on the head; bleeding (internal/external) which may cause death; broken limbs e.t.c. Apart from verbal and physical scars, properties are also destroyed, contributing to economic downturn of the family.

Conflict Resolution

The steady growth in the practice of conflict resolution and third party consultation in peace making can be identified in two broad ideological traditions that have influenced western practices (Voutira & Brown, 1996): One influence comes from ideas of non-violent action such as the redefinition of conflict. not as a battle to be won but as opportunity to move to higher level of truth (Wehr, 1979) The second line of thought been traced to the teachings of such religious groups as the Quakers. At the core of the Quaker approach to conflict resolution is the preference for consensual decision-making, which is amenable to non-zero sum outcomes win-win situations (Woodhouse, 1994).

According to Emmert and Emmert (1984), total and permanent absence of conflict, were it possible, apparently would not be a desirable situation even for most intimate situations. Certainly this does not imply that a bitter quarrel in marriage is a good thing. People say and do things in anger that can damage any relationship sometimes permanently. But a disagreement between married partners can actually be constructive and useful if (and if) it is handled in the right way. Thus it is not how often couples engage in conflict that matters but how well they resolve the conflict before it degenerates to separation or divorce.

If conflict is chronic and the parties involved in the conflict are powerless to resolve tie
issues themselves, Fisher (1983) and Alhassan (1988) are of the view that outside intervention should be employed. This can come in the form of enrichment programmes where couples will be exposed to training sessions aimed at helping them resolve their conflicts.

**Techniques of Conflict Resolution**

Different techniques of conflict resolution have been identified in the literature. These include coercive and non-coercive techniques (Imobighe, 1993). Coercive techniques, as the name implies, are meant to exert pressure on the opponent to see if the opponent would retreat. Non-coercive techniques, on the other hand, employ bargaining and conciliatory methods to resolve conflicts.

Non-coercive bargaining techniques normally lead to mutually acceptable outcomes. This is done through:
- gaining an understanding of the partner's fears and concerns;
- preparedness to compromise, and
- avoidance of gaining too much since the partner cannot afford to lose too much.

Conciliatory method relates to an informal process in which a third party tries to bring the parties involved in conflict to agreement through the improvement of communications between them and through helping to interpret the salient issues involved in the conflict. It also involved explanation of possible options that would help to bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Conciliation is thus an attempt by a third party to create an atmosphere of trust and cooperation that is conducive to fruitful negotiation.

Behaviour Contracting: is a non-coercive conflict resolution technique. By definition, a contract is an agreement between two or more parties, such as between a husband and his wife. A behaviour contract sets out acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and the parties to the contract agree to abide by it. Its purpose is to increase the frequency of desirable behaviours and decrease or eliminate the frequency of undesirable behaviours.

Firestone and Moschetta (1975) see behavioural contract as a major tool in breaking down family members' resistance to change and in encouraging flexibility and the experimentation with new behaviours. The family therapist they point out, adopting the role of behaviour modifier, serves as a catalyst enabling family members to risk flexibility (p.27).

The use of contracts has become so popular that a number of counselling approaches has developed around them. Weathers and Liberman (1975) have discussed an innovative use of the family contracting exercise, a therapeutic teaming experience in which family members learn to negotiate with each other. The exercise consists of five steps:

1) identifying the family members' needs and desires;
2) setting priorities on self awareness;
3) empathizing with each other;
4) setting costs for providing gains to others and
5) bargaining and compromising.

The purpose of the exercise is to help the family members team to negotiate with each other so that they eventually resolve whatever problems are causing disaffection amongst them thereby providing for each others' needs. Weavers and Uberman (1975) suggest four guidelines for generating successful contracts, which are central to the entire procedure.

1) The negotiation of contract must be open and honest, free from explicit or subtle coercion. A contract is based on mutual agreement between two parties thus there must be no coercion or undue influence.
2) The terms of contract should be expressed in simple, explicit, clearly understood words.
3) For a contract to be effective, it has to provide an opportunity for each participant to optimize his reinforcement or minimize his costs and losses in the area of his life covered by the contract. The contract must provide advantage to each party over the status quo-the terms of contract must be equitable in all ramifications.
4) The behaviours contracted for must be in the repertoire of the person agreeing to do them. It is very easy to make the mistake of asking too much from a person.

**Steps in formulating a behavioural contract.**

Spouses should be cognizant of the following steps in formulating a behavioral contract:

**STEP 1: Identify the problem to be resolved**

Before setting out to solve or negotiate a marital conflict, the spouses must first of all recognize and come to the agreement that there is a problem, that is, they must be able to acknowledge the presence of the problem in their relationship. Denying or pretending that nothing is amiss will only exacerbate the problem. Clear identification of a problem is basic to its solution. It is only when a problem is identified and pinpointed that solution to it is set in motion.

**STEP 2: Describe the problem specifically**

This is another important phase in formulating a behavioural marital conflict contract. Problems may be broken into sub-problems and tackled one after the other. For instance if the problem centres around finance, it may range from say, the husband or wife being too wasteful, not having or providing enough house keeping allowance, not settling utility bills to leaving or placing the whole household maintenance financial burden on one spouse. Each of these sub-problems should be clearly described and tackled one after the other.

**STEP 3: Selection of possible contingencies**

Having identified and described the problem specifically, the spouses can now select and negotiate possible contingencies that would be motivating to success. These contingencies (terms of the contract) can be contract reward or contract punishment depending on performance. An opportunity should also be provided to have some control over the term(s) imposed.

**STEP 4: The contract form**

Having gone through the three foregoing steps, the spouses should now, write down the contract on a paper in such a way that both parties can understand it.

The contract form should contain the following: date the agreement beings; date the agreement ends or is to be renegotiated, the problem or behaviour(s) targeted for change; amount and kinds of consequences to be used. It also contains statement of the penalty that will be imposed if specified behaviour is not performed; the reworder or punisher; name and signature of all those involved.

For easy assessment, there should be schedule for review of progress.

Observe and collect reliable data and display results on a graph. Review the data and trouble shoot the system if lack of improvement is indicated. If need be rewrite the contract. Continue to monitor, trouble shoot and re-negotiate the contract until there is desired improvement in the behaviour. Don't give up if there is no immediate improvement.

**Advantages of behaviour contract in marital conflict resolution**

The importance of behaviour contract in marital conflict resolution cannot be over-emphasised. First in a behaviour contract, there is less chance of confusion. There is no forgetting or misunderstanding because it specifies behaviours and their contingencies in written document. The contract is written in such a simplified way that spouses involved understand clearly the terms of the contract. Furthermore, the fact that the contract requires daily attention and review helps in maintaining its usefulness and effectiveness as a conflict resolution tool. Behaviour contract states the negotiator's behavioural goals and establishes specific positive and negative consequences of attaining the goals.
Finally behaviour contract do not only offer its solution for a particular behaviour but also teaches each party that the other can be depended upon and that modest sacrifice and cooperation can bring mutual rewards. Thus behaviour contract encourages mutual respect and trust in a marital relationship.

**Empirical Review**

Marital therapy has been described as any therapeutic intervention technique aimed at assisting troubled marriages and couples to better understand their reciprocal marital interaction and attempt to find ways in which their needs, can be mutually satisfied. This is to ensure that growth and development of each partner can be maximized in the relationship (Satir, 1967). Most of the researches on behavioural marital therapy are descriptive in nature. Only few studies have utilized rigorous methods or experimental designs, the most common approach, used was follow-up of marital therapy cases to investigate the effectiveness of treatment (Weiss, Hops & Patterson, 1973; Paterson, Hops & Weiss, 1975; Stuart, 1976; Tsoi-Hoshmand, 1976; Jacobson, 1977, 1979, Filani, 1984; Sotonade, 1978; Esere & Idowu, 2000).

These studies have empirically established that optimal marital relationship can be deliberately fostered among couples. Using the treatment package developed by Weiss, Hops, & Patterson (1975) for instance, Jacobson (1977,1979) conducted two controlled Behavioral Marital Therapy (BMT) outcome investigations in which distressed couples receiving BMT improved more significantly than couples on a waiting list. Again, Tsoi-Hoshmand (1976), compared a behavioral treatment with a waiting list conditions, the treatment group improved more than the waiting list group.

In Patterson et al's (1975) study, couples were taught negotiation skills. This method corresponds to the quid pro quo interchanges described by Stuart (1976) and Esere (2001). Under such an agreement, one spouse agreed to change some aspects of his/her behavior in exchange of desirable behavior of the other spouse. In a similar study, Jacobson (1977) successfully treated a group of 10 distressed couples with a package comprised of problem-solving and contingency contracting procedures. In a subsequent study, Jacobson (1979) investigated the effectiveness of problem-solving training alone with severely distressed couples. Six couples received problem-solving training following a condition in which they received instructions to increase positive behavior. All six couples improved during the course of therapy. Follow-up data showed five out of the six couples to be maintaining their positive changes.

**Conclusion**

Research has shown that the marriage institution is being highly threatened through marital conflicts, which more often than not leads to divorce. (Adegoke & Esere, 1998). The institution of marriage is not separated from other aspects of social life in that it does not exist in a vacuum. It is an integral part of other social institutions. Thus peace and stability in the home have positive multiplier effects on the society at large.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine and highlight marital conflict, its causes and its effects on couples. A review of literature has shown that there are different ways by which conflict could be resolved. One of such ways is behavior contracting which is a non-coercive conflict resolution technique.

Instability in marriages and the resultant impact on all family members are among the most pressing problems facing our society today. Thus, teaching couples various conflict resolution skills is pivotal to the health, well being and development of this country Nigeria, and for a peaceful coexistence and transformation of the world.
References


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