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Effect of Age and Marriage Duration on Marital Satisfaction: A Case of Christian Marriages in Kenya

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Abstract:

The quality of a marriage is a key determinant of the mental and physical well-being of individuals, as well as well-being of family and society. Quality of a marriage is said to be determined by various factors including age of individuals and duration of the marriage. It has been highly debated as to whether being married for long erodes marital satisfaction, or conversely increases satisfaction due to common interests like children and bonding established over many years together. Similarly, it is assumed that as individuals grow older, the marriage will stabilize due to the understanding and tolerance that comes with maturity.

1. Introduction

Marriage is defined as “a social construct in the form of a formal union of a man and woman typically recognized by law, by which they become husband and wife” (Psychologydictionary.org, 2015[1]). The marital relationship is a universal institution considered as the back bone of the society as it is the foundation on which future generations are built. In addition, healthy marriages influence the physical and psychological /emotional health of both the spouses as well as the children brought up within the union (Botlani et al.,2010[2]); Bookwala, 2011[3]); Warner & Kelley-Moore, 2012[4]). Married individuals typically have better physical and emotional health than the unmarried, and are at a lower risk of mortality (Holt-Lunstad & Birmingham, 2008[5]). However, these effects are dependent on the quality of the marriage, as poor marital quality is associated with worse physical and mental health and marital conflict, which increases the risk of dying (Birditt & Antonucci, 2008[6]).

The quality of a marriage can be measured in terms of the level of happiness, affection, intimacy, tenderness, love, communication, commitment and the feelings of satisfaction with the relationship (Amidu et al., 2011[7]). Researchers have interchangeably used the terms marital adjustment, marital satisfaction and marital happiness to refer to marital quality (Shahnazari et al., 2013[8]). According to Schoen et al. (2002[9]), marital satisfaction is a global evaluation of the state of one’s marriage and a reflection of marital happiness and functioning. Research shows that the quality of a marriage is associated with various demographic factors (Jose & Alfons, 2007[10]; Guo & Huang, 2005[11]; Zainah et al., 2012[12]). Specific demographic factors of age at marriage and length of marriage are key predictors of divorce, possibly because people who marry at a younger age are more likely to face marital conflicts caused by several factors including jealousy and disloyalty (Smart, 2008[13]; Amato & Rogers, 1997[14]). Previous studies have reported that length of marriage affects marital quality positively (Brako, 2012 [15]). This study examined the effects of age and marriage duration on marital satisfaction.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised of 111 married participants drawn from three Christian churches in Nairobi using purposive sampling. Some 35 participants were from a conservative and traditional church, the African Inland Church (AIC), another 37 from the Catholic Church and a final 39 from more modern and liberal Evangelical churches, the Nairobi Chapel and House of Grace Church. The participants selected comprised of 60 females and 50 males, were over 18 years old and currently married for four years or more. One respondent did not indicate their gender. They were all in a monogamous marriage and none were separated or divorced. However, the participants were not couples.

2.2. Instruments

The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS) (Spanier, 1976) a standardized 14 item scale was used to assess marriage quality. The RDAS is the most commonly used measure of marital functioning in social and behavioral research literature. It has been used in

thousands of empirical studies (Glenn, 1990; Touliatos et al., 1990; Spanier, 1985). The RDAS provides a multidimensional view of marriage in which subjective satisfaction ratings are measured through self-reports of observable behavior and events. It has been found to have a Cronbach's alpha of 0.9. In terms of discriminant validity, the RDAS has been found to successfully differentiate between 81% of distressed and non-distressed cases (Assari et al., 2009; Turliuc & Muraru, 2013). The RDAS has a cutoff point of 48, with scores below 48 indicative of marital distress.

A demographic questionnaire was used to gather demographic data namely age, marriage duration, number of children and denomination. The United States International University (A) Institutional Review Board issued an approval letter for this study. All the participants gave and signed informed consent to participate in the study after the researcher explained to them the purpose of the study, and assured them of privacy and confidentiality.

3. Data Analysis

The RDAS has a manual with scoring instructions which was used to score and interpret the scores. After scoring the questionnaires, they were then classified into 2 groups according to those falling above the 48 cutoff point of RDAS and those falling below 48. The two sets of questionnaires were then compared and analyzed in terms of age and duration of marriage to assess which ones reported marital satisfaction and vice versa. The scores were then analyzed using SPSS to find out if there were any correlations between individuals' ages, marriage duration and their scores on the RDAS. The findings were then used to answer the research questions.

4. Findings

A correlational analysis was used to determine the relationship of age and marriage duration with marital satisfaction.

4.1. Marriage duration and Marital Satisfaction

The participants were married for between 4-50 years ($M = 18.73$, $SD = 10.63$). Of the 111 participants, (23.4%) were married for 6-10 years, a further 18% (20) were married for 16-20 years and 16.2% were married for 21-25 years. When marriage duration and marital satisfaction (quality of marriage) was correlated, the results indicated that there was minimal negative correlation between the two ($r = -0.049$, $p = 0.612$). While the direction of the relationship may be suggestive of an inverse relationship, i.e. the longer the duration of marriage, the lower the distress, this association is not significant at 5%, and the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.24$) means that marriage duration helps to explain only 24% of the variance in the perceived marital satisfaction.

4.2. Age and Marital Satisfaction

The ages of the participants ranged between 26 and 75 years (mean = 44.9 years, $SD = 10.8$ years). A correlation of the participants' age and marital satisfaction indicated that there was a minimal negative correlation between age and Satisfaction ($r = -0.026$, $p = 0.79$). This is not significant at 5%, and the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.0006$) means that age helps to explain only 0.07% of the variance in the perceived marital satisfaction.

5. Discussion

The results in this study showed that there was no relationship between age and marital satisfaction. Similarly this study found no correlation between marriage duration and marital satisfaction. This was contrary to findings from other studies from the Western Countries that show that marital quality decreased with age. In the present study, there were couples who were still married for up to 50 years. Research by Anderson et al. (2010), Dush et al. (2008), Lavner & Bradbury (2010), and Lavner et al. (2012) found that majority of marriages are stable and report highest levels of marital satisfaction during the initial four years, followed by a decline after the fourth year when the "honeymoon phase" comes to an end. The "honeymoon phase" effect is further explained by Aron et al. (2002) who suggest that marriages go through a "typical honeymoon then years of blandness" pattern. Aron et al. (2002) further explain that in the first few years of marriage partners have unrealistic positive perceptions and expectations of their spouse but within few years, the reality of their partner's flaws dawns on them, causing them to feel disillusioned and dissatisfied. Kurdek (1998) refers to this decline as "the honeymoon is over" effect. Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) observed that marriages that were seen as low distress over the first 4 years divorced after 5 years, possibly due to the "honeymoon" effect. Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen & Campbell (2005) and Peleg (2008) found that marital quality tends to decline over time and is impacted by age and marital duration. Possible explanations to these contrasting findings in this present study may be explained by factors specific to the population. Firstly, this population was drawn from Christian church attendees who were committed to adherence to the religious beliefs and practices of their church. These practices include regular church attendance, prayer, reading the bible and active participation in church events. Sullivan (2001) found that while religiosity was not related to marital satisfaction, it increased commitment. Furthermore, there have been suggestions that the divorce rate among Americans Christians is between 15-20% (Feldhahn & Whitehead, 2014). This implies that adherence to Christian practice possibly promotes positive attributes prescribed in the Bible like perseverance, forgiveness and humility (Phil 2:3-4, New Revised Standard Version) which keep Christian marriages stable. It appears that because of their faith, Christians are able to find satisfaction and happiness in their lives even amidst daily life and marriage challenges. Similarly, since the Christian faith encourages faithful to have hope and faith even during difficult circumstances and wait on God believing that he would change their circumstances. The Bible urges them to "walk in faith, rather than by sight". The participants in this study may be declaring that they are "happy" as that is what they are hoping for in faith, rather than declaring the reality that they are dissatisfied, since it would indicate a lack of faith.

The Christian church forbids divorce or separation which may explain why the population in this study endured their marriages despite reporting dissatisfaction. Since Christians are expected to be “holy, righteous, peaceful, loving and forgiving” as prescribed by the Bible, to admit being unhappy within their marriages would reflect negatively on their expected conduct. It is possible that in this study, the participants did not admit dissatisfaction in their marriage because they “were feigning good.” Participants may have felt that they are expected to be seen as having the Christian virtues of gentleness and patience within their marriages. Tangney et al. (2007) noted that individuals tend to alter their behavior to what is considered “acceptable” within specific environments.

Another explanation as to why this study found insignificant correlations between age, duration and marital satisfaction unlike in the studies conducted on western populations, maybe that Africans view marital satisfaction differently from the west. Some of the factors measured by the RDAS to examine marital satisfaction include Cohesion and Consensus between a couple which involve agreement in major decisions, flexibility and agreement on levels of affection displayed within the marriage. African culture especially within developing countries is paternal in nature and so not liberal in matters of men sharing decision making power with their wives. Displays of physical and emotional affection are also very limited. Thus a lack of cohesion and consensus within a western population would indicate high levels of dissatisfaction but would be insignificant in Africa as these factors are not expected within a relationship, and thus not key determinants of satisfaction in a marriage. Other factors like the presence of children, housekeeping abilities and provision of family needs may be the key determinants of a satisfying relationship in Africa. Goode (1993), Waite and Lillard (1991) and Shackelford and Stone (2007) found that marital stability does increase with number of children. The present study did not include number of children as a variable and hence we are unable to verify this assertion in the present study.

6. Limitations of the Study

The study population was derived from committed Christians in a church setting, who were also mostly older Kenyans, a relatively conservative society. Both the church and conservative society prohibit divorce and separation, which means that these individuals are likely to stay married against all odds, or have different perceptions of marital satisfaction that differ with those of populations from Western countries.

Therefore the findings of this study may not be generalizable to individuals within secular and more liberal populations. Further research on secular and more liberal populations would provide more comprehensive insight on how age and marital duration affect marital quality, as well as specific cultural and religious parameters that define marital satisfaction among these populations. Such research may shed light on suitable measures and assessments that can accurately capture the factors indicative of distress and non-distress among populations similar to those in the current study.

7. Therapeutic Interventions

Clinicians need to take into consideration cultural and religious implications during therapy with couples. The indicators and measures of distress applicable in some cultures may not be applicable in others, which therefore calls on therapists to be culturally sensitive during their work with diverse clients. Clinicians’ orientation with cultural and religious differences of diverse populations will ensure more accurate conceptualization of client problems and application of appropriate interventions.

8. Conclusions

The early years of marriage are a time of blissful happiness for many newlyweds irrespective of their age. However with the passage of time as reality sets in, couples enter a season of conflict during which they will find equilibrium and settle down to enjoy the marriage, or reach a *status quo* where tolerance and maturity enables them to stay together despite their challenges. Others unfortunately find that the passage of time has deteriorated the quality of the marriage beyond repair and so opt to dissolve the marriage. Others find other sources of happiness like religious activities and their children which mitigates the effects of any dissatisfaction in their marriage. Future research is necessary to understand which specific factors contribute to some older marriages surviving and even getting better with time, while others only get worse over time.

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