

PLEASURES AND WOES IN COUPLES' RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE: PHENOMENOLOGICAL NARRATIVES FROM INTEGRATIVE BEHAVIOURAL COUPLE THERAPY AMONG IBIBIOS

OTTU, IBORO F. A.

Department of Psychology

University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria

Iboro.fa.Ottu@Uniuyo.edu.ng or Iboro2061@yahoo.com

Abstract

Marital interactions are behavioural strategies that reveal the powerfulness or powerlessness of spouses, their perceptual variations and labours to sustain the relationship. Our study sought to examine the lived experiences of couples from in-session narratives of the Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy. Research questions centered on how couples' emotional and behavioural distress, from relational events were influenced by processing errors, distorted appraisals and unrealistic expectations. Ten interview dialogues were created to generate data among Ibibio-speaking couples of Nigeria, who were purposively studied to explore the efficacy of an important ethno –cultural practice, mbopo, which suggests the seclusion and training of young women on tenets of marriage to adequately equip them for duties of marital life. Participants were interviewed in English, Pidgin English and Ibibio languages. Forty-eight (48) distressed participants screened from a large-scale survey (n =1328) of married persons were placed in therapy. Qualitative data were explored and extracted from participants' responses and submissions during therapy. There were 6 thematic sessions comprising individual and joint assessments of spouses on marital distress; feedback/treatment on related issues; behavioural exchange, including communication skills and problem solving training; and acceptance-driven empathic joining and unified detachment. The Nvivo 8 software package was used in data analysis. Emerging themes, nodes, attributes and categories were carefully noted. In the end, transcribed responses coalesced into the change and acceptance behavioural dimensions of the Integrative Behaviour Couple Therapy. It was confirmed that couple's relationship maintenance efforts were moderated by relative measures of couples' performance ecology, empathic-accuracy, struggles with the dialectics of infidelity or suspicion of it, and power dimensions of their lived experiences.

Keywords: Pleasures and Woes, Couples' Relationship Maintenance, Phenomenological Narratives, Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy Ibibio Couples of Nigeria.

Introduction

In many marriages, relationship maintenance is the lifeblood of stability and satisfaction. Relationship maintenance is strategic because relationships take an incredible amount of work that centres mostly on communication (Abdul & Yusuf, 2013). Relationship transactionary behaviours at times emerge from shared family identity, which in turn are either predictive or moderating of marital or adult sibling relationship quality (Myres, 2022; Haas & Lannutti, 2022) and when people fail to enact relationship maintenance the interpersonal climate in the relationship can also give rise to increased questions of uncertainty about relational involvement (Theiss, 2019). Earlier, Biu (2020) had reported that relationship maintenance prepared on social media sites and face-to-face interactions are also associated with relationship uncertainty. For instance, Horan (2014) believes that relationship maintenance implies "doing the work of relationships". Generally, relationship maintenance can be described as processes that help to keep involved actors relatively interdependent with one another (Agnew & Vander Drift, 2015). Healthy romantic relationships such as marriage, and other long term relationships are central in human life because they help promote people's physical and mental health through fulfilling peoples' fundamental need for love and social affiliation (Dubois et al., 2010). Many programmes of research have identified relationship maintenance strategies as behaviours that serve to improve couples relationship and satisfactory attachment (Emmers-Somer, 2006). Murray et al. (2015) developed a new equilibrium model of relationship maintenance in which three threat-mitigating rules are proposed to protect relationship bonds. These include demonstrating the tendency to accommodate a partner is hurt, always rooming towards mutual dependence – as a way of denouncing independence and its adverse relationship effects and resisting every attempt to devalue a partner who is aversive to one's personal goals. The importance of relationship maintenance in enhancing the quality of romantic relationships was further boosted by another study that investigated attachment, maintenance behaviours and stress among long distant and geographically-close relationships (Pistole et al., 2010). In the study, different attachment and maintenance behaviours contributed uniquely to global stress in long distance and geographically close relationships. It is important that despite the type of technological innovation, relationship maintenance (and related advantages such as higher sexual frequency and lower relationship

stress) is better in proximate (i.e geographically-close) relationships than long distant (distal) relationships (Dubois et al, 2016). Moreover, relationship maintenance shows great diversity in social values and cultural beliefs (Chonody & Gabb, 2019; Ogolsky, et al., 2017). Relationship maintenance inevitably involves positive and negative behaviours. Sometimes there may be instances of misperception of motives and intentions, especially when non-verbal behaviours serve as communication strategies. Nevertheless, there are clear-cut positive and negative behaviours in marital transacts in diverse ways, sometimes leading to several aspects marital satisfaction (pleasures) and other times bringing about relational dissatisfaction (woes and miseries). This was reported in a recent study by Dainton (2015) using interdependence approach to investigate relationship maintenance in interracial marriage.

For many individuals, success in marital and family life represents an important component of their social identity. In the Ibibio socio-cultural group in Nigeria, marital failure is greatly abhorred and vehemently viewed as a form of social dislocation that is bound to impact the larger community negatively. Marital trouble is generally viewed with extreme aversion by community members and conclusively blamed on parenting failure. This formed the basis for the age long reverence and celebration of female puberty known commonly among the ibibios as *Mbopo*. The concept of *Mbopo* is premised on the assumption that the seclusion (confinement) of a young woman prior to marriage will serve many purposes including character training and projection of beauty (through fattening), power, literacy, spirituality and ornamental extravagance as principal components of female identity construction (Imeh, 2009).

Although much work has been done on relationship maintenance, no known study has examined relationship maintenance in the context of the *Mbopo* ritual coupled with its suspected culturally-induced therapeutic efforts at reducing relationship distress. Moreover, there are no known qualitative studies incorporating the Integrative Behaviour Couple Therapy with this cultural orientation of Ibibio maidens. It was therefore important to explore the qualitative nature of relationship maintenance in this context and test the Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy among married couples from the social psychological and evolutionary inclinations.

Design

The study used a combined phenomenological and narratives enquiry approach from a marital perspective. It was aimed at understanding the underlying meaning of being a spouse in a committed marital relationship. The design integrated the hermeneutic and heuristic inquiry method (Kenny, 2012;

Moustakas, 1990; Manen, 1990) for data collection before employing the NVivo 8 software for analysis. As commonly known, this method of analysis helps to explore nodes and coding from identified themes using the open coding process. Nodes provide the storage areas in NVivo for references to code text. Every node serves as a storage for everything that is known about one particular concept or category. In the present study, nodes were used as tools to organize qualitative data in particular ways. Generally, heuristic inquiry is similar to phenomenology in its assumptions (Bermudez et al., 2014) and qualitative research is the systematic collection, organization and interpretation of textual material derived from talk or conversation. “Qualitative methods are used in the exploration of meanings of social phenomena, as experienced by individuals in their natural context”, (Malterud, 2001). One advantage of the qualitative method over quantitative method is that it uses rich data to see the social world as constructed by the observer against quantitative method’s use of hard, reliable data with a view of the social world as external to the observer (Bryman, 1988). Although some qualitative designs aim at generating a theory, the present study was informed by some already existing theories. One of the principles of qualitative analysis which formed part of the design of the study was the commencement of the analysis with systematic detachment from the phenomenon, using concepts and categories that guided the researcher (creating and importing textual sources) as well as casting insights into new leads for further inquiry.

Study Context

Marriage generally has been an important social institution valued for its numerous roles of social control, procreation and companionship between lovers. Nevertheless, this institution has faced numerous challenges central on the personalities and interests of participating persons. One of the greatest challenges of marriage is that of commitment to the cause of building an undivided dyad. Many people get into marriage and do not hesitate to leave because of one reason or the other. Some may pretentiously remain, hoping for better days which may after all not come. The result is that people remain in distress relationships which work against their happiness and wellbeing. Due to this, communities and institutions such as religious and social bodies initiate programmes intended to provide social antidotes to the threats of marriage. Such is also the case with the Ibibios, a Nigerian socio-cultural group that (used to) protectively guard the marital institution. This is done by devising behavioural training programmes (such as *mbopo*) for the maidens that are ready to go into marriage. The motive is to ensure the stability of the institution of marriage by the application of good behaviour, which was also intended to

rub off on the men as beneficiaries. Nevertheless, like diseases which occasionally resist certain therapies, marital problems remain a universal given. Not minding numerous proactive measures, marital distress remains inevitable in social life. This study anticipated such problems among the Ibibios and initiated a cross-sectional survey which yielded mixed results. The Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy was used in the intervention process among couples found in distressing conditions. The outcome of the qualitative study is reported in this work.

Study Participants and study period

Participants in the study were 24 couples drawn from a larger sample of 1,328 family men and women previously surveyed in a cross-sectional sample from nine local government areas in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The families were undergoing an 8-week therapeutic training and counselling on relationship maintenance after being pretested. They attended therapy (as a referral) on the basis of low relationship maintenance and empathy scores. Since most of the couples' concerns centred on behaviour exchange, inadequate communication and the struggle between change and acceptance of each other, the Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy (IBCT) was chosen, because the therapy was an updated version of the Traditional Behavioural Couple Therapy (TBCT) and two counselling groups were created.

Procedure

Permission to undertake this study was sought from the review board of the Institute for Advanced Medical Research and Training, College of Medicine, University of Ibadan. Based on the spread of the participants, two therapy centres were set up in the University of Uyo, and a public primary school in Eket, a regional town, respectively, both in Akwa Ibom State. Participating couples were contacted on phone to attend intervention sessions in any of the two locations nearest to them. Sampled participants in Esit Eket, Eastern Obolo, Nsit Ubium, and Ibiono were interviewed at the Eket Centre, while those from Uruan, Ikono, Itu, Nsit Atai and Ibiono Ibom participated at the Uyo centre.

The researcher and their assistants had the responsibility of matching group-related module of the therapy to participants, that attended sessions between Mondays and Saturdays at their individual convenience. The researcher met both spouses and introduced the purpose of the interaction and the rules covering the therapy sessions before pre-treatment evaluation including their level of distress, especially any major issue(s) that divide them. After the joint session, individual spouses were interviewed to verify specific

individual problems that may have been hidden or avoided during the joint session.

The couple again came into a joint session where the therapist presented observations to the six questions and advised on the need for partners to increase mutual positive love through behavioural exchange. Every couple was taken-through the dynamics of communication with deep exploration on speaking and listening skills as well as problem solving. These were the steps for participants undergoing therapy using the Traditional Behavioural Couple Therapy (TBCT). However, for those undergoing therapy under the Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy (IBCT), additional acceptance programmes were taken beyond the TBCT module. These included; counselling and training on empathic joining which requires guiding participants to learn the relevant strengths towards the development and promotion of emotional acceptance. Also, *mbopo* is the cultural “recipe” of relationship maintenance which was also explored among participants. The following is the abridged structure of the interview guide: (1) behavioural exchange (what spouses do to make each other happy, (2) success at behavioural exchange (seeing how successful a spouse has been in making spouses happy in the week before therapy) (3) relationship gripes (patterns of small problems that could eventually present as serious issues in the relationship), (4) poor communication (how personal exchanges lead to resentment) (5) problem solving (initiatives to resolve issues by reaching compromise) (6) acceptance (perceptions of acceptance in partners and assessment in relation to whether partners ever looked first at their faults before trying to change their spouses), (7) empathic joining (evidential traces of using soft emotions to state and or present relationship problems) and (8) tolerance building (attempts to change a partner’s intolerable differences to tolerable differences using positive rather than negative behaviours) (9) Unified detachment (giving up the different struggles to change your partner but expressing acceptance) (10) *Mbopo* enhancement (explorations of how the maiden seclusion and fattening practice of the Ibibios may have influenced couples relationship maintenance strategies),.

Results

Behavioural Exchange

A particular participant described behavioural exchange with disappointment encountered in his effort to encourage a disillusioned partner:

“When she feels sad sometimes, I will ask her what is wrong, women are sometimes hard to understand, they can just change. When this happens, I will try to find out and do some good things for her (husband, 35 years old, eight-years in marriage, high school qualification, TBCT, EA)”

Another participant expressed delight in engaging in a culturally-ascribed, gender-specific exchange behaviour in the service of her partner.

"In our tradition, the woman has to give chewing stick as a sign of respect. I don't know whether it is the same thing to give tooth paste and brush, but what it shows is that you love and value your husband and it makes you feel happy too" (Wife, 32 years, FSLC, 8 years of marriage, TBCT, EA)".

Success at Behavioural Exchange

In exploring how successful marital partners were in exchange behaviours, participants expressed wide ranging experiences, some specific, and some unspecific and unconscious.

"I always do them, he can testify that last week we had a happy week together. I do whatever I feel can bring peace (wife, 43, SSCE, 15 years of marriage, TBCT, EA)".

Another participant who appeared to have lost count of such behaviours said:

"I cannot remember everything but we were happy last week because we were able to fix some windows in our new house. We got the money from our joint business (Husband, 35 years old, FSLC, 3 years of marriage, TBCT, EA)".

A spouse reported non-engagement in behavioural exchange due to unhappiness caused by a disagreement and conflict.

"He almost --- well, we were not happy due to a disagreement (Wife, 48, GCE, 12 years in marriage TBCT, EA)".

Poor Communication

The interaction of marital partners with the therapist during the IBCT sessions also revealed issues of poor communication between spouses. Lavner, et al., (2016) had found that communication – to – satisfaction and satisfaction – to – communication pathways were relatively associated with marital functioning. However, studies have found that distressed couples were more likely to engage in negative communication than positive communication (Bradbury & Karney, 2013). In our study episodes, distressed couples reported instances where they engaged in poor communication:

"Yes, what always makes us to quarrel is the way he talks to me, so I will also talk that way even though I will later beg because it is not good. I just don't know what to do when I am angry" (wife, 43, SSCE, 15 years, TBCT Empathically Accurate)".

"I have done this sometimes. I remember when I was very angry with my wife because she used the money we planned for something to buy other things without asking me, but you have to, choose between money and wife – you see (Husband, 53, HND, 27 years, TBCT, Empathically Accurate) "

Uncovered relational trends in participants' thoughts and opinions also reveal that even in the midst of poor communication, some spouses still restrain themselves towards maintaining the relationship.

"If my wife offends me, I always approach her to know why she did what she did. Sometimes what you think may not be how she explains it. This shows that we can infer false meanings from what people do" (Husband 35, GCE, 8 years, text, EA) "

Relationship Gripes:

Relationship gripes are small problems that can snowball into serious relationship resentments and damages. During the sessional dialogues, relational partners identified blaming, child training, alcoholism, impatience, quarrelsome interaction and stonewalling as some of the problematic issues hampering their relationships.

"Yes, we quarrel over how to punish a child when he or she does something wrong. When she gives them too much treatment" (Husband, 29, SSCE 4 years in marriage, TBCT, EA) "

Extensive qualitative analysis particularly revealed that couples encounter relationship problems due to impatience on the part of one or both partners. Data exploration of the sample revealed that spouses were different on what should be the sufficient period between information and action (reaction time).

"My wife will always tell you her needs, but will not give you sufficient time to think about it. She needs immediate solution (Husband, 56, B.Sc, 32 years, IBCT, EA) "

Still on relationship gripes, alcoholism and negative mind-reading came up as important puzzles of concern for wives in their relationship.

"The most important things that make me quarrel with my husband is how he drinks and gets intoxicated, other men can drink but his own...(Wife, 29, FSLC, 10 years, IBCT, EA) "

"It is because when you do not understand his behaviour, you remember similar things in the past and conclude that he may be it is the same (wife, 27 old, FSLC, 3 years, TBCT, EA) "

Problem Solving

The central step in relational problem solving is the ability to foster collaboration through brainstorming. During therapy, partners in this study were primed with relevant scenarios to recall problem solving strategies and scenes in their dyadic encounters. Moreover, therapeutic sessions between couples and researchers offered opportunities to uncover couples peculiar strategies at problem solving.

“When I tell my husband the truth, it is not good for me if he does not believe me. It is better for both people to be truthful so that there will be trust. It is the lack of trust that brings suspicion and problems... and problem is not good” (Wife 32 years old FSCL, 8 years, TBCT, EA).”

In solving problems, participants also identified loyalty and trust as mechanisms to ensure peaceful interaction between spouses. They believe that loyalty breeds respect which is also very essential in warding off relational problems or solving them whenever they arise.

“The wife should submit to the husband and respect him. In the university there, because of too much book knowledge, they may not agree to this (Husband, 50 years, FSLC, 25 years, IBCT, EA)”

“It is men who accuse their wives more. But some women too deserve to be accused. You can see some married women behave immorally. It is bad (Wife, 60, NCE, 38 years, IBCT, EI).”

Acceptance:

The central reasons for updating the Traditional Behavioural Couple Therapy to Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy was to pay additional attention to the recipient (observer) of behaviour and focus less on the agent of behaviour (Dimidjian et al., 2008). The Traditional Behavioural Couple Therapy (TBCT) has, from inception, concentrated all attention on the agent of behaviour hence the over-emphasis on change. With the incorporated component of acceptance, the context can change not only because the agent alters the frequency or intensity of behaviour, but also because the recipient receives the behaviour differently. However, most of the couples in this study could not see acceptance in the way it was formulated. They instead consistently emphasize that there was the need for the other partner to “change” problematic behaviours:

“I cannot accept a behaviour that is not good. She has to change bad behaviours and I have to change mine too. Marriage is give and take – it is not good to give bad behaviour and take good one (Husband 29 years old, OND, 5 years in marriage, IBCT, EI)”

"I sometimes say even though I did this or that to you, you should not do this to me. It should not be an eye for an eye when someone makes a mistake. But when we quarrel, we still go on with our marriage because there is no more place for you in your father's house (Wife, 43 years, FSLC, 25 years of marriage, IBCT, EA)".

Empathic Joining:

Generally, Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy strategies include acceptance and tolerance. Acceptance strategies are used as tools to manage incompatibilities, the differences that seem irreconcilable or problems that are not getting solved (Mairal, 2015). From the theoretical framework of IBCT, the methods of acceptance are opposed to negative methods of change, coercion, vilification and polarization (Mairal, 2015). Empathic joining as an acceptance strategy consists of learning strategies that encourages partners to express their grief or distress in a way that does not project accusation. Sessional transcripts of participants in this study include the following views:

"I remember once that I lost an important document in transit due to the carelessness of my wife who held the document while sitting on a motorbike. I was midway between anger and sadness and actually cried. I did not complain and shout at her but I felt a lot of pain and was trying to pity myself because of the loss. Is this the type of thing you are saying (therapist: yes, part of it). Ok, I have done it. All of us do it at one time or the other (Husband, 36 years, FSLC, 10 years of marriage, TBCT, EA)".

Mairal (2015) had pointed out that the IBCT is a treatment that is not well known but with great potential. The present study, in precaution, took a great deal of effort to get participants into the knowledge of the therapy and they, in turn, showed great interest and optimism in the awareness created. For instance, after an interesting interaction with the therapist, a participant with nostalgia responded as follows:

"There is no need to be complaining always, I have told him many times that it is love that brought me into his (this) house, then if I don't see the love in his actions, I feel lonely and angry. I feel I made a mistake because even now, men do not allow me to rest, he knows and I always tell him that they are disturbing me on the road. If I did not love him, will I not listen to any of them (I mean those people?) (Wife 50 years old, NCE, 27 years marriage, TBCT, EA)".

Unified Detachment

The second component of acceptance is "Unified Detachment", which is oriented towards the two partners to distance themselves from their conflicts and arguments by promoting an intellectual analysis of the problem favouring

impartial, descriptive dialogue (Dimidjian et al., 2008). After a session where unified detachment was explained to participants, the following reactions ensued:

"In the past, we normally see the person who caused the problem and not the problem because somebody caused the problem. No problem can come on its own". (Husband, 50 years old, FSLC, 35 years, IBCT, EA) "

While trying to make sense of the concept of unified detachment, some partners made attempts to relate it to familiar concepts in everyday use.

"I feel this is just another name for forgiveness. If two people (husband and wife) both agree to forget about their problem, then they have forgiven each other. It is good. We always forgive. But can the two people forgive in the same way? Some people will still talk about it later. But I know we forgive each other. (Wife, 48 years, GCE, 12 years marriage, TBCT, EA) "

Mairal (2015) has also explained that unified detachment is "unified" in the sense that the two partners have to get together, by cooperating, to face the problem. However, when the twin strategies of acceptance: empathic joining and unified detachment fail to yield expected results, it becomes necessary to employ other strategies related to tolerance building. The basic feature of tolerance building is to highlight positives out of negatives and take negative behaviour as inroads to remind partners of corresponding positive behaviours. In this study, there was evidence that couples encountered difficult situations that depleted their emotional reservoirs in different relational concerns.

Tolerance Building

Participants also relieved their experiences in accommodating the adverse or excessive mannerisms of their spouses through tolerance building:

"Personally, I tolerate my wife over many things. You cannot have 100% in your life but I believe that as we go on in life my wife will see that this particular behaviour will not keep us in peace. She will even change it without your (i.e. my) advice (Husband, 36 years, FSLC, 10 years, TBCT, EA) "

This strand of response indicates hopefulness that tolerance building is capable of manifesting positive behaviours in the future. Tolerance building can be encouraged in diverse ways including enacting negative behaviours to help partners understand that they can control the intensity of behaviour, identifying the positive aspects of a problem, faking negative behaviours to evaluate them from a more objective standpoint and increasing self-care to increase one's level of independence, thereby decreasing the demands each

partner makes on the other. A similar scenario was created in this exchange:

“Yes, sir, what you say has been happening and we try to make peace and forgive each other. As long as you continue to marry and stay together, all these things happen. In fact, if they don’t happen in a marriage, that marriage will be very dull because they are the different ways (positive or negative) that you talk to your partner “ (Wife, 31 years, NCE, 10 years of marriage, IBCT, EI) ”.

Depending on one’s personality which helps to enact individual differences, people employ different skills which include tolerance building to navigate relational gripes and project or forecast a healthy relationship.

Mbopo Enhancement

Turning to the cultural dimension of peoples’ lives, therapy also explored qualitative information on the *mbopo* rites of passage usually performed on young maidens who were to be handed over to their prospective husbands. Therapy, in this study, sought the understanding and application of *mbopo* in participants’ marital lives. As observed in these reports, qualitative data varied from people’s attitude towards the cultural practice to their direct and indirect experiences in marriage

“Mbopo is good because it helps to teach young women all aspects of home management while preparing them for marriage (Husband, 36, FSLC, 18 years, EA) ”.

“The rules of mbopo have influenced us because some of the things teach us good ways of life which we also learn in church and school. So it is still good” (Wife, 25, SSCE, 5 years, IBCT, EA) ”.

“It is good but the negative sides of the culture makes it incomplete. We need to separate good things from those that people do because of no religious education (Wife, 52 years, FSLC, 12 years in marriage, EA) ”.

“What most people don’t like are the negative things like circumcising the woman to stop her from following other men” (Wife, 25, SSCE, 5 years, IBCT, EA ”.)

“it is bad because of some things like female circumcision. Christianity does not allow this even though some church goers still do it. It is not good (Husband, 44, B.Sc, 11 years in marriage, TBCT, EA) ”.

Participant responses at some point indicated some level of conflict between mbopo practice and Christian beliefs.

“The training now goes on silently in people’s households because of some of the things people use it to do that is against Christianity. God fearing parents now select the good things to teach their daughters ... without the negative ones. Those days, you cannot see special houses where the mbopo are kept. This is because some people look at it as idolatory but the basic morals are still taught in the homes” (Husband, 36, FSLC, 10, TBCT, EA)”.

“Mbopo is still being practised in our communities in a revised form. The fear of God and rules of government makes (many) people not to engage in female circumcision any more. Males too do not like to marry circumcised females for many reasons” (Husband, 35, GCE, 8 years, TBCT, EA)”.

Discussion

In the previous section we presented the findings of the study in discourses identified under the ten formulated dimensions that data emerged in line with the components of the Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy. The purpose of this section is to state our interpretations and opinions about our findings and go further to explain their implications and make suggestions for future research. More specifically, the section attempts to relate or integrate the findings with relevant literature and theory concerning the discourses that emerged, as a way of providing a broader understanding of the various themes.

Relationship maintenance through Behavioural Exchange

Given the descriptions of behavioural exchange as projected by the integrative behavioural couple therapy, participants associated exchange behaviours with several actions they could undertake to make each other happy. These include physically related things, family related things, economic as well as educationally related things. Others were obedience, dialogue, sex, praise, amusement, truthfulness and anniversaries. In support of this, Butzer and Kuiper (2008) had observed that a relationship exists between romantic relationship satisfaction and the use of humour, with more satisfied individuals using more positive humour in both conflict (woeful) and pleasurable situations than less satisfied individuals.

It should be noted that participants in the study were distressed partners of marital conflict, most with low level of education. Viewing this from Gottman and Levenson’s (2006) findings that the first seven years of marriage and midlife (when couples have young teenage children) are crucial periods for

divorce, there appears some empirical and theoretical support with marital duration of participants. As indicated, majority of the participants were married within the 1-7 and 8-14 years duration. Participants' private disclosures with the therapist as well as in joint session as couples were mostly positive behaviours that give them a sense of meaning in their relationships. In support of this, Rogge and Bradbury (2002) had observed that by sampling couples at multipoint over time, is it possible to track change as it is occurring, and this allows a deeper analysis of the mechanisms involved in that change.

Success at Behavioural Exchange

Results of participants verbalizations regarding success at behavioural exchange showed diverse directions of what they actually did, intended to do and what they have been doing but do not remember. These indicate the flow of intimacy which, in some cases, could not be expressed due to psychological barriers such as ego and some measures of conceited self-worth. Specifically, instances of stone walling represent tactical withdrawals intended to measure the other partner's capacity to transit from interdependence to temporary independence. This aligns with Arriaga's (2013) account of the causes and consequences of relationship interactions using the interdependence theory. Notably, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) originated this psychological theory which has found roots in other disciplines, example. sociology (Homans, 1961), anthropology (Malinowski, 1992) and economics (Heath, 1976). The social exchange theory is an economic model of human behaviour where people invest with expectations to gain in interpersonal interaction. Couples who love each other would always find avenues to enact successful behaviours for the other's pleasure.

Poor Communication

Discussions aimed at mitigating poor communication between relational partners were found to contain emotional expressions such as appreciation, discontent and disrespect. This, however did not mean that partners were unconcerned about the state or quality of their relationship but were negotiating routine relational tensions inherent in their union as evidenced in age-long relational perspectives in communication. Qualitative methods greatly seek plurality, complexity and subjectivity in drawing conclusions because they are designed to address these and provide the researcher with the perspectives of target audience members through immersion in a culture or situation and direct interactions with the people under study. Specifically, it is assumed that men communicate to exchange information, while women use it (information) to bond. Nelson and Brown

(2012) have submitted that women use language as a social mechanism for social maintenance and relationship building including the creation of bonds while men use it primarily to exchange information.

Relationship Gripes

The results presented relational gripes as diverse including complaints on alcoholism and disagreements on child training. Emerging exchanges between marital partners reflected issues which tend to evolve, revolve and concentrate around repair strategies ranging from arguments on deeply interactive modes of child training to inability of a spouse to delay gratification of certain needs. These altercations have in past researches been stressed by Emmers and Canary (1996) who coded relational repair strategies into four types including passive, active, interactive and uncertain and found that relational partners relied most on interactive and direct processes in repairing their relationships. However, due to the inability of partners to get their spouses to make the kind of changes they expect, Christensen et al. (2015) explained that most crimes of the heart are misdemeanors which may not be as huge as the transgressions of infidelity, but they may still be construed as blatant disregard of the other spouse's feelings.

Problem Solving

In this study, participants' disposition on problem solving still emerged age-long cultural expectations regarding the relationship between husband and wife in the Ibibio cultural setting. For example, when discussing problems associated with dyadic exchanges, women did not lose the sense of respect that is culturally expected of them in reverence to their husbands. Problem solving generally entails emotional maturity as observed during therapeutic exchanges, even though at some point certain emotions tend to run out of control. The study has shown that participants were least influenced by their level of education, chronological age or number of years in marriage but were mostly governed by the empathic rhythm of their attachment towards their spouse. The unfolding exchange also revealed that although participants were screened on the basis of their empathy levels, qualitative data reflected the transference of routine interaction between personalities of the partners involved. In sum, problem solving skills were as diverse as the genre of couples' personalities.

Acceptance

The theoretical model of change in IBCT suggests that acceptance promoting strategies (primarily, unified detachment and empathic joining) will

usually result in shared vulnerability, externalization of the problem and non-blaming, intellectualized discussions and conflictual interactions (Wiedeman, 2011). It also means that acceptance would involve changing an aversive value from an aversive outcome to a more attractive outcome (Cordova, 2001).

Empathic Joining

Outcomes of empathic joining in our therapy sessions were mixed as participants expressed emotions revealing their individual differences. The IBCT conceptual model of relationship difficulties holds that relationship distress develops primarily through couples' repeated and unsuccessful attempts to deal with natural differences or initial localized disagreements that are often emotionally loaded because of partner's sensitivities and vulnerabilities (Doss et al., 2013). Mixed outcomes noticed among study participants point to situations where they blame their partners for their emotional suffering and at the same time verbalized their desire to identify the soft feelings underneath their anger and disappointments, loneliness, abandonment, embarrassment and shame. The interchange of a 50-year old wife as indicated in the result represented a woman's evolving and loving feelings towards the husband in an attempt to create assurance of commitment, which should as well be reciprocated by the husband. This process can help spouses to become a team, learning each others stories, rather than blaming each other for all the problems in the relationship. In essence, it presents the message that instead of shifting blames, spouses should join hands, in support of the doctrine of unified detachment.

Unified Detachment

Available theoretical evidence has shown that whereas "empathic joining" focuses on a close emotional look at separating the problems from a partner, "unified detachment" takes a more distant, intellectual and objective look at justly rejecting the problem. In our study's sessional interactions, spouses attempted to draw meanings from the therapist's responses which, on the whole, brought them together in attacking the problem. This scenario situates with Christensen et al. (2015) views that the therapist can promote unified detachment by continually referring back to the major theme in the partners' interactions, their pattern of interaction, and the mutual trap into which they both fall. It was apparent in this study that spouses were cooperative in addressing relationship issues that tended to pull them apart.

Tolerance Building:

Concerning this component, observations from participants' exchanges

showed levels of effort in spouses to build tolerance in their relationships. Tolerance building is absolutely necessary in relationships because an important assumption in IBCT is that many important differences between partners and the problems that those differences create will never be completely erased (Christensen et al., 2004). Based on Ibibio people's ethos whose worldview and values strongly abhor divorce and separation in all its ramifications, spouses reported several strategies and tools from their personality repertoires which they use to accommodate each other in order to increasingly enhance their relationships.

***Mbopo* Enhancement**

Apart from inferences drawn from Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy in the Ibibio sub-culture, feelers from participants showed that the pre-marital preparation of young women through the *mbopo* practice were, at the same time, strange as well as familiar in some respect to spouses in the course of therapeutic interaction. The testimonies from participants who had relative information and experience about *mbopo* as a cultural ritual mostly (village dwellers and aged people) and those without such experiences (city dwellers and young people) showed differential perceptions of the utility and acceptability of the practice among people of various generational groups.

In summary, these qualitative episodes indicate diverse strategies that support healthy as well as distressing interaction in relationship maintenance. However, the study's findings have shown that relationship maintenance among Ibibio couples is, as expected, high and diverse depending on relationship ecologies of couples concerned.

Limitations

We recognize that several limitations may have impacted the global utility of this study because of the process of interpreting and translating data presented in this research. First, field interactions with spouses were given in different languages and formats which were later harmonized (translated) into the English language. Second, spouses expressed their views under the therapeutic process which places the therapist as a superior partner in the process. This power differential and distance, as well as the presence of a participant's spouse at some levels of the therapeutic interaction, may have influenced the content of verbalizations that emerge from spouses in the course of therapeutic interactions. This may at some point lead to distortions in order to play safe with one's partner intentional.

Conclusion

The research employed qualitative design that incorporated semi-structured interviews to better understand couples' perceptions and experiences about relationship maintenance from the perspective of the Integrative Behavioural Couple Therapy. Both positive and negative behaviours were identified. However, spouses appreciated the opportunity that therapy (IBCT) provided within the ambience of daily interactions, even as they were aware of the numerous challenges that dyadic interaction provided on a day-to-day basis. Our research confirms that outcomes of the IBCT provide useful scientific guide for partners to improve their interaction for sustained relationship. It is important to mention that since the goal of phenomenological research is not to generalize but to understand particular phenomena, there will be no need to anticipate generalization or expectation of external validity of this study. Finally, whereas a narrative study reports the life of a single individual, a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon and focuses on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon which, in this study, is marital relationship maintenance.

The study therefore serves as a strong reference to how couples should learn to interact to keep their relationships against the adverse currents of intolerance and despair. Moreover, future researchers and therapists would appreciate it as a compendium of solutions and ideas about marriage and its maintenance strategies.

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