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Abstract

This study sought to establish the prevalence of marriage conflicts and marital instability among middle-aged couples in Suneka, Kisii County. The target population of the research was 1000 participants, with a focus on the middle-aged couples in Suneka, Kisii. The study was quantitative and employed a descriptive design. The study randomly drew a sample of 314 from the target population using Yaro Yamane formulae. The data was collected using a structured questionnaire of 32 items. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to the 314 respondents and after two months she went back and collected the filled questionnaires. The data analysis was done using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 23 and presented using tables. The findings of the study revealed a positive and significant relationship between couples' prevalence and their marital stability. The study recommends that married couples need help in learning how to deal with conflicts. Teaching biblical principles of marriage can reduce if not end the trend of marital instability. This would be in line with Christian belief that God created man and woman and blessed their union to be a lifetime. However, as other factors may center on highly functioning marriages, quality sex life among couples is the main tributary of it (communication) to enhance the joyful and thankful relationship.

Keywords: *Prevalence of marriage conflicts, married couples, marital instability*

1.0 Introduction

Marriage instability among middle-aged women has become prevalent both in western and non-western cultures. According to Santrock (2015), middle-aged couples stretch from ages 40 to 65 years. This age bracket faces two challenges in relation to upholding marital relationships: the backgrounds contracted into a new life scenario and intimacy issues. From the age of 40, some middle-aged couples struggle with intimacy—whether they are still loved and wanted and are afraid of being rejected by family and society. Couples that fail to merge their values and interests to sustain a successful marriage end up in a botched intimacy. Hence, intimacy versus isolation markedly increases marital instability (Frisbie et al., 2008). With the increasing globalisation, unhealthy marriages habits are easily being copied as people strive to acquire an identity and autonomy (Harrell-Bond, 2019). As a result, the ancient African culture in which marriage stability was valued and embraced in the society is eroding speedily and making many young people hesitant in getting into marriage as the bigger percentage of marriages are not stable. In this confusion, middle-aged marriages are

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seemingly the target of conflict and instability because of the influence of the psychological traits, the environment, and personal choices that influence their behavior (Berger, 2005).

In yester years most men oversaw their family operations and even commanded respectable authority. However, since the implementation of the no-fault laws in the late 1960s, which in a nutshell suggests to couples that dissolving a marriage is appropriate, and the justification for the dissolution is no one's business (Olson, 2014), marriage problems have increased. With this, couples have adopted habits of walking away out of marriages without a second thought because their actions are backed by the law, whereby the law has helped to remove the stigma associated with separation and divorce as it allows couples to maintain their respectable positions in their communities without feeling guilty. In Europe, for instance, divorce by mutual consent is a major ground for divorce (Boele-Woelki et al., 2004). The current trend is that couples do not need to work hard to save their marriage. As it used to be in the past women always were determined to save their marriages, but this has changed drastically as more women have been empowered. Women can now comfortably take care of their needs without the support of their husbands. This has contributed a great deal to the high rate of marital instability.

Suneka S-County is one region that has been marred with several marital conflicts leading to separations and even divorces. According to Monyancha (2017), the divorce rate in Kisii County is 73% and leads to untold psychological problems and women who are the pillars of the homes are more stressed. This is against God, the author and perfecter of marriages. Malachi 2: 16 declares "For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and him who covers his garment with wrong, says the Lord of hosts. So, take heed to your spirit that you do not deal treacherously". The need, therefore, to investigate the relationship between prevalence of marriage conflicts and marital instability among middle-aged couples in Suneka Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya.

1.1 Research Problem

The existence of the family institution is constantly threatened by various forces, but it remains the most important and relevant institution in the development of a holistic society. According to Kutara (2015), about 49% of marriages in Kenya are experiencing marital distress. This means many families are going through instabilities caused by marital conflicts which make them unproductive in their role of holistically nurturing future generations. Since all other relationships in any society all over the world stem from the father-mother relationship, it means that other relationships can only thrive if the family relationship is simultaneously a close functioning relationship because the family is the bedrock of strong societies.

Unfortunately, in Kisii County in Kenya as highlighted by Monyancha (2017) there has been an increase in domestic violence and infidelity including cheating on one's spouse resulting in serious differences and disagreements within many marriages which often leads to divorce and severe emotional stress in both spouses and the children out of the marriage. There is limited research done in Kisii County on the prevalence of marriage conflicts and marital instability among middle aged couples.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by the cognitive behavior theory and Attribution Theory. The cognitive behavior theory assumes how people think (cognition), how they feel (emotion) and how the act (behavior) is closely interrelated. Our thought pattern affects how we feel and hence brings out the behavior we display. This theory was pioneered by Becker in the 1960s. Becker discovered in his research that depressed people experienced streams of negative thoughts that seemed to arise naturally. Lately, behavioral therapists have even realized that

people not only act but also think and feel. The cognitive approach believes that people's interpretation of other people's behavior affects the way they relate with other people and respond to them. We interact with the world through our mental presentation of it—where our mental presentations are inaccurate then our emotions and behavior become distorted. For example, a husband comes home late from work the wife concludes he has been having an affair, a child spends a night out parents conclude he or she is up to no good. Cognitive theory is an approach to psychology that attempts to explain human behavior by understanding their thought processes. The implication here is that cognitive theory is a dependable orientation to researchers' and marital counsellors' understanding of human functioning that includes the ideas and contributions couples bring into their marriage relationships (Turner, 2008).

In general, cognitive theories assume that maladaptive behavior especially in marital relationships results from irrational or distorted ways of thinking influenced by internal erroneous thought processes. The twisted cognition distorts the way couples see things. Becker (1960) proposed that this is negative thoughts about self the world and the future have significant effects on people's relationships. He emphasizes "here and now" principles asserting that it is mostly more rewarding to focus on contemporary processes rather than the past plaque. However, critics of the cognitive theory claim that it ignores all other factors that have been shown to influence behavior. It focuses basically on the cognitive process that cannot be directly observed and heavily relies on inferences—things that cannot be easily measured.

Attribution Theory

The attribution theory as noted by Winkler (2013), is primarily about achievement and the most critical factor associated with attributions is the couple's ability to lead their marriages to stability amid uncertainties caused by shifting circumstances. The suggestion here is that *attribution theories* deal with the formation of individual's opinions about the causes of events or observations. It is involved with how people interpret their experiences with events in life and how such experiences influence their thought patterns and behavior. This observation is supported by Winkler (2013) when he suggested that attribution theory presumes people seek to determine why other people do what they do—that is they attempt to attribute causes of people's behavior.

According to Pappas (2016), there is a three-stage process that underlies attribution theories: "first, the person must perceive or observe the behavior, second, then the person must believe that the behavior was intentionally performed, and third, then the person must determine if they believe the other person was forced to perform the behavior in which case the cause is attributed to the situation or not in which case the cause is attributed to the other person." The implication here is that the theory presumes all people are balanced intellectuals capable of using external and internal cues to help them rationally explain what goes on around their environment, especially their marriage relationships. The attribution theory also assumes all people can use internal cues (their views about their surrounding environments) and external cues (their observations about their surrounding environments) to correctly attribute causes to outcomes in their marriage relationships and ensure they remain stable.

However, attribution theory is often used by couples to blame one another and avoid personal convictions that more often than not lead to marital instability and sometimes separation or divorce. The blame game can also lead couples in disgruntled relationships to avoid engaging in activities that might expose their weaknesses out of fear of rejection.

2.1 Empirical Review

There are many causal factors related to marital conflicts such as money, sexual issues, improper communication, and negative influence from relatives, recreational issues, religious issues, bad influence from friends, alcohol abuse, and differing ideologies on parenting, and jealousy (Storaasli & Markman, 2009). A similar study conducted by Fincham and Beach (2015) revealed that most couple conflicts emanated from sharp individual differences, poor verbal communication and physical abuse. Fincham and Beach's (2015) study also reported that having two centers of power or an extreme source of power was a key source of marital conflict and instability.

A study in a rural area of Matlab, Bangladesh on divorced, abandoned, and widowed children found out that desertion by husband, non-fulfillment dowry demands, physical and sexual abuses of the wives were major prevalent reasons for the marital disruption in rural areas that were studied by Bhuiya et al. in 2005. Steiner, et al. (2011) also noted infidelity in marriage as a key factor that was causing marital conflicts and instability. According to Bosch (2011), the way couples dealt with interpersonal verbal expressions towards each other determined whether their marriage relationships remained intact or were dissolved. This observation was supported by Rehman et al. (2011) who argued that high levels of negative expressions vis-a-vis low levels of positive expressions during any form of argument highly contributed to marital conflict and dissolution. The implication here is that spouses who do not recognize the value of their partners will always find an issue to quarrel about, however minor it might be.

A study done in Ghana (Tuffour, 2017) concerning conflicts in marriage showed that many marriages are in trouble thus there is a big need for premarital counseling programs to be conducted before marriages to help couples stick together. Like many other places in the world, the divorce rate in Suneka is on the rise hence the need to investigate psychological factors that are attributing to the state of marriage breakdown.

3.0 Research Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive research design. According to Saunders et al., (2014), descriptive research aims at describing when and what of a problem under investigation. Sekaran and Bougie (2013) purport that descriptive research design describes situations in detail. The current study was conducted in the Suneka sub-county in Kisii County. Suneka Sub-County borders Kisii Town which is one of the major urban centers in South-Western Kenya. The target population of the research was 1000 middle-aged couples in Suneka, Kisii County. The Yaro Yamane formulae was used to determine a sample size of 314 respondents. After determining the sample size, she arranged all the couples alphabetically according to their gender and selected the *n*th number until she obtained the required numbers. From a target population of 1000, the sample size was 285 but the researcher added 10% of the population to cater for drop-out rates which gave a working sample size of 314 respondents. In this study, the researcher used a modified fashion of the Dyadic Adjustment scale as the data collection instrument.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The objective of this study was to determine the prevalence of marriage conflicts among middle-aged couples in Suneka Sub-County, Kisii County, Kenya. The findings are summarized in table 1.

Table 1: couples' prevalence of conflicts

Items 8-15		Always Agree	Almost Always Agree	Occasionally Disagree	Frequently Disagree	Almost Always Disagree	Always Disagree
Handling family finances		10 3.2%	40 12.9%	85 27.4%	40 12.9%	20 6.4%	115 37.2%
Leisure interests and activities	time and	30 10%	60 20%	50 16%	30 10%	10 3.2%	130 40.8%
Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws		30 10%	40 0%	85 27%	45 15%	110 35%	40 13%
Demonstration of affection	of	0 0%	33 10.6%	40 13%	51 16.8%	110 35.5%	75 24%
Sexual relationship		0 0%	0 0%	65 21%	115 37%	30 10%	100 32%
Conventionality (correct or proper behavior)		28 9.3%	10 3.2%	50 16%	22 7%	130 42%	70 22.5%
Philosophy of life		0 0%	0 0%	65 21%	115 37%	30 10%	100 32%
Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws		30 10%	40 0%	85 27%	45 15%	110 35%	40 13%
Demonstration of affection	of	0 0%	33 10.6%	40 13%	51 16.8%	110 35.5%	75 24%
Work together on a project.		30 10%	50 16%	44 14%	26 8.4%	150 48.4%	10 3.2%
Handling family finances	family	10 3.2%	40 12.9%	85 27.4%	40 12.9%	20 6.4%	115 37.2%
Conventionality (correct or proper behavior)		28 9.3%	10 3.2%	50 16%	22 7%	130 42%	70 22.5%
Leisure interests and activities	time and	30 10%	60 20%	50 16%	30 10%	10 3.2%	130 40.8%
Career decisions		20 6.5%	30 10%	30 10%	100 30.5%	80 26%	50 17%

Handling family finances the significant number of the respondents stated they never at 37.2%, followed by those more of than not at 27.4%, then those who stated most of the time(2) and occasionally both at 12.9%, then followed by rarely at 6.4%, then followed by all the time at 3.2%. The findings, therefore, revealed a significant number of respondents never

discussed matters concerning finances and how to spend their money with their spouses thus leading to arguments which in most cases was a venue for marital instability.

Leisure time interests and activities: the significant number of respondents stated never at 40.8%, followed by most of the time at 20%, then followed by more of than not at 16% then those stated all the time at 10% and occasionally both at 10% and the least was stated rarely at 3.2%. The findings, therefore, indicate a significant number of respondents never hold leisure time activities together which means they do not have special times together which often leads to animosity.

On the dealing with parents or in-laws who stated that rarely at 35%, followed by most of than not at 27%, then followed by occasionally at 15%, then followed by never at 13% and the least was all the time at 10%. Therefore, a significant number of respondents stated that they had a challenge relating to in-laws as the families felt they were never good enough for their sons or daughter.

The responses were as follows the demonstration of affection rarely at 35.5%. Trailed by those who stated never at 24%, then by those stated all the time at 16.8%. Then those who stated more than not at 13%. Then finally by those who stated most of the time at 10.6%. A significant number of respondents revealed that when it comes to demonstration of affection it was rare as they never thought it was important in their marriage thus creating conflict as the language of love was not clearly understood by both spouses.

On friends, the responses were as follows the significant number of respondents stated that it happens occasionally at 39%, followed by those who state never at 29%, then followed by those who stated rarely at 16%, followed by those who stated more of than not at 8.4%, then followed by most of the time at 4.8% and the least stated all the time at 3.2%. The findings indicated that the couples had friends occasionally but some of their friends had a negative impact on their marriages as their behavior and utterances caused disagreement among spouses.

The sexual relationship the significant number of respondents stated that occasionally at 37%, followed by never at 32%, then those who stated more of then not at 21%, then rarely at 10%. The findings indicated that a significant number of respondents rarely had fulfilling sex which led to feelings of unloved and anger due to the unmet sexual needs which lead to extramarital affairs among some couples and in turn lead to instability in their marriage.

The responses on the conventionality which is correct proper behavior who stated rarely at 42%, followed by those who stated that never at 22.5%, then followed by those who stated that more than not at 16%. Then followed by all the time at 9.3%, followed by those who stated it was occasionally at 7% and the least most of the time at 3.2%. These findings indicate that showing conventionality among couples was rare as most couples never complimented their spouses especially in public which left some of them not being sure if they were truly loved.

On the philosophy of life, the significant number of respondents stated never 35.4%, followed by those who stated more than not at 23.4%, followed by most of the time at 18.4% rarely at 13% and the least were all the time at 3.2%. The finding, therefore, reveals that many couples shared different philosophies of life hence increasing the instability in their marriages.

Career decisions the significant number of respondents stated occasionally at 30.5%, followed by rarely at 26%, followed by Never at 17%, followed by most of the time at 10%, then the least was all the time at 6.5%. The findings, therefore, revealed that a significant number of respondents rarely held discussions on career decisions which is a recipe for marital instability.

Handling family finances the significant number of the respondents stated they never at 37.2%, followed by those more of than not at 27.4%, then those who stated most of the time and occasionally were both at 12.9%, then followed by rarely at 6.4%, then followed by all the time at 3.2%. Therefore, a significant number of respondents never discussed matters concerning finances thus leading to a lot of arguments which in most cases is an avenue for marital instability.

On work together on a project that a significant number of respondents stated it happens rarely at 48.4%, then most of the time at 16%, then followed by those who stated least never at 3.2%. On working together therefore a significant number of respondents stated it happened at minimal times. The research findings revealed that most men started projects then informed their wives later which contributed to quarrels and disagreement and in turn contributing to marital instability.

Leisure time interests and activities the significant number of respondents stated never at 40.8%, followed by most of the time at 20%, then followed by those who indicated more than not at 16% then those stated all the time at 10% and occasionally were both at 10% and the least was stated rarely at 3.2%. The findings, therefore, indicated a significant number of respondents never held leisure time activities together which means they do not frequently participate in activities that species their marriages hence most of the marriages were unexciting and lonely which often led to marital instability.

Career decisions the significant number of respondents stated occasionally at 30.5%, followed by rarely at 26%, followed by those who indicated never at 17%, followed by most of the time at 10%, then the least was all the time at 6.5%. The findings, therefore, revealed that most couples occasionally had similar prevalence with their partners which means if they are given proper psychosocial education, they could effectively adjust their choices in life and avoid conflicts which often leads to separation and sometimes divorce.

This study, which sought to determine how a couple's prevalence affected the marital stability among middle-aged couples in Suneka Sub-County, Kisii county, Kenya generated one null hypothesis to test if there was no significant relationship between couple's prevalence and their marital stability. Table 2 gives a summary of the Pearson correlation matrix results.

Table 2: Regression coefficients of prevalence of marriage conflicts and their marital stability

Coefficients ^a					
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T
		B	Std. Error	Beta	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.166	.173		12.503
	Prevalence	.454	.044	.508	10.347

a. Dependent variable: Marital stability

Table 2 indicates that there is a positive and significant relationship between couples' prevalence and their marital stability since (P-value =0.000< 0.05. This indicates that if

couples address factors leading to prevalence of conflicts it will lead to enhanced marital stability by 0.454 to the constant marital stability at 2.166. This implies that the null hypothesis (Ho1) was rejected, leading to the conclusion that there is a positive and significant effect between couples' prevalence of conflicts and their marital stability.

The findings on how couples' prevalence relates to their marital stability revealed that most respondents indicated that they were happy almost all the time. On the question of how often they discuss or have considered divorce, separation, or terminating relationships a significant number of respondents indicated rarely. This means there is a positive relationship between couples' prevalence of conflicts and marital stability. There is a positive and significant relationship between couples' prevalence and their marital stability. This indicates that if couples address factors leading to prevalence of conflicts it will lead to enhanced marital stability by 0.454 to the constant marital stability at 2.166.

5.0 Conclusion

The study findings revealed that most ingredients that lead to marital stability have not been given the prominence that they deserve such as couples' sense of self which contributes greatly to an individual's demonstration of affection to his or her spouse through friendly behavior, disclosing his or her feelings to their marriage mates as well as discussing issues calmly. The study findings indicated that when this is not correctly done it can be a recipe for marital instability.

6.0 Recommendations

Based on current research findings, the researcher recommends that couples need psychosocial education to enhance their sense of self, motivation, and right attitude towards marriage to boost their communication about marital issues that lead to conflicts, separation and sometimes divorce. If couples are taught how to get along with one another, they would be helped to build better relationships both in their marriage and in society. As such, couples should be told about the importance of listening to one another, self-disclosure, mutual acceptance, and understanding. This is likely to go a long way in preventing marital problems which lead to divorce.

This is because God created man and woman and blessed their union to last for life. The Bible also has many passages like Ephesian. 5:22-27, that teach about how couple can keep their marriage intact which means when these teachings are carefully and systematically taught at home and in the church by mature Christian leaders, many couples are likely to remain together and resist non-biblical values about marriage sex and love in marriage which leading some marriages to break down under the pressure of frequent disagreements over various issues.

The world we live in today often tempts many couples to prioritize their demands over their marriage and family relationships and it is churches' responsibility to offer proper psychoeducation to couples about spending time with their spouses which this study findings have highlighted as key in keeping marriages intact. The implication here is that marriages take time, effort, and commitment to make them grow and churches should encourage couples to prioritize their marriage because this would reduce marital problems. This is because communication was revealed by these research findings among other research findings as a key element in the success of marriages which means ignorance of quality communication in marriage has adverse negative effects on marriage relationships.

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