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A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF MARITAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study sought to establish the level of marital adjustment among 198 students (135 male and 63 female) of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) at the Manicaland and the Masvingo regional campuses. These students were on the B.Sc. Counselling, B.Sc. Psychology and B.Sc. Special Education programmes. The adapted Locke's Marital Adjustment Test (LMAT) was administered to collect data. The results showed that the bulk of the ZOU students were perfectly happy and only a small percentage was outright unhappy in their marriages. The former would remarry the same partner if they were given a second-chance, while a high percentage of the latter would marry a different partner. The respondents in unhappy marriages predicted divorce, but those in happy marriages did not. Even those unhappy in their present marriages wished to remarry again if given a second chance, although, understandably, they would wish to marry different partners from those they presently live with. Recommendations on overcoming marital maladjustment were given, and these are given as suggestions for comprehensive research studies in the area.

Introduction

Marriage is one of the oldest and most popular institutions among human beings. Much as marriage may take a number of forms, it is mainly conceived as a legitimate sexual union, begun with a public announcement and undertaken with some idea of permanence (Stephens, 1971). It is a social arrangement which spells out the reciprocal rights and obligations between spouses and future children. Thus, marriage is seen as involving a number of social skills that give rise to happiness, and satisfaction and the absence of which can lead to much unhappiness and, perhaps, even divorce. Some of the pro social skills that differentiate a happy from an unhappy marriage include mutual trust, understanding, compatibility, commitment, care and satisfaction. This means that the relationship is characterised by total commitment to, total self-donation of, one another, accompanied by the taking of responsibilities that lead to mutual well-being.

According to Sinha and Mukerjee (1990: 633), marital adjustment is "the state in which there is an overall feeling in husband and wife of happiness and satisfaction with their marriage and with each other." Thus, it can be assumed that the families which are happy have higher levels of such attributes as care, mutual concern, understanding and acceptance. In line with the thinking of Sinha and Mukerjee (1990), marital adjustment/happiness can be seen at two levels. The first is acceptance of marriage as an institution. The second is the satisfaction of a spouse with a specific individual with whom one shares life space in marriage.

There seems to be some agreement over areas of marital adjustment. These include religion, social life, mutual friends, in-laws, finances, sexual relationship, communication, recreation, companionship, parenting and personality, among several possible others (Landis et al, 1975; Mace, 1982; Sison, 1976; Tevaraj, 1988). Any differences in these areas could lead to conflict within a marriage.

The presence of marital instability and the increasing divorce rates in developing and developed countries have resulted in two important consequences. The first is widespread societal concern. The second consequence is a strong academic interest, both of a theoretical and empirical nature (Booth & Johnson, 1983, Bumpass & Sweet, 1972, & McRae & Brody, 1989). The rates of divorce worldwide seem to be escalating at an ever-alarming rate. For example, Martin and Bumpass (1989) estimated that 65% of new marriages in the United States of America (USA) fail. These figures are likely to be an underestimate because there are many marital arrangements whose break up may not qualify as divorce per se. For instance, there are increasing numbers of people who are living together in some sort of trial marriages. The break-up of such unions is not likely to count officially as divorces, when, in actual fact, they are. In addition to this, there are many states in the USA which do not systemically enumerate and record divorces.

Lapuz (1986) mentions factors that pose problems to marital adjustment among Philippino couples. Some of these are role reversal when women take over the breadwinner roles from men, problems with in-laws, irrational jealousy, incompatibility and power conflicts. He further states that marital unfaithfulness influences the relationship of couples and their marital adjustment. These observations seem to be also true of countries like Zimbabwe. Some researchers such as Landis (1975) cite such factors as short pre-marriage acquaintance between the spouses. He contends that the longer the time over which partners know each

other before marriage, the more likely the index marriage is likely to be a happy one. Landis' assertion may carry some water, but could be simplistic. The length of pre-marriage acquaintance can only be one of the factors in a whole complex of other factors (Lapuz, 1986; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Jenetius, 2003). There is bound to be problems in a marriage in which parties perceive the concept of marital adjustment differently and hold different expectations for their marriage relationship. This difference of perception can arise from the very reason why individuals marry. Different people marry for different reasons or combinations of reasons. Bowman (1970) states that the varieties of reasons for which people marry includes sex and sexual attraction, love, economic security, escape from loneliness and unhappy home situations. These reasons for marriages also include such concepts as common interests and the desire to have children.

Nature of communication also affects marital adjustment. Sison (1976), for instance, found that couples that communicated more regularly on important family issues or areas adjusted better in their marriages. This finding was based on the intuitive sense that communication breathes life into love relationships, provides awareness for each other's feelings, needs, problems and expectations. These findings have more recently been revisited by other researchers who have fine-tuned and expanded them considerably. For example, Gottman and Levenson (2002) found that over half of the divorces in the USA are not due to lack of communication, but a result of the presence of too much communication of the wrong type. They state that early years of marriage are made up of a cluster of variables that describe a high level of expressiveness and a tendency to be volatile and highly emotional in attempts to adjust to the new marriage status.

The positive effects of happy marriages do not seem to be in doubt. Coghlan (2002: 5) speaks for many when she observes that "research has consistently shown that having a good marriage is good for our health, happiness, longevity and of course our children."

The researchers of this study are not aware of any research on marital adjustment that has been done in Zimbabwe. It is for this reason that an attempt to study the Zimbabwe situation is being made.

Statement of the Problem

This study sought to find out the levels of marital adjustment among students registered with the ZOU at the Manicaland and Masvingo campuses in the year 2002. Specifically, the study sought to find answers to the following questions:

- What is the degree of happiness of the ZOU students in their marriages?
- What is the perceived extent of agreement or disagreement between couples on important family issues?

Hypotheses

It was hypothesised that:

- There is a relationship between level of marital adjustment and prediction of divorce.
- Male spouses are more prone to predicting divorce than female spouses.
- More couples express happiness rather than unhappiness with their marriages.

Methodology

Sample

A total of 198 subjects participated in this study. Of these, 135 were male, while 63 were female. Their ages ranged from 23 to 45 years.

Instrumentation

The researchers adapted Locke's Marital Adjustment Test (LMAT). The test was piloted on 20 married people to check for any possible ambiguities of the items on the test. The instrument asked respondents to indicate their degree of happiness in their marriages on scale line. They were also asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement among themselves and their spouses on given family issues. The instrument also asked the respondents to indicate whether they would marry the same person, a different person or not marry at all if they were given a second chance.

Procedure

Volunteer married students on the B.Sc. Counselling, B.Sc. Psychology and B.Sc. Special Education filled out the Marital Adjustment Test during the ZOU's March/April weekend schools in 2002. The researchers personally administered the test to the volunteers and collected the completed instruments.

Data Analysis

Data from the completed Marital Adjustment Test were analysed and presented. Table 1 shows the degree of happiness experienced by 198 respondents in their marriages.

Results

Table 1: Degree of Happiness (N=198)

| Degree of Happiness | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Perfectly happy | 30 | 15.1% |
| Very happy | 75 | 37.9% |
| Happy | 60 | 30.3% |
| Outright happy | 33 | 16.7% |

Table 1 shows that 83.3% of the subjects fell within the very happy and perfectly happy category. Just over half the sample were within the and perfectly happy group. Only 16.7 % of the sample registered unhappiness with their marriage.

Table 2 shows that the subjects did not always agree on important family issues or areas of marital adjustment. In general, the table shows that the subjects nearly always agreed on important issues. There was considerable disagreement between the perfectly happy and the outright unhappy couples in areas to do with recreation and sexual relations. The table also shows that partners who were outright unhappy disagreed with their partners on demonstration of affection, friends (disapproval of spouse's friends) and philosophy of life.

Table 2: Index of Agreement on Important Family Issues of Areas of Marital Adjustment (N=198)

| Area of Marital Adjustment | Degree of Happiness | Average Score/ Index of Agreement | Possible Score (Always Agree) |
|----------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Financial | Perfectly Happy | 3.8 | 5 |
| | Outright Unhappy | 3.7 | |
| Demonstration of Affection | Perfectly Happy | 5.6 | 8 |
| | Outright Unhappy | 5.4 | |
| Friends | Perfectly Happy | 4.1 | 5 |
| | Outright Unhappy | 3.2 | |
| Sex-relations | Perfectly Happy | 11.4 | 15 |
| | Outright Unhappy | 9.9 | |
| In-laws | Perfectly Happy | 3.9 | 5 |
| | Outright Unhappy | 3.6 | |
| Recreation | Perfectly Happy | 3.3 | 5 |
| | Outright Unhappy | 3.1 | |
| Conventionality | Perfectly Happy | 4.1 | 5 |
| | Outright Unhappy | 3.7 | |
| Philosophy of life | Perfectly Happy | 3.8 | 5 |
| | Outright Unhappy | 3.1 | |

Table 3 shows that 24 (72.7%) partners, who were outright unhappy with their marriages, did expect or, at least, did not rule out divorce in their relationships. On the other hand, no one in the group that was perfectly happy expected his/her marriage to end up in divorce. Contrariwise, only seven (21%) of the respondents in the outright unhappy group ruled out divorce from their marriages. Only 6 (10%) of the respondents in the happy group predicted divorce in their marriages. 18 (30%) marginally predicted divorce in this group. A clear majority of 36 respondents (60%) in this group did not predict divorce as the destination for their marriages. The figures in the very happy group reveal that only three (4%) of the respondents predicted that marriages could end up in divorce. 18 (24%) marginally expected their marriages to end in divorce, while 54 (72%) ruled out the possibility of divorce as a destination for their families. None of the respondents in the perfectly happy group

predicted divorce in their families. Only six respondents (20%) marginally expected divorce to occur in their families, while an overwhelming majority of 24 (80%) ruled out the possibility of their marriages ending up in divorce. In summary, 33 (17%) out of the total of 198 subjects predicted high chances of divorce. Of these, 12 (36.4%) were female, while 21 (63.6%) were male.

Table 3: Prediction of Divorce (N=198)

| Degree of Happiness | Score | Frequency/Percentages | Prediction of Divorce |
|---------------------|-------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Outright Unhappy | 7-10 | 24 (72.7%) | Yes |
| | 5-6 | 2 (6.1%) | Marginal |
| | 0-4 | 7 (21.2%) | No |
| Happy | 7-10 | 6 (10%) | Yes |
| | 5-6 | 18 (30%) | Marginal |
| | 0-4 | 36 (60%) | No |
| Very happy | 7-10 | 3 (4%) | Yes |
| | 5-6 | 18 (24%) | Marginal |
| | 0-4 | 54 (72%) | No |
| Perfectly happy | 7-10 | 0 (0%) | Yes |
| | 5-6 | 6 (20%) | Marginal |
| | 0-4 | 24 (80%) | No |

Table 4 shows that 91 % of those subjects in the outright unhappy category would marry a different partner, while only 9 % would marry the same person if they had a second chance. Only 15 % of those in the happy category would marry a different person while 10% of them would not marry at all. Four percent of the very happy category would marry a different person. In the perfectly happy group, none of them would marry a different person, but 20% of these would not marry at all.

Table 4: Whom One would Marry if Given a Second Chance (N=198)

| Level of Adjustment | Marry Same Partner | Marry Different Partner | Not Remarry at All | Total |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Outright unhappy | 3 (9%) | 30 (91%) | 0 (0%) | 33 |
| Happy | 45 (75%) | 9 (15%) | 6 (10%) | 60 |
| Very happy | 72 (96%) | 3 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 75 |
| Perfectly happy | 24 (80%) | 0 (0%) | 6 (20%) | 30 |
| Total | 144 | 42 | 12 | 198 |

Discussion

The results here revealed that 83.3% of ZOU students in this study were happy in their marriages. We did, however, find some disagreements in these marriages, which centred on sex relations, matters of recreation, demonstration of affection, attitudes to the spouse's friends, and philosophy of life.

The results also revealed that marriage was important to our sample of respondents judged by the percentage (100%) who, even where there was unhappiness, would marry again if given a second chance. There are findings in the American situation that seem to agree in some way with our findings here. Baring the high rate of divorce, 96% of American public has expressed a personal desire for marriage, only 8% of American women consider remaining single. According to Blankehorn, Bayme and Bethke (1990: 97-98) almost three-quarters of adult Americans believe that "marriage is a lifelong commitment that should not be ended except under extreme circumstances." Even 81% of divorced and separated Americans believe that marriage should be for life.

The results also showed that chances of divorce were perceived to be higher by those partners who were in the outright unhappy category. 72.7% of them predicted divorce in their marriages. We fail, therefore, to reject our primary hypothesis, which states that there is a relationship between level of marital adjustment and prediction of divorce. Furthermore, the majority of this group (91%) revealed that they would marry a different partner if given a second chance. This is, perhaps, the clearest indication that these people were not happy in their marriages. This unhappiness

with a specific marriage partner should not be seen as unhappiness with the institution of marriage. It should be observed that of those who were outright unhappy with their marriages, none said that they would not remarry given a second chance. This, therefore, seems to suggest that they were unhappy only with a specific individual. Given a second chance, all of them would remarry but not necessarily not to the same partner.

More males than females predicted divorce in their marriages. Thus, we fail to reject our hypothesis, which stated that men were more likely to predict divorce in their marriages than women. The smaller proportion of women predicting divorce in their marriages could not mean that women are happier in their marriages than men. This possibility is clearly in disagreement with the conclusions of Booth and White (1980), Crane and Mead (1980) in America, who found that clinical and non-clinical research shows that women are more dissatisfied in their relationships than their male counterparts. Flowers (1991) aptly summarised this position by stating that 'his' marriage may be much more desirable than 'her' marriage. If women in this study are unhappy, but do not predict divorce in their marriages, may be that has to do with the difficulties they fear to face when their marriages break up. May be an unhappy marriage is better than life after divorce. It is possible too that pressure to remain in the unhappy marriage may come from a wide variety of sources, including relatives and colleagues. We suppose that more males predicted divorce on two grounds. The first is that it is much less stigmatising to be a divorced male than it is to be a divorced female. Secondly, it is easier in the post divorce period for the divorced male to successfully seek a female partner than it is for a divorced female to do the same.

Only about 17% of the total number of respondents expressed unhappiness with their marriages, while the vast majority of the respondents not only expressed happiness with their marriages, but also would marry their present partners if they had to do things all over again. Therefore, we fail to reject our third hypothesis which states that more couples would express happiness than unhappiness in the marriages. We must admit that there are one or two surprising results. Some respondents in the happy and very happy groups indicated that they would marry a different partner, while some even said that they would not marry at all. Our supposition was that those who were happy, but would marry a different partner, were really people whose marriages gave them most of what they needed, but who believed that a different partner would give the marriage more of what the present partner was not able to give. But these were not sick marriages, but those, perhaps,

where the partners believed there was room for improvement in the chemistry of the marriage. Those who were perfectly happy, but would not marry if given a second chance are probably people who thought they were getting everything they could in their marriage but who, perhaps, did not have complete belief in marriage as an institution. It must be pointed out though that these surprising results are only true of very few people.

Recommendations

The study recommends the provision of pre-marital counselling to couples in order to prepare them for marriage. The counselling should be carried out with both spouses separately and jointly. Pre-marital counselling will preempt divorces and strengthen the quality of those marriages that are holding. Variables like age, socio-economic status and culture of the couples should be included in future studies.

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