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An Analysis of the Interplay between Marital Relationships and Mental Health

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Abstract

Marriage is an institution that has played prominent roles in the history of humanity. It has aided the growth of the human race and also filled the vacuum of solitariness by creating companionship. This study discusses this important human institution from the perspective of mental health. Mental health, as applied in this study, is not referring to the presence of mental diseases, but the absence of it. This study examines marriage, by exploring the bilateral nexus between marriage and mental health via empiricism, which attributes experience as the origin and the source of validity of all possible knowledge. This is done with a view to analysing the place of marriage in emotional wellbeing and the psychological issues that can affect marriage.

Keywords: Marriage, Mental Health, Psychological Marital Gains and Losses

Introduction

Marriage is an important subject in human discourses, and it has been discussed within the contexts of different disciplines. Marriage serves both social and individual needs. It allows procreation and also serves the need for companionship. The importance of marriage at both the personal and societal level cannot be over-emphasised, thus, the need for continuous scholarly works on it. Although several factors influence the success and failure of a marriage, the mental health of the persons involved is a very important factor. This state of a person's mental health often does not receive the same kind of attention that the physical health attracts. However, the emotional success of a person at an individual level determines the level of success when in a marital relationship with another individual. This paper, therefore, addresses the role of mental health in marriage. This is a two-sided relationship; the role of marriage on mental health and the role of mental health on marriage. This analysis is done with the use of philosophical tools such as epistemology, which is the theory of knowledge. Epistemology is the traditional analysis of knowledge and the basis for which belief is justified. (Fieldman, 2003) Epistemological questions involve the concepts of knowledge, evidence, reasons for believing, justification, and probability, what we ought to believe and so on. (Fumerton, 2006) This study examines marriage, by focusing on the empirical studies of the nexus between it and mental health. Marriage is a great benefit to most people, because it improves health and happiness and also boosts financial success. Married people live longer, too. Therefore, most marriages are worth saving. (N.a, 2015. *Saving Your Marriage from Extreme Crisis*. Love learning Inc.: Victoria. 10) Although this position is debatable because of unmarried priests and Reverend Sisters, who are happy in their calling, successful, fulfilled and who also live till old age. Although they are not married in the physical sense, they are also married in the spiritual sense because the vacuum not having a physical partner may create is filled by their calling and 'marriage to Christ' and the activities of the kingdom of God.

It is important to note that marriage means different things to different people. This paper discusses marriage within the contexts of heterosexual relationships, which is between two opposite sexes. Homosexual marriage, on the other hand, is the marriage between members of the same sex. According to Mbiti,

“Marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life from which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a lawbreaker, he is not only abnormal, but “under-human”. Failure to get married means the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return.”(Mbiti, 1969)

The definition of marriage given by Mbiti reveals the social importance attached to marriage in most African societies. Marriage is not really about the individual or the individuals involved, but more of a corporate thing. The fact that anyone who chooses to remain unmarried is seen as abnormal or under-human, shows the importance Africans attach to marriage as a social institution. An important question emerges from this position of Mbiti thus: ‘What about someone who wants to marry but unable to, especially in the case of spinsters or those due to circumstances beyond their control have remained unmarried?’ This fundamental question leads to the importance of marriage to mental health. Interestingly, these set of people in most African society are not negatively criticized in any form since the members of such people’s community know their deficiency. For instance, an imbecile, an impotent man also known as *lakiriboto*, or even a sickler is handled with care, no one will pester, force or make jest of them in any African community.

An example of a religious definition of marriage is offered by Graemme Marshal (n.d. lifehopeandtruth.com/relationships/marriage/what-is-marriage) as an institution the Creator, God, made when he created humans male and female. The first marriage began as Adam and Eve became husband and wife. Marshal opines further that the fact that God fashioned Eve from one of Adam’s ribs seems to reflect the permanent and intimate connection that was always between them. They shared the same substance, and they were to share their lives from that point on. They formed a family unit in which they were to enjoy deep conversations, quiet moments, difficulties and stress, and the kind of intimate physical relationship that God intended between husband and

wife. This is a biblical view of marriage that is peculiar to Christianity; other world religions like Islam and African Indigenous Religion do not share this permanence or monogamous view of marriage. Marshal's definition of marriage reveals the positive roles of marriage on individuals not necessarily the corporate roles of marriage.

Another definition of marriage is the conjugal union of husband and wife, which serves the good of children, spouses and the common good of the society. (R. George, S. Girgis and R. Anderson, 2012) This definition embraces both the individual and the corporate benefits of marriage. Nonetheless, is every marriage serving this purpose? Some individuals may be seen to be better-off unmarried than the yoke of marriage they seem to bear. Such ones may be described as being in a dead-lock rather than a wed-lock. Marriages that fall into this category are the ones that would ultimately have negative effects on the mental health of the individuals involved. As marriage has positive effects on the mental health of individuals, so also does it have negative effects. In the same way, as marriage has effects on the mental health of people, so also does the mental health of people have effects on their marriages. Hence, one does not need to be a seer to predict the success of the marriage of one(s) who is (are) not healthy mentally. This position shows that the nexus between marriage and mental health is bilateral and also multi-dimensional. It is this inter-play that this study attempts to explore.

What is Mental Health?

Mental Health is a concept that features in diverse milieus beyond medical framework, having no general definition. The World Health Organization (2014) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual that realises his or her own potential can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. There are some important variables in the definition of mental health by the WHO. Firstly, mental health is a state, because it is a condition at a given time influenced by certain circumstances. It is also a possibility which may or may not apply, thus, a person may be in it or not. Secondly, it is a state of well-being predicated on certain indices, namely: Anyone that is unable to realise his or her potential is not mentally healthy; a person

that cannot cope with certain stresses of life regarded as normal is seen as unhealthy - this further implies that certain stresses are normal and not peculiar such as personal or domestic duties, occupational duties or cosmopolitan or any other issue several other people are dealing with; Having the ability to work productively and fruitfully but is not able to is not mentally healthy. Unfortunately today, most people would fall into this category in developing nations that are still grappling with basic amenities like power supply, good roads, water supply and others taking for granted in developed nations, lack of which makes them unproductive and unfruitful. Moreso, the ability to make a contribution to one's community is an indication of mental health.

The WHO stresses further that the positive dimension of mental health is stressed in its definition of health as contained in its constitution: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." (World Health Organization, 2014) Although the causes of mental diseases are complex and quite diverse, thus, having a diagnosable mental illness is outside someone's control. Mental health, on the other hand, is somewhat simple. It is something that most people have the power to control, work for and attain, giving human beings the power to manage their mental health before diseases set in. The ability of one to control and achieve mental health makes it an important personal duty of individuals. Certain issues not dealt with during childhood later become bigger issues in adult years and much bigger problems in marriage. To Christian Nordqvist (2017), mental health refers to our cognitive, behavioural, and emotional well-being - it is all about how we think, feel, and behave. The term 'mental health' is sometimes used to mean an absence of a mental disorder because it can affect daily life, relationships, and even physical health. It also includes a person's ability to enjoy life - to attain a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience. It is often used as a substitute for mental health conditions – such as depression, anxiety conditions, schizophrenia (a psychiatric diagnosis denoting a chronic mental illness characterised by abnormal thinking, perception and behaviour), and others. Rather than it being what the problem is, the emphasis is on what is going well. The emphasis on what is going well in mental health shows the sharp difference between it and

mental diseases. It has the ability to affect every area of an individual's life including physical health and social relationships, the quintessence of which is marriage.

It is important to note that mental health is not a fixed thing; it is a state that has a high tendency of fluctuating. It is possible for someone who has issues with mental health to attain a state of high degree of mental health. It is also possible for someone who does not have mental health problems to degenerate to that level once certain aspects of living are not taken care of. Mental health issues affect all segments of society, regardless of age, gender, education, or ethnicity. In fact, according to Beyond Blue (2018), an Australian organization on mental health, "indeed, everyone experiences mental health problems, and those problems can make us feel awful. They can negatively affect our thoughts, our emotions, and our behaviours. However, no matter the nature of the bad times, we can all take charge of improving our mental health." (Beyond Blue 2018) If indeed everyone regardless of race, gender, religion, occupational status or any other social inclination experiences mental health problems, then it is an issue that should be taken most seriously. This is because if people's mental health problems are not addressed adequately, they may degenerate to the level of mental diseases, thereby having tremendous effects on various aspects of living. Although, mental health affects different aspects of life, the focus of this study is its effect on marriage or the effects of marriage on the state of mental health.

The Effects of Marriage on Mental Health

Marriage has played several roles in the history of humanity and it has been a subject of discourse in different contexts. Its roles as an institution have undergone series of metamorphosis over the years. Even though it is easy to agree and conclude that the society and marriage have lost some of the roles that they have played in history as a result of modernity, they still perform some psychological functions for individuals. In a ground breaking research by Walter Gove, Michael Hughes and Carolyn Briggs (1983), it was established empirically that marriage has positive effects on the psychological well-being of individuals. According to them:

“In the overwhelming majority of the comparisons between the married and unmarried, in these studies, the married are in better mental and physical health, happier, less inclined to suicide or other ... where psychological factors play a key role and less likely to be institutionalized for mental illness or other forms of maladaptive behaviour.” (W. Gove, M. Hughes & C. Briggs Style, 1983, 122)

The studies carried out by these researches revealed that there are important roles the marital statuses of persons play on their mental health. This showed that there is interplay between social roles of marital statuses and psychological states of mental health.

It is interesting to note that in these studies, it was discovered that marital status is a much powerful predictor of home life satisfaction than any of the control variables such as income, education, race and age or childhood background. The data also revealed that being married is very strongly associated with experiencing a happy home life, while the three unmarried statuses (Never married, widowed and divorced) are associated with a relatively unhappy home life. In addition to these discoveries, the data on the mental health balance scale show that the married are by far in the best mental health, followed by the three unmarried statuses. Although the strength of the relationship between marital status and mental health is relatively comparable between men and women, married men appear to be in a better mental health than married females. Married respondents are also much happier than the other respondents followed by the Never-Married. Married respondents find life more satisfying than the other respondents. The major finding from this study of Gove *et al* is that of all the variables analysed, marriage emerges as the most powerful indicator of mental health (Walter Gove, Michael Hughes and Carolyn Briggs, 1983). This means that marriage is important and its success is important for mental stability. Since there is a link between marriage and mental health, happiness and satisfaction in marriage contributes immensely to mental health and stability. Thus, it is crucial to strive for marital success and

fulfilment since it plays an important role in a person's psychological wellbeing. Marital failure has its toll on mental health making it imperative to be taken seriously. In order to avoid ambiguities, it is necessary to understand what mental health is not especially within the marital context, in order to prevent unreal expectations an online organisation involved with mental health called "Healthy Place" (<https://www.healthyplace.com>) made a list of what mental health is not, which can be easily confused for the meaning of mental health. The following items are not correct indicators of mental health: Living life without problems, feeling jolly and happy 100% of the time, always having positive thoughts and being perfect.

The indicators listed above are not attainable in this world. In fact, anyone that makes them his/her target is already set out for failure and frustration. People encounter challenges in this world and people do different things to individuals at different points in times. Humans are constantly faced by hurts and anger. Within the marriage settings, couples create the utopia of a perfect marriage influenced by the fictional ideas of "they lived happily ever after". These unrealistic expectations affect people tremendously and when confronted by life challenges, they are devastated. It would be highly irresponsible to think that a marriage would be without problems. It would also be highly unthinkable and unrealistic to expect that the same euphoria and jolly feelings during the early days of the romantic journey would always be present after many years into marriage. It is also true that after living together for many years, couples are expected to have understood each other; they should know what their partners enjoy or cannot stand, this does not mean that they will not have issues or crises. Living with a sane or rational person who has come from another family is a guarantee for disagreements. The key issue is how to handle the disagreements before they degenerate to psychological issues. Moreover, by expecting to always have positive thoughts on marriage, one or the spouse at all times are not also realistic indicators of mental health in marriage. It is quite common to hear "no one is perfect". Expecting perfection from a spouse in marriage or oneself is a farce, as people continue to live together, they become more exposed to each other's imperfections. Having an unrealistic expectation of perfection would definitely have negative effects on the mental health

of individuals in marriage which would ultimately have its toll on their marriage.

On another issue of marriage and mental health, some scholars have included the place of gender in their analyses of marriage and mental health. Gove and Menaghan show for example that men stand to benefit from marriage than women psychologically. (Elizabeth G. Menaghan and Morton A. Lieberman, 1986) Contrarily, Thoits (1986) argues that women are the true beneficiaries of mental health in married relationships. That is, women benefit more mentally from marriage than men. However, studies have contrasted both positions by showing that regardless of gender, married people enjoy better mental health than unmarried including people that were never-married and those formerly married. (Ronald C. Kessler and James A. McRae, 1984) Regardless of this seemingly tussle on sexes, scholars have agreed on a position; marriage is beneficial to mental health.

On another note, walking away from a marriage also has effects on mental health. This means that there are psychological issues associated with the statuses of divorce or separation. Interestingly, the same emotional issues are not seen when the death of a spouse is seen. (Nadine F. Marks and James David Lambert, 1998) It has been shown that individuals who opt out of marriage report more depressive symptoms, while those who stay in marriage report less. (W. Simon Robin, 2002) This means that people who have been married before are more likely to go into states of depression than those who have stayed married thereby emphasising the function of marriage on mental health. The position emphasized here may not be true as far as the African society is concerned because forcing oneself to stay in marriage because of depression may even kill such a person male or female. This perimeter of western world may not be applicable in Africa where people live communal lives as different from the solitary life of a westerner. Although Africans do not really encourage divorce, they also do not reject their own when the need arises.

Another notable scholar, Robin Simon, in his study, examined and revealed the relationship between marriage and mental health. His hypothesis is as follows:

1. "In all marital statuses, women report more depression than men.
2. Married people report fewer symptoms of depression and substance problems than the unmarried.
3. Marital loss has harmful effects, while marital gain has beneficial consequences for men's and women's mental health." (W. Simon Robin, 2002)

To corroborate the position above, in an interview with a psychiatric nurse at University College Hospital, Ibadan, she revealed that a good number of the female patients at the psychiatric ward had some marital issues. It was shocking to discover that some of the husbands of these women married a second wife or left them for another woman or other issues relating to their marital lives. The anger and hurt from the actions of their husband led to a major nervous breakdown for them. In another interview with an out-patient at the psychiatric ward, a sentence was very prominent in what she had to say, "Bayo (not the real name) betrayed me". When was this betrayal? Seventeen years ago. What was the betrayal? Bayo fathered four children through a woman that she thought was her friend, her husband met this woman through her? A lot of women have similar experiences and some have been able to manage the crisis without allowing it to degenerate to their ill health, while some others could not withstand the emotional agony of what their husbands did, leading to mental issues for them. One may wonder why it seems women are more prone to mental problems than men especially as a result of marital problems. According to Prof. Olayinka Omigbodun, a consultant psychiatrist at U.C.H, "1,680 cases of mental illness were treated in the last three years, (2017) ... sixty five percent of these numbers were women and girls because women are more prone to depression which is a primary factor causing mental illness." Indeed, the results from empirical studies gathered are consistent with the hypotheses above. The analyses reveal that marital roles are associated with enhanced mental health. According to Simon, in comparison with people who have stable marriage, persons who suffered loss of spouse go through mental stress, which is largely expressed in the increasingly intake of alcohol. Other forms of loss in marriage can be through divorce or separation. This study also affirms that women suffer more emotionally from separation and divorce. (W. Simon Robin, 2002)

In spite of which gender is more affected in terms of mental health by loss of marriage, one fact remains very clear in the works of the scholars that have been discussed thus far, the state of a marriage has effects on mental health. The success or failure of a marriage can affect the mental health of an individual and more importantly, the inability to marry or stay married can also have tremendous effects on a person's mental health. It is necessary at this juncture, to examine also, the effects of mental health on marriage.

The Effects of Mental Health on Marriage

This paper has made attempts at establishing that marriage can play important roles in the mental health of individuals. Likewise, the mental health of a person can affect the marriage of such person. There are certain psychological stresses that are only peculiar to marriage. In other words, some problems are only problems of the married people. These problems have a very high tendency of affecting the mental health of such individuals. This reveals that mental health plays a very critical role in the success or failure of a marriage. Besides, it determines the possibility of an individual getting married. At the same time marriage plays a great role in mental stability, that is, success in marriage contributes to success in mental health. In order to understand the effects of mental health on marriage, it is crucial to discuss some of the popular indices that can affect the mental health of a married person.

Popular Indices in Marriage That Can Affect Mental Health

Marital Disharmony

This is a problem that emerges from marital relationships. Anyone undergoing serious marital disharmony is exposing him/herself to undue mental health that could result in life threatening diseases. It is even recorded in the Bible that, "It is better to live in the wilderness than with a nagging and hot tempered wife" (Proverbs 21:19 ; 25:24) This verse could also be appropriated to a husband, to show that it is better for a woman to be single than to be yoked with a mean husband. There are indications that people who undergo marital strain were more likely to need heart surgery, suffer heart attacks or die of heart diseases than

women who are not married. This is corroborated in 2003 in the *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour* that single people tend to have better mental health than those married but undergoing stress in their marital relationships. (I. Tse, 2011) Conflict, tension, disharmony, hatred and continuous anger, incompatibility, disagreements, oppositions and lacerations caused by harsh criticisms and abusive words have negative impact on the mental health of couples in marital relationships.

Finance

Issues related to money have a lot of impact on the mental health of married couples. The lack of financial resources often times creates a serious tension in marriages. In some other cases, it is not impossible that financial wealth also comes with its toll on the emotional states of couples. Money is a major cause of stress among couples, especially in the modern African societies. In the past, money was not a criterion for a happy marriage. It was when Africans became materialistic that money became an issue. In an interview with a clergy man, he revealed that money has been a major source of discord in sessions of marriage counseling he has had with couples over the years. (Pastor O. Israel, 2018) It is not unusual for people to have different attitudes to financial issues. People have different spending and saving habits. The sharp differences in attitude towards money have its toll on the mental health of married couples.

Sex and Intimacy

The natural urge in humans for sex and intimacy is a subject of much worry and attention among couples. This private affair if not handled properly can lead to serious crisis among couples, although it was not a problem in the past because there were traditional ways of handling the issue, secretly, among Africans. In modern societies, couples who do not have problems in this regard do tend to enjoy better health mentally, which in turn affects their productivity in other areas of lives. There is a difference between sex and intimacy because it is possible to have sex without being intimate, and also, it is possible to be intimate without having sex. However, in any marital relationship, the two should go hand in hand. Incidentally, psychological stress can also have negative effects on sex and intimacy. According to Adeoye

Oyewole, a sexless marriage is “a marital union in which little or no sexual activity occurs between the two spouses” (A.Oyewole, 2017). To avoid ambiguities on how to define “little”, the definition is broadened by Oyewole to include those who had sex less than ten times in a year. Oyewole expresses some of the possible causes of this condition which could be psychological, biological or clinical situations, resentments or other unresolved conflicts. It is quite clear that lack of intimacy leads to emotional stress. In the same vein, frustrations in other areas of life can also affect sexual urges. Sex and intimacy should be taken quite seriously among couples because of its relationship with their mental health.

Infidelity

Infidelity is a problem that can emerge from marital relationships. Infidelity could be classified into two; the one that actually occurred and the one that is suspected. Of the two, the latter is the worse because even the thought of infidelity of one’s spouse is a serious mental stress. Such person undergoes a lot of mental stress as he/she is constantly looking for proofs to substantiate his/her suspicions. And where cases of infidelity have been established, mental and emotional stress on the part of the two spouses is inevitable, depending on how they are able to resolve the crisis.

Unemployment and Employment

The unemployed status of one’s spouse also has psychological effects. As employment has emotional benefits for women, it also could have negative effects on their mental health as they often have to juggle roles of bread winner and home maker in most cases. Men that assume domestic responsibilities to assist their employed wives have to deal with the emotional stress of self-esteem and social roles (Pastor O. Israel, 2018) Employed women whose husbands do not take on domestic duties or unable to provide are also at the risk of emotional stress. There is a very strong relationship between employment or the lack of it among couples and their mental health.

In-laws, Differences in Cultural or Social Backgrounds and Religious Issues

Most spouses have to deal with the problems of their in-laws; some are problematic while some are easy to live with. In most societies, it is quite difficult or totally impossible not to have dealings with in-laws, some live with the couple while others visit regularly or occasionally. More importantly, some societies are multi-ethnic and multi-religious, leading to inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriages. Cultural and social differences as well as religious issues are often causes of tension in marriages. In-laws and differences in cultural or social background and religious issues could be classified as serious threats to the mental health of some couples.

Infertility

In most African societies, procreation is mostly seen as the sole purpose of marriage and when there are problems in this regard, the couple (in most cases, the wife) is usually under serious emotional stress. However, unmarried people often do not need to deal with the problem of infertility. On the other hand, this may not be absolutely true, because although the unmarried may not have to undergo the stress of infertility, he/she may also grapple with the emotional vacuum of not having his/her children especially when he/she sees the children of his/her mates. Infertility therefore, poses a great problem for the mental health of couples.

Communication Gap

Lack or inadequate communication among couple can also affect the mental health of couples. Several reasons may be responsible for the break in communication between married couple such as unresolved disputes, hurts, doubts, fear, arguments, being busy with other things, lack of love, personal problems at work, health, family or finance not shared with spouse, infidelity, use of harsh words, lack of forgiveness and even individual temperament among several other reasons. The emphasis here is not necessarily the cause of the communication gap, but its consequences especially in the area of mental health. In fact, here is a link between being healthy mentally and the communication between spouses. Thus, it could be plausible to say that creating a gap between

oneself and one's spouse amounts therefore to courting problems in the area of mental health.

Physical Abuse and Violence

The area of physical abuse and violence also contributes to the mental health of couples. This should be taken seriously because it could be life threatening. People subjected to physical abuse by their spouses suffer more emotionally from the abuse than physically. The violent spouse is also a victim of mental abuse as studies indicate that such persons have mental disorders caused by several factors such as childhood abuse, substance abuse, depression and a host of others. (Claudia Garcia-Moreno and Anita Riecha-Rossler, 2013) Domestic violence can have adverse effects on the psychological state of its victims. Some of these effects include: panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, depression and anxiety. It is also possible for a violent spouse to cause severe body injuries or even death of spouse during moments of insanity. Thus, any case of physical abuse or violent should be taken most seriously.

Recommendations

Religious leaders should teach intending and married couples that it is normal to have differences in marriage. This will remove unrealistic expectations from spouses and the marital relationship.

Parents, families and the society at large should stop placing undue burdens on unmarried people. This burden can pressurize singles to marry wrongly and it can also affect their mental health by seeing themselves as failures when they are not married.

Married people undergoing marital challenges should seek help by discussing their challenges with people that can counsel them. When problems are not shared, depression sets in which may later lead to mental health issues.

Marriage counselors and religious leaders should realize that marriage is not a "do or die" affair. They should counsel couples to separate when the need arises, sometimes separation can be beneficial to the marital relationship.

Mental health is a personal responsibility as discussed in this paper. Married couples should strive to be happy, contented and fulfilled as individuals within a marital relationship.

Conclusion

It is obvious from the foregoing that there is a very close relationship between marriage and mental health. Even though evidence abounds that marriage is beneficial for couples psychologically and socially, this institution, if not properly managed could result to adverse effects on the mental health of individuals. Marriage, as seen in this paper, is a very powerful predictor of the mental health of people. At the same time, some seemingly minor psychological issues if not properly handled at an individual level can lead to serious marital problems. This is a bilateral relationship that should be handled with uttermost care. It is important therefore for individuals to work on their marriages because they stand to benefit mentally from a healthy marriage.

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