

Socio-Demographic Factors in Marital Instability among Couples in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area, Enugu North Senatorial District, Enugu South East Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated socio-demographic factors in marital instability among couples in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area, Enugu North Senatorial District, Enugu South East Nigeria. Two research questions and one null hypothesis guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional research design. The population consisted of 88,859 married couples in the area. The sample size was 400 married couples drawn using multi-stage sampling procedure. Questionnaire was used for data collection. Frequency count, percentage, median and linear multiple regressions were used for data analysis. Findings reveal that more than half (52.9%) of married couples had high marital instability while nearly half (47.1%) of married couples had low marital instability in their marriages. Age, education level, occupation, number of children and gender were not significantly associated with marital instability of married couples ($p > .05$). However, professional counselors should intensify counseling in non-school settings through community education, group counseling, seminars and workshops which should be conducted in organizations, religious institutions and other relevant settings so as to create awareness on how to manage marital conflicts considering socio-demographic characteristics of spouses.

Key words: Marital, Instability, Couples, Socio-Demographic, Factors, Counseling.

Introduction

Marital instability has become one of the most prevalent and endemic social challenges in many families and communities globally. The fragility of the marriage bond is a notable feature

of the contemporary world, and is present at every level of society (Musau, Kisovi, & Otor, 2015; Omoniyi-Oyafunke, Falola, & Salau, 2014), including households in Enugu State, Nigeria (Ogunrinde, 2020a).

Every marriage is constantly under the influence of some external and internal pressures; a condition that is somewhat inevitable that every marital union experiences (Amadi & Amadi, 2014). An unstable marriage is continuously on the increase in developing nations and it's often associated with separation, divorce and widowhood (Ogunrinde, 2020b; Omoniyi-Oyafunke et al., 2014). Studies showed that divorce rate in the United States is 3.4 per 1,000 populations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012), and more of the population of the United States is currently unmarried than ever before (Lehrer & Son, 2017; United States Census Bureau, 2017). In African context, divorce is estimated to occur in 20,000 marriages in Nigeria, and 19,000 marriages in Zambia annually due to marital disharmony among couples (Nnagbo, 2011; Oimage, 2013).

When marriage is no longer seen and enjoyed as supposed, it could be unstable. Unstable marriage can be referred to as marital instability (MI). Marital instability comes in different forms. The most prevalent forms of MI experienced by couples include: unfaithfulness, disagreement, spouse battering, views not respected, communication gap, lack of sexual satisfaction, lack of respect to parents and parental interference, lack of care for the children, sexual abuse, rape, subtle struggle for control between couples and other abusive behaviours (Ogunrinde, 2020a). Marital instability could be seen as a situation whereby marriages breakdown through

separation, desertion or divorce (Ezeanya, 2006; Priyadharshini & Gopalan, 2020). It may occur in the form of misunderstanding or disagreement between a husband and a wife or lack of harmony in the homes of couples. Thus, unresolved marital conflict often times lead to failed marriage (Abekhale, 2016; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015).

Various factors have been adduced to be associated with MI. Studies have shown that reported that age, education, suspicion regarding the partner, history of divorce, the way to get married (personal or by family), socio-economic concordance with partner, expressing love to partner, partner expressing love, education (Danso, 2008; Vakili, Baseri, Abbasi, & Bazzaz, 2015), occupation, and parity (Chen & Ngoubene-Atioky, 2019; Ozean & Breen, 2012; Takyi, 2012) were identified as predictors of MI. However, the most commonly included variables or risk factors in this study are socio-demographic in nature, such as gender, age, education, occupation and number of children.

The issue of age is very sensitive in marriage. This is to say that age at which people marry may affect their understanding and exposure. Also, educational attainment of spouses can contribute to MI. When there is a wide gap in the level of education among married couples, their level of reasoning and interaction will differ. When there is a wide educational gap between spouses, their approaches to life will be at variance, a problem may

arise as the less educated person may be more superstitious, traditional or conservative, and there may be difficulty in reasoning together (Omage, 2013). Furthermore, when these disparities exist in marriage, it is often difficult to maintain peace and stability, so failure may likely result since the spouses are not at par in intellectual or rational thinking level.

The occupation of couples in any marriage to a large extent determines the level of stability that exists in that marriage. In other words, certain jobs most likely can create unhealthy relationship among couples, for instance, banking job, acting profession, musical profession, and political position among others. In the authors' experience, there are professions that most men may not encourage their wife to be part of, such as the case of being an actress, which often takes her out of home for two weeks or more when she is involved in a movie production. Ozean and Breen (2012) claimed that the expectation of divorce may actually lead to increase in wives' employment, rather than the opposite, and wives' employment and earning may help them exit dysfunctional marriages rather than destabilizing all marriages. In addition, unintended or disagreed-upon births may elevate the risk of dissolution (Stykes & Guzzo, 2020).

Marital instability appears to have hindered the growth and progress of many homes and children in Nigeria, particularly Enugu State. Consequently, MI generally affects the society and particularly exposes

children to single parenthood, which may lead to poor physical, social and mental development of children from such families. The consequences of divorce and separation occasioned by MI are severe, as early experiences of parental conflict have lasting consequences on the quality of relationship between children and their parents (Duke-Natrebo, 2014; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007).

There appears to be high rate of divorce, separation and death among married couples resulting from occupation, age at marriage, educational attainment, childlessness, infidelity, dishonesty, lack of mutual respect, sexual incompatibility and negligence among couples in the area of the study. The increase of the new forms of instability calls for a deep analysis of the new phenomenon in order to understand their associated factors. Studies on the socio-demographic and economic antecedents of marital instability across Nigeria are scarce. The survey on socio-demographic factors among couples in Igbo-Etiti LGA Enugu North Senatorial District, Enugu State South East, Nigeria becomes necessary because of the alarming rates of divorce in the study area as can be attested by cases treated daily by customary courts. This study finding would help health professionals, researchers, religious bodies, married persons among others in providing an insight to the socio-demographic factors associated with MI among couples. The outcome would enable the society and families to be better

informed on the underlying socio-demographic factors of MI and the best ways to resolve them.

Objectives of the Study

The major purpose of the study was to investigate socio-demographic factors in marital instability among couples in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area (LGA), Enugu North Senatorial District, Enugu South East Nigeria. Specifically, the study determined:

- 1.status of marital instability among couples in Igbo-Etiti LGA; and
- 2.relationship between marital instability and socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education level, occupation, number of children) of couples in Igbo-Etiti LGA.

Research Questions

Two research questions were posed to guide the study.

- 1.What is the status of marital instability among couples in Igbo-Etiti LGA?
- 2.What is the relationship between marital instability and socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education level, occupation, number of children) of couples in Igbo-Etiti LGA?

Hypothesis

Socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education level, occupation, number of children) of married couples are not significantly associated with their status of marital instability.

Methodology

Design of the Study: The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design.

Area of the Study: The study was conducted from December, 2019 through January, 2020 at households in Igbo-Etiti LGA, Enugu North Senatorial District, Enugu State, South East Nigeria. Igbo-Etiti LGA is located in the hillside Northern part of Enugu State, and has 14 autonomous communities in the area and many villages. There are records of high rate of divorce, separation and deaths associated with marital conflicts resulting from occupation, age at marriage, literacy level, childlessness, infidelity, dishonesty, lack of mutual respect, sexual incompatibility and negligence of Igbo-Etiti LGA inhabitants (Ezeanya, 2006; Ibeh, 2013). In view of these facts, the area was adjudged suitable for the study.

Population for the Study: The study population comprised married individuals in the study area. The projected population of Igbo-Etiti LGA in Enugu North Senatorial District as at 2016 was 281,200 (National Population Commission [NPC]/National Bureau of Statistics [web]). The population of married couples is 31.6 per cent of the entire population in Enugu North Senatorial District (NPC/Enugu State Planning and Economic Development Commission, 2016), which is 88,859. Only couples who have been married for at least three years were included in the study population. Couples whose years of marriage are below

three years were excluded from the study.

Sample for the Study: The sample size was 400 determined using Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011) Standardized Table for Sample Size, Confidence Levels and Confidence Intervals for Random Samples, which states that when a population size is 50,000 or above at 95 percent confidence level (5% intervals), the sample size should be 381 or above. A multi-stage sampling procedure was used to select the respondents for the study. The first stage involved random sample of 10 out of the 14 autonomous communities in the area of the study. The second stage involved random sample of two villages from each of the 10 selected autonomous communities, which gave a total of 20 villages. The third stage involved purposive 10 households from each of the 20 villages to give a total of 200 households. A couple was selected from the 200 households. This gave a total sample size of 400 respondents.

Instrument for Data Collection: The Marital Instability Index (MII) developed by Booth, Johnson, and Edwards (1983) was used for data collection. The MII scale consisted of 19 questions divided into parts A and B. Part A consisted of five socio-demographic variables (gender, age, education level, occupation, number of children). Part B consisted of 14 questions with a four-point Likert-type scale (from 0 (never) through 3 (now); thus coded: never (0), ever (1), within last 3 years (2) and now (3). The MII was validated by experts from Public

Health, Psychology and Social Works Departments and as well was tested for internal consistency. The internal consistency of MII was determined using alpha (Cronbach) with an index of .928.

Data Collection Technique: A total number of 400 copies of the questionnaire were distributed. Out of 400 questionnaires administered, 384 were returned, which gave a return rate of 96.0%. Out of the returned questionnaires, 16 copies were not duly filled out, thus discarded. Only 376 copies of MII duly filled out were used for analyses.

Data Analysis Technique: The standard descriptive statistics were applied to describe data pattern. Frequency count, percentage and median were used for analyses of the research questions. The nature of the participants' MI was measured using the MII. The score of 56 indicated the highest level of instable marriage and the score of 14 suggested the lowest level of MI. The median score of the summated scores of MII of the participants (21) served as the cut-off point between low and high levels of MI among the participants. Thus, the median score of ≥ 21 indicated high MI and the median score of < 21 indicated low MI. The normality of the data was checked with Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test. Linear multiple regressions were used to assess the socio-demographic variables of gender, age, education level, occupation and number of children associated with marital instability. All the tests were 2-tailed, and the probability values less

than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) were considered significant.

Results

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents based on their Status of Marital Instability

Marital Status	Instability Index (MII) Score	n(%)
Low	< 21	177 (47.1)
High	≥ 21	199 (52.9)
Total		376 (100.0)

Table 1 shows that more than half of the respondents (52.9%) had high marital instability while 47.1 per cent low high marital instability.

Table 2: Linear Regression Analysis of Socio-demographic Factors and Marital Instability

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standard Error (S. E)	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	p-value
1	Constant	20.55	2.551		8.058	.000
	Age	.472	.596	.043	.793	.428
	Education Level	-.213	.671	-.018	-.317	.751
	Occupation	.427	.656	.038	.650	.516
	Number of Children	.301	.535	.030	.563	.574
	Gender	-.721	1.302	-.029	-.553	.580

$R = .072$; $R^2 = .005$; $Adjusted R^2 = -.008$; $F = .388$; $Sig = .857$

a = Dependent Variance: Marital instability;

b = Independent Variance (constant): Gender, Age, Education Level, Occupation, Number of Children

Table 2 shows that the R^2 of .005 indicates that in the regression model, the independent variables (gender, age, education level, occupation, number of children) account for only .5% of the variance in the dependent variable (marital instability). Findings revealed that age ($B = .472$, $p = .428$); education level ($B = -.213$, $p = .751$); occupation ($B = .427$, $p = .516$), number of children ($B = .301$, $p = .574$); and

gender ($B = -.721$, $p = .580$) had both positive and negative effect, but they had no statistically significant association with marital instability ($p > 0.05$).

Discussion

Research in recent years has shown that several factors may underline the fragility of family bonds and the subsequent dissolution of the

marriage. However, this study was undertaken to investigate socio-demographic factors in a sample of married couples. Findings in Table 1 reveal that more than half of the respondents had high marital instability while nearly half (47.1%) had low marital instability. This suggests a high level of marital instability among couples in the study area which could be attributed to recent low social value placed on the marriage institution in the various communities of the LGA under study. The finding was expected, but was not consistent with the finding of Asa and Nkan (2017) in a study conducted in Akwa Ibom Nigeria that majority of the respondents had low MI while 37.5 per cent had high MI. This is affirmed by the recent reports of unstable marriages associated with dissolution and or separation at various religious tribunal and legal offices. The result could also be attributed to the fact that every marriage is under the influence of some external and internal pressures, which is somewhat inevitable for marital unions. The forces could come in form of unresolved conflicts, misunderstanding, suspicion regarding the partner, sexual incompatibility, infidelity, subtle struggle for control between couples and abusive behaviours. Besides, people do not merely want to get married; they want to marry someone they love and to remain in love together for the rest of their lives (Geiger & Livingston, 2019).

Findings in Table 2 reveal that age, education level; occupation, number of children; and gender had both positive and negative effect, but they have no statistically significant association with marital instability as depicted in Table 4. Studies have shown that age, education, suspicion regarding the partner, history of divorce, the way to get married (personal or by family), socio-economic concordance with partner, expressing love to partner and partner expressing love, were identified as predictors of marital instability (Lehrer & Son, 2017; Priyadharshini & Gopalan, 2020; Vakili et al., 2015). The findings on age was consistent with the findings of Kornblum (2001) in Orlando who found that women who marry while still in their teens are twice as likely to experience instability and likely to be healthy in their marriages as women in their thirties, and those who marry in their thirties are half again as likely to experience instability in their marriages as those who marry in their twenties. However, the finding on age was also consistent with a study conducted in the United States by Spanier and Glick (1981) who revealed that women who marry between the ages of 14 and 17 are twice as likely to divorce as those who marry between the ages of 18 and 19 years, and the rates were similar to males of corresponding ages. It has been observed that, higher ages at marriage are typically thought of as an indicator of autonomy in relationship. It appears that it is best not to marry too old or too young, because age at marriage is

complicated by the same measurement issues at marriage period.

However, research findings on MI are inconsistent. While some researchers have found no significant impact of education and occupation on divorce (Liao & Heaton, 1992; Ogunrinde, 2020b; Zeng, Schultz, Wang, & Gu, 2002), others have found some evidence to support the idea that women with higher education, especially those residing in urban areas, experience higher divorce rates. The result of this test was consistent with a finding in Lagos Nigeria by Animasahun and Fatile (2011) who found that the level of marital instability was not significantly associated with education level. However, the finding was not consistent with studies by Adegoke (2010) and Lehrer and Son (2017) who found a significant relationship between educational background of women of reproductive age and divorce rates. The result was also not in line with a study in Ethiopia by Tilson and Larsen (2000) who found that women with no education as well as those who had attained a literacy programme showed lower risk of marital instability than women with primary education; and women with secondary and higher education have more risk of divorce compared with women with primary education. The findings are expected and not surprising because people with less education most times experience low levels of marital stability as well as men and women with higher education. This depicts an alarming

signal that education level does not insulate the present husbands and wives in the modern African society from marriage instability. Again, sometimes the association between education level and MI is positive. This is because the influence of education appears to be non-linear, with the lowest divorce rates observed among uneducated couples and the highest educated groups.

The findings of this study also contradict the research of Danso (2008) who found that there is a high rate of MI among the young highly educated women with few children than among the old, illiterate women with many children. Nevertheless, a study in Ghana by Takyi (2012) implicated parity as a strong predictor of divorce in marriage. Also, in a study conducted among Chinese female migrant workers, intimate partner violence predicted significantly marital instability for child free or one child, but not for workers with two or more children (Chen & Ngoubene-Atioky, 2019). Moreover, the findings of this study was not in line with the findings of: Adegoke (2010) and Lehrer and Son (2017) who found that occupation is one of the factors associated with marital instability. The resource theory developed by Blood and Wolfe (1960) posits that marital relationships are reflective of the resources that each partner contributes to the marriage. It has been argued that as the amount of resources attained by wives reach the same levels as that of their husbands, inequity in housework and decision-making power will vanish, otherwise,

a sense of injustice will be provoked in both parties (Zuo & Bian, 2001). As a result, whoever has greater resources than their spouse may use their economic advantages to secure decision-making authority, avoid household labour and discourage his or her spouse's independence. Based on this theory, if women have their own incomes, jobs or careers, they are in a better position to leave an unsatisfying marriage rather than work on marital problems. On the other hand, a husband may feel more inclined to leave an unhappy marriage if he knows his wife can support herself. As such, couples with greater resource discrepancies would tend to have greater marital instability and increased likelihood of divorce. Finally, the finding on gender was inconsistent with the scholarly research conducted in both China and Taiwan which revealed that gendered decision-making power increases marital disharmony in urban China (Pimentel, 2006). Also, as depicted in Table 3, there was a statistically significant difference between men and women's nature of MI.

The results obtained in this study have demonstrated the realities of marriage instability among couples in South East Nigeria and also has implication for all the beneficiaries to step towards fulfilling the country's obligation to eliminate all forms of abuse and discord in marriages. This can be done by formulating health policies that can educate married couples on areas of family planning, sex education, communicating

effectively, showing respect and love and disposition of good attitudes towards partner as well as sensitization on the need for premarital marriage counseling and evaluations that can promote their health and a healthy relationship.

The limitations of this study include that, this study only provides information on significant associations between socio-demographic factors and MI in couples, and it cannot be used to infer causality of these events, which would require clinical trials and longitudinal studies. Also, in this study, data were collected retrospectively, this might introduce recall bias. Our study sample consisted of only the legally married couples, and does not include divorced/separated, single parent and widowed individuals, thus limiting the generalize ability of the findings. Future studies should consider using a larger, randomized and more representative sample size, considering other associated factors of MI and ever married individuals.

Conclusion

The overall score obtained from the marital instability questionnaire in this study was fair and showed higher level of marital instability. A significant percentage (47.1%) still has low marital instability. Age, education level; occupation, number of children; and gender had both positive and negative effect, but they have no statistically significant association with marital instability.

Recommendations

1. Professional counselors should intensify counseling in non-school settings through community education, group counseling, seminars and workshops which should be conducted in organizations, religious institutions and other relevant settings so as to create awareness on how to manage marital conflicts considering socio-demographic characteristics of spouses.
2. Marital counseling clinics should be established in major towns and cities to enable couples who are experiencing unresolved conflicts to seek for professional assistance of a counselor.
3. Findings could be promising for the policy makers to design specific interventions suited to target population.
4. Couples should embrace effective communication and understanding and learn to stay away from external interference in their marital relationship.

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