

The Role of Adverse Childhood Experience, Psychological Distress and Life Satisfaction on Marital Satisfaction among Couples in Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study dealt with marital satisfaction among couples in Lagos, Nigeria. It sought to establish whether adverse childhood experience, psychological distress and life satisfaction have any impact on marital satisfaction. The study adopted the predictive correlational design, using 893 married men and women as respondents to a questionnaire. Data was analysed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The study revealed that adverse childhood experiences did not affect marital satisfaction. While psychological distress negatively affected the marital satisfaction, life satisfaction enhanced the marital satisfaction. The study recommended that effort be directed at keeping the level of psychological distress low in marriages by ensuring that any action or activity that can potentially trigger psychological distress is eliminated. Efforts geared toward enhancing life satisfaction should be encouraged among married couples due to the potential positive influence of such on marital satisfaction.

Keywords: Adverse childhood experience; psychological distress; Life satisfaction; marital satisfaction; Married Couples.

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Introduction

Life is a journey, a lonely one when alone and an interesting and dynamic with a life companion. Companionship over time builds love, trust, dependability, commitment and sacrifice. These companionship attributes make life's journey enjoyable, especially with a partner in the life journey- Marriage. Marriage has been severally defined. Often, the definition is shaped by the

profession or professional attempting the definition. Sociologically, marriage is defined as a socially supported union involving two or more individuals in what is regarded as a stable, enduring arrangement typically based at least in part on a sexual bond (Crossman, 2019). The legal definition of marriage is put as the legal union of a couple as spouses. It goes further to state the essential elements of marriage as (1) the parties' legal ability

to marry each other, (2) mutual consent of the parties, and (3) a marriage contract as required by law (Legal Information Institute, 2022). Therefore, marriage is a socially acceptable and legally sanctioned union between a man and a woman as husband and wife. It is the bonding of two individuals as husband and wife who have agreed to set up their own family.

It has been estimated that over 90% of the global population will get married at least once in their lifetime (Shackelford & Buss, 2000); similarly, every culture, race, religion and nationality favours marriage (Aroyewun et al., 2017). To the religious, marriage is viewed as an ordained institution established by God to create an enduring relationship between a man and a woman primarily for companionship, pleasure, procreation, and sustenance (Animasahun, 2011). To culture, it is viewed as a necessary condition for societal expansion and continuity (Crossman, 2019). At the same time, several studies have established that married individuals are happier and healthier-physically and mentally than unmarried individuals (Salarifer et al., 2014; Diener & Diener-McGarvan, 2008; Rosen-Grandon et al., 2004; Myers, 2000). The happiness of couples in marriage depends on the success and health of the marriage- marital satisfaction; it is plausible that any factor that impaires the health and success of marriage may result in marital dissatisfaction.

A recent survey showed that there had been a significant increase in studies on marital satisfaction, conflicts in marriages and divorce in both developed and developing nations like Nigeria, owing to the alarmingly high percentage of marital strife and divorce in modern society (Fasasi et al., 2020). Although marriage as a social and legal institution is designed to foster cooperation, love, joy, caring and stability between partners, unfortunately, these values are unrealistic and are lacking in several homes and marriages today. The study of Animasahun and Oladeni (2012) demonstrated that frequent discord, violence, infidelity, poverty, social assault by in-laws, spousal abuse and a refusal to accept responsibility is associated with divorce and disagreements between married couples. Globally, the average rate of divorces per 1,000 married persons in nearly four decades between 1970 and 2008 increased from 2.6% to 5.5%, representing a more than twofold increase in divorce rate within the period (Schrader, 2019). In contrast, the recent global average divorce rate stands at

4.08% worldwide (world population review, 2020). It is therefore evidenced that marital satisfaction among couples is nosediving while marital dissatisfaction and divorce are accelerating as if in a race to win a prize.

Divorce rates vary from one country to the other, from as low as 0.45% and 0.46% for Sri Lanka and Peru, which placed them among the countries with the least divorce rate to as high as 19.01%, 11.49%, and 11.03% for Kazakhstan, Russia and Cuba, respectively (world population review, 2020) which placed them among the countries with the highest rate of divorce, thus indicating diversity and a steady rise in the rate of divorce globally. For nations like Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe, the divorce rate and risks have remained stable over the past 20 years. Contrarily, there has been a 10-percentage point or more fall in divorce in nations like Benin, Ghana and Niger as well as lesser declines in Liberia, Malawi, Namibia, Senegal, Togo and Zambia (Clark & Brauner-otto, 2015). The incidence of divorce within the first 20 years of marriage varies significantly from 6.9 percent in Mali to 47.1 percent in Congo-Brazzaville (Clark & Brauner-otto, 2015).

Although the incidence of marital dissatisfaction and divorce in Nigeria is considered alarming, the prevalence is unknown due to lack of precise data. However, a 2018 survey indicated that the rates of marital separation in Nigeria had increased by 14% compared to the previous year, which reflects a generally unfavorable tendency (Vanguard, 2020). The 2018 report noted that Badagry, Lagos has 3,000 divorce cases overall (Sunday, 2020). Furthermore, according to a news article, 20 to 30 divorce cases are recorded daily at one of the offices of the Social Development Secretariat in the Federal Capital Development Authority (FCDA). Records at the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) High Court also revealed that despite the Court's best efforts to mediate disputes through arbitration panels, over 2,000 divorce cases were filed between the years 2019 and February 2020, with an average of 30 cases being heard daily (Adeniyi, 2021). Additional findings showed that the number is higher at the FCT's Sharia, Alkali and Customary Courts (Olafioye et al., 2020). Therefore, this increasing trend in marital dissatisfaction leading to divorce must be curtailed among married couples by launching investigations into other factors yet to receive the deserved attention, such as the present study.

Various authors have defined marital satisfaction differently; to some authors, the individual's perspective on their marriage is interpreted as their level of marital satisfaction (King, 2016). To others, it is a mental condition representing marriage's perceived advantages and disadvantages. Baumeister et al. (2007) viewed marital satisfaction as the level of satisfaction in relationships determined by intra-personal or interpersonal perception. Also, marital satisfaction is often perceived as a gauge of how well a person's wants and feelings are met in Marriage (Ja'farzadeh, 2011). Consequently, marital satisfaction is conceptualized in this paper as an individual's mental experience and expectations of marriage regarding their thoughts, wellbeing, support, communication, spouse's emotional stability, conflict frequency and factors from their family background influencing whether they are happy or unhappy with the marriage.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) refer to potentially traumatic events throughout childhood, such as seeing violence, abusing drugs or alcohol, having a mental health issue or having one's parents separate. These experiences also include but are not limited to physical or emotional abuse and issues with the family structure during childhood, which could manifest as parental deaths or divorce and low socioeconomic position (Schafer & Ferraro, 2013). However, childhood adversity such as ACEs has consistently been found to have a lasting impact on many adult outcomes, including life evaluation, feelings of control, and physical and mental health (Schafer et al., 2011; Irving & Ferraro, 2006; Hayward & Gorman, 2004).

According to Richards (2011), people with ACEs, especially those from violent homes, are likelier to exhibit attitudes and behaviours that reflect their chance of having experienced domestic violence-risk-taking behaviour. Risk-taking behaviour was found to have a corresponding increase with the individual's ACE scores (Gilbert et al., 2015) while high risk-taking behaviour, such as substance use, has a correspondingly higher risk of divorce (Leonard et al., 2014). Furthermore, pressures induced by ACEs have the propensity to cause other mental health issues later in life; thus, higher ACE scores are associated with affective and personality disorders such as depression, anxiety, suicidal behaviour and antisocial personality disorders and decreased ability to cope with stress (Monnat, 2015) which invariably affect marital satisfaction. Studies

such as Story and Bradbury (2004), Umberson et al. (2005) and Donnelly et al. (2017) found that exposure to chronic stress and stressful life events in adulthood appears to be linked to both short- and long-term reductions in marital quality and increases the risk for divorce (Butterworth & Rodgers, 2008).

Psychological distress refers to non-specific symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, which can be brought on by various circumstances, such as domestic violence, family conflicts and in some cases, learning and adapting to a new marriage or relationship. It is more common in women than men and can be overwhelming for those experiencing it, with many of those experiencing it trying to manage it privately in their way. Available evidence attests that psychological distress negatively impacts the psychological wellbeing (Whisman & Uebelacker (2003). A significant proportion of people globally experience moderate to severe psychological distress and above 458 million individuals in both developed and developing nations experience psychological distress, including adolescents and those in Marriage (Baxter et al., 2013). Several studies, such as Mamun et al. (2009) have interrogated the relationship between psychological distress and marital satisfaction and they found that a person's marital status may influence how depression in married couples is diagnosed. Over the years, the researcher frequently focused on the links between the level of psychological distress such as depression, anxiety disorder, hostility, post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorder, trait anger and the level of marital adjustment (Graham et al. 2006; Whisman 2007; South et al., 2008). Additionally, Marital adjustment has been found to be associated with less psychological distress (Whisman & Uebelacker, 2003). Therefore, any emotional upheaval that directly impairs a person's ability to function at their best at all times is considered psychological stress. Thus, it is crucial to ascertain whether a person's satisfaction or dissatisfaction in marriage can potentially contribute to the issues of psychological distress experienced by couples. Life satisfaction refers to how people express their emotions, sentiments and feelings about future possibilities and directions (Anand, 2016). Life satisfaction is also referred to as wellbeing, which is the state of being healthy, happy and wealthy (Morris, 2001).

Life satisfaction is a wellbeing gauge that considers factors including mood, relationship satisfaction,

goal accomplishment, self-concept and self-perceived ability to manage day-to-day tasks. It entails a positive outlook on one's life rather than a judgment of one's current emotions. It can also be conceived as the degree to which a person thinks, feels and assesses their overall quality of life (Huebner et al. 2005); life satisfaction is the cognitive aspect of subjective wellbeing and implies the overall assessment of individual life. However, life satisfaction is often overlooked in marriage and in most research relating to marital satisfaction, such studies often focus on wellbeing. Thus, to comprehensively analyze life satisfaction and its role in marital satisfaction, it is essential to look at how well an individual can meet all of their life and living requirements, which go beyond just one particular area of life (Diener, 1984) but rather an assessment of individual satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their life (Heller et al., 2006). Available literature has demonstrated that marital contentment is directly related to life satisfaction (Gupta & Nafis, 2014) while subjective wellbeing, marital quality and life satisfaction have been positively correlated (Bookwala, 2012; Jackson et al., 2014). Additionally, other studies have demonstrated that married couples experience high life satisfaction compared to their counterpart who are unmarried or divorced (Diener et al., 2000). Studies such as Yildiz and Baytemir, (2016); Celenk and van de Vijver (2013); Perrone-McGovern et al., (2012); Ng et al., (2009) have demonstrated that marital satisfaction is a significant predictor of life satisfaction.

Although numerous studies abound on marital satisfaction in Nigeria, a standard narrative to most of the studies of marital satisfaction in Nigeria is to identify factors such as the length of the marriage and the number of children (Animasahun & Oladeni, 2012), socio-demographic factors (Ojukwu et al., 2016), communication pattern, gender and Age (Aroyewun, 2017), Communication and Coping Strategy (Abidin et al. 2018), psychological factors, depression, affection and sexual activities (Adigeb & Mbua 2015), emotional intelligence (Anyamene & Etele, 2020) as predictors of marital satisfaction. Others are Age at Marriage, spirituality and religion, commitment, sexual relationship, communication, children, love and attachment, intimacy, conflict resolution approach and mental health (Karimi et al., 2019; Zaheri et al., 2016). However, a cursory observation of these studies revealed that none attempt to answer questions on the influence of adverse childhood experiences, psychological

distress and life satisfaction on marital satisfaction. Apart from this, none of the previous work keeps the duration of marriage constant in their respective studies.

Consequently, this study aimed to (1) Examine the correlation between adverse childhood experiences, psychological distress, life satisfaction and marital satisfaction among couples who have been married for ten years; (2) To explore the joint and independent influence of Age, Gender, Age of Marriage, adverse childhood experience, psychological distress, and life satisfaction on marital satisfaction among couples who have been married for ten years.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study adopted a predictive correlational research design. It is a research design that aims to predict the association, not causality, between variables in which quantitative means are used to gather data through questionnaires to describe adverse childhood experiences, psychological distress, life satisfaction and marital satisfaction among married individuals with a minimum of ten years of living with their spouses.

Study Location

Data for the study was gathered from two selected local government areas in Lagos State. Lagos is Nigeria's commercial and economic capital and home to the largest population in Nigeria, with the current metro area population of Lagos in 2022 put at 15,388,000 [United Nations population, 2020]. The state has 20 local governments, of which two were selected for the study. The participant for the study were 893 married men and women: 527 (59% males and 366 (41%) females.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised married men and women in Lagos State, while the study employed a non-probabilistic purposive and accidental sampling technique. Purposive because among the people in Lagos, only married individuals were selected for the study, and accidental because all available married people who met the inclusion criteria were likely to be selected.

Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval from the Psychology Ethics Committee (PEC) of the University of Lagos, the researchers approached the married individuals in their homes and office spaces during work hours.

They explained the nature of the research, confidentiality and freedom of participation to the participants. Those who gave consent and met the inclusion criteria were issued a copy of the questionnaire.

Instruments

The measuring instrument for this study comprised a pencil and paper test divided into two sections. Section A was used to collect information on socio-demographic information from the respondents on age, year of marriage, religion and ethnic group of respondents. Section B collected answers to questions on the four study variables with standardized psychometric Instruments.

Adverse childhood experience was assessed through the Adverse Childhood Experience International Questionnaire (ACE – I.Q) [WHO-IQ]. ACE-IQ had 43 items, seven section scale with different response formats ranging from Yes or No to Likert. Several studies have confirmed the reasonable validity of the content of the ACE-IQ, reliable internal consistency of $\alpha = .81$ (Kazeem, 2015) and satisfactory test-retest reliability since all the key elements of the questionnaire ensure that the information collected is independent (Ho et al., 2019). Convergent validity evidence was observed in a sample of 253 Nigerian prisoners and it reported a correlation between ACE-IQ and the CTQ ranging from $= .49$ to $.72$.

Psychological distress was measured with a 10-item Psychological Distress Scale (K10) developed by Kessler et al. (2003). A four-point response format ranges from 1 = none of the time, 2 = A little of the time, 3 = some of the time, 4 = Most of the time, and 5 = All of the time. Some of the items on the scale read "In the past four weeks, about how often did you feel worthless "and "In the past four weeks, about how often did you feel tired out for no good reason? " The author reports a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) of 0.89.

Life satisfaction was assessed using the 18-item Life Satisfaction Index developed by Neugarten et al. (1961). The scale was designed to elicit psychological satisfaction derived. The scale is an 18-item scale scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), where respondents were expected to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each item on the scale. Examples of the item on the scale read, "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal" and "I am satisfied with life." The authors reported a

Cronbach alpha of 0.87 and test-retest reliability of 0.82 for the scale. The scale was validated with the Death anxiety scale and religious affiliation scale. The mean score for the scale is the basis for interpreting the score of the clients. Scores lower than the norms indicate that the client is satisfied with life while scores higher than the norms indicate dissatisfaction with life, which means that the lower the score, the higher the life satisfaction.

Marital satisfaction was measured using the 15-item Index Marital Satisfaction Scale developed by Fournier et al. (1983); the scale has a response format ranging from 1- strongly disagree, 2- moderately disagree, 3- neither agree nor disagree, 4- moderate, 5-strongly agree. Some of the samples of the items read," "My partner completely understands and sympathizes with my every mood " and "I am not happy about our communication and feel my partner does not understand with my partner, not even for me." High score on this scale signifies satisfaction with marriage. In contrast, a low score on the scale indicates dissatisfaction with the marriage. The author of the scale reported a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = .92$. In this study, a Cronbach alpha of $.83$ was reported.

Inclusion criteria

These are the conditions that every participant was expected to fulfill for selection:

1. Any gender age 20 years and above.
2. Must be Married
3. Living with a spouse for the last ten years
4. Minimum of 12 years of education (Secondary school certificate level)
5. Must be employed (either paid employment or self-employment)

Exclusion Criteria

1. Any gender less than Age 20 years
2. Single or divorced or separated or widowed
3. Living with a spouse for less than ten years
4. Less than 12 years of education
5. Unemployed or complete housewife

Data analysis

All analyses were done using the SPSS 24 [IBM, 2020]. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was used to determine if there is a significant relationship between the variables on the psychometric measures; Multiple regression analysis was used to assess the predictive relationship among the variables on the psychometric measures while t-test was used to

measure the Age and gender-related relationship between the participant on the psychometric measures.

Results and Discussions

The presentation of results began with demographics of respondents and then moved into the analysis of research questions.

Demographics of Respondents

Descriptive statistics show that 484(54.2%) of the respondents fall between the age bracket of 20 and 35 years and 409(45.8%) belonged to the age bracket of 35 years and above. With respect to gender, 527(59%) were male while 366(41%) were

females. Based on the religion of the respondents, 565(63.3%) were Christians, 277(31%) were Muslims and 51(5.7%) were traditionalists as regard an ethnic group of the respondents, Yoruba 742(83.1%), Ibo 118(13.2%), others 33(3.7%).

For the level of education, 14.3% were secondary school holders, 3.4% acquired NCE/OND, the majority (60.7%) were degree holders and 21.6% acquired M.Sc certificates. Findings further show that 176(19.7) of the respondents were from low socioeconomic status; the majority, 527(59%) were from middle-class socioeconomic status, 190(21.3%) were from high socioeconomic status.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistic Showing the Demographic Distribution of Study Respondents

Variables	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Age	20-35 years (young couples)	484	54.2
	35 years and above (Old couples)	409	45.8
	Total	893	100.0
Gender	Male	527	59.0
	Female	366	41.0
	Total	893	100.0
Religion	Christian	565	63.3
	Islam	277	31.0
	Traditional	51	5.7
	Total	893	100.0
Ethnic	Yoruba	742	83.1
	Igbo	118	13.2
	Others	33	3.7
	Total	893	100.0
Educational Qualification	Secondary	128	14.3
	NCE/OND	30	3.4
	Degree/HND	542	60.7
	M.SC	193	21.6
	Total	893	100.0
Socio-economic status	Low	176	19.7
	Moderate	527	59.0
	High	190	21.3
	Total	893	100.0
Duration of Marriage	10-14 years	505	56.6
	15 years and above	388	43.4
	Total	893	100.0
Age at Marriage	20-24 years	491	55.0
	25 years and above	402	45.0
	Total	893	100.0

On the duration of the marriage, 505(56.6%) had 10-14 years of marital experience and 388(43.4%) had 15 years and above marital experience. Regarding

age at Marriage, 491(55%) married between 20 and 24 and 402(45%) married at 25 years and above.

Research question 1: What is the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, psychological distress and life satisfaction with marital satisfaction among married couples within ten years of marriage?

Table 2 shows no significant relationship between adverse childhood experiences and Marital satisfaction ($r = -.02, p > .05$). There is a significant inverse relationship between psychological distress and marital satisfaction ($r = -.41, p < .01$). Finally, there is a significant positive relationship between life satisfaction and marital satisfaction ($r = .38, p < .01$). Psychological distress was found to be

moving in the opposite direction to marital satisfaction. These findings aligned with those by Weissman et al. (2015) and Whisman and Uebelacker (2003) who concluded that psychological distress negatively impacts wellbeing and that lesser psychological distress is associated with marital satisfaction and marital adjustment among couples. Additionally, the study of Gupta and Nafis (2014) concluded that marital satisfaction and contentment are directly related to life satisfaction. Similarly, Bookwala (2012) and Jackson et al. (2014) found a positive relationship between subjective wellbeing, marital quality and life satisfaction.

Table 2: Zero-order Correlation between Adverse Childhood Experience, Psychological Distress, Life Satisfaction and Marital Satisfaction

		Mean	S.D	1	2	3	4
1	Marital satisfaction	63.56	8.89	-			
2	Adverse childhood experience	22.57	1.84	-.02	-		
3	Psychological distress	31.85	4.36	-.41**	-.05	-	
4	Life satisfaction	15.03	5.95	.38**	-.30**	-.02	-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Showing the Influence of Demographic Factors (Age, Gender, and Age of Marriage) and Psychological Factors (Adverse Childhood Experience, Psychological Distress, and Life Satisfaction) On Marital Satisfaction

PREDICTORS	MODEL I			MODEL II		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
Age	-.16	-4.41	<.05	.02	.80	>.05
Gender	.07	1.95	>.05	.34	12.81	<.05
Age of marriage	.22	6.45	<.05	.34	12.77	<.05
Adverse childhood experience				.10	3.62	<.05
Psychological distress				-.49	-18.88	<.05
Life satisfaction				.60	21.26	<.05
R	.227 ^a			.700 ^b		
R ²	0.051			0.49		
ΔR^2	0.048			0.49		
Df	3,889			6,886		
F	16.03			142.12		

Research Question 2: Does age, gender, age at marriage, adverse childhood experience, psychological distress and life satisfaction jointly and independently predict the marital satisfaction among married couples?

In table 3, the first model reveals that gender and age of marriage significantly predicted marital satisfaction among the married couples ($R^2 = 0.05, F = 16.03, df = 3,889, p < .05$). The two

variables were found to significantly predict 5.1% of the variance observed in the marital satisfaction.

The study further reveals that psychological factors in general accounted for 49% toward marital satisfaction among married couples ($R^2 = 0.49, \Delta R^2 = 0.49, F = 142.12, df = 6,886, p < .05$). The results revealed that adverse childhood experience ($\beta = .10, t = 3.62, p < .05$), psychological distress ($\beta = -.49, t = -18.88, p < .05$) and life satisfaction ($\beta = .60, t = 21.26, p < .05$) were significant independent predictors of

marital satisfaction. At the same time, the age of marriage was a significant independent predictor of marital satisfaction among married couples.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that adverse childhood experiences did not affect marital satisfaction. While psychological distress negatively affected the marital satisfaction, life satisfaction enhanced the marital satisfaction. Additionally, the age of marriage significantly predicted marital satisfaction among the married couples. The study recommended that effort be directed at keeping the level of psychological distress low in marriage by ensuring that any action or activity that can potentially trigger psychological distress is eliminated. Efforts geared toward enhancing life satisfaction should be encouraged among married couples due to the potential positive influence of such on marital satisfaction.

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